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*Guy Debord and the
Internationale situationniste
A Special Issue*

Guest editor, Thomas F. McDonough

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the Situationists*

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*Situationist Texts on Visual Culture
and Urbanism: A Selection*

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Rereading Debord, Rereading the Situationists*

THOMAS F. McDONOUGH

"He must be read and reread, for the same phrases are always cited. He is reduced to a few formulas, at best out of nostalgia but more often in a negative sense, as if to say: look at where thinking like that gets you!"¹ So cautioned Philippe Sollers one week after Guy Debord's suicide on November 30, 1994. It is advice well taken, if recent glosses on the life and work of this founding member of the Situationist International are any indication. When, twenty-odd years after the publication of his *Société du spectacle* (1967), Debord circulated his *Commentaires* on this book (1988), it was greeted with general skepticism. The reviewer for *Le Monde* conceded the verity of its characterizations:

Can we decide against him, when he emphasizes the generalized secrecy predominant in this gray world? The more we speak of transparency, the less we know who controls what, who manipulates whom, and to what end. Those who are "well-informed" are generally the biggest fools. From censorship to crimes, "we live and die at the confluence of innumerable mysteries."²

Despite this, the reviewer concluded that "by virtue of seeing spies everywhere" Debord had descended into an increasingly paranoid vision of the world. When an English translation was released two years later, the response was even less equivocal. Laurent Jenny summarized the consensus: "Situationism has fallen from megalomania into paranoia."³ Another described it as "Adorno gone mad in a situation in which there is no longer any access to concrete experience, capitalism reigns supreme, and only a few marginal intellectuals can figure out

* I would like to thank Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Aruna D'Souza for their critical readings of this essay.

1. Philippe Sollers, contribution to "Considérations sur le suicide de Guy Debord," *Libération*, December 6, 1994, p. 34.

2. Roger-Pol Droit, "Guy Debord: le dernier des Mohicans," *Le Monde*, July 22, 1988, p. 11.

3. Laurent Jenny, "The Unrepresentable Enemy," *Art + Text* 35 (Summer 1990), p. 112.

what is going on.”⁴ In an analysis that would become virtually canonical in the anglophone scholarship on the Situationists, Debord was cast as the mirror image of Jean Baudrillard (whom the Situationists, incidentally, poked fun at in their infamous 1966 pamphlet, *De la misère en milieu étudiant*), repulsed by what fascinated the sociologist of hyperreality.⁵ In any event, the book was seen as a dead letter, clear evidence of its author’s irrelevance.

Such hostility makes the reaction to Debord’s next book, *Panegyrique* (1989), rather unexpected. Coming less than a year after the *Commentaires*, it received the opposite response, one of virtually unqualified praise. It may not be surprising that a sensitive and sympathetic reader like Sollers picked up on the multiple ironies of this text, the “first volume of *Memoirs* by someone we believed to be unconditionally dedicated to the impersonality of revolutionary critique.”⁶ (For example, Sollers noted that the author “makes fun of the word ‘professional’ but writes: ‘I have been a very good professional. But in what? Such will have been my mystery, in the eyes of a blameful world.’”) Another reviewer wrote that, given the state of the world, “a man whose opinion of our society amounts to judging it ‘blameful,’ but who argues his ‘critical theory’ with intelligence, talent, and originality, deserves to be heard more than ever. For in such a time as this we are in danger of lacking dissenters.”⁷ What had merely been paranoid one year earlier could now be seen as constructive, with the reviewer noting that “Debord’s ‘negativity’ is boldly positive.” Clearly the form of presentation of this “critical theory” allowed it to be assimilated much more easily; the memoir paradoxically permitted Debord to be seen not as a particular historical subject with a revolutionary project, but as “the great dissenter,” a mythical subject situated at the margins of “our” society. He could thus become “a master of sentiment and of resistance as much as and sometimes more than a master-thinker”—a “moralist,” in fact.

An image of Debord was taking shape that was distinctly different from those applied to him earlier in his life. Now he was able to be seen as the melancholic social critic, intransigent but cherished for the anachronistic rectitude of his opinions. (In this light, even the *Commentaires* could be recuperated as the words of “the man who will not correct himself.”)⁸ Of course, Debord himself must share some of the responsibility for this characterization: *Panegyrique* is a cryptic text,

4. Paul Piccone, in “*The Society of the Spectacle* 20 Years Later: A Discussion,” *Telos* 86 (Winter 1990–91), p. 86.

5. See, for example, Paul McDonald, “Review: Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*,” *Screen*, vol. 32, no. 4 (Winter 1991), pp. 491–94; and Simon Reynolds, “Haute Anxiety,” *Village Voice*, February 5, 1991, p. 68.

6. Philippe Sollers, “Guy Debord, vous connaissez?” *Le Monde*, October 2, 1989, p. 25.

7. Claude Roy, “Le grand désapprouvateur,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, November 16–22, 1989, p. 163.

8. The title of a review of the 1992 Gallimard reedition of *La Société du spectacle* and its *Commentaires*; the title is actually a pun, *se corriger* meaning both to “correct oneself” and to “reform” (Francis Marmande, “L’Homme qui ne se corrige pas,” *Le Monde*, October 2, 1992, p. 27.)

which romanticizes its author to some extent.⁹ Yet the effort to cast him as a moralist, as a lone voice of virtue and ethics in a corrupt world, goes far beyond what may properly be read into his work. (And, it should be noted, this reading of Debord's work is a decidedly masculinist one, emphasizing his isolated, heroic life and his "manful" alcoholism, assimilating him into a long tradition of classical French writing.) Any suggestion of a critical *project* of transformation, never mind a Marxist critique of bourgeois society, disappeared from considerations of his books. By the time of his suicide, a commentator felt that Debord's great contribution was less in substance than in style: "His writing has largely contributed to the perception of his perfection: Debord was also, and perhaps primarily, a stylist of pessimism."¹⁰

This growing consensus, which sees Debord as a fundamentally romantic critic, or as an exiled scholar-poet (and hence reinforces his mythical status as a figure outside the boundaries of the culture he relentlessly critiqued), confirms the need for a careful rereading of the work of Debord and that of his colleagues in the Situationist International at this moment. Against the continued mythologizing—engaged in by both sympathetic and hostile commentators—must be posed a careful analysis of the Situationist legacy, a project of archival retrieval, reconstruction, and historicization. This special issue of *October* makes a contribution to such a project, collecting critical essays and primary documents that move far beyond the reduced formulas prevalent in much of the literature on this subject. Together, they provide an opportunity to reassess Debord and his colleagues in a new context—not as timeless "classics" of a melancholic pessimism, but as figures centrally engaged in the cultural politics of their time.

*

However, this issue of *October* is posed not merely against the French reading of Debord as a late-twentieth-century moralist—it has a distinctly Anglo-American context as well. The English-language literature on the Situationist International may be far from plentiful,¹¹ but it is worth briefly discussing some

9. For Debord's participation in this transformation, see some remarks made by Greil Marcus in his review of the English translation of *Panegyrique*, "You Could Catch It," *London Review of Books*, March 25, 1993, pp. 12–13.

10. Roger-Pol Droit, "Guy Debord ou le sens de la révolte," *Le Monde*, December 3, 1994, p. 17. Even Sollers, who appreciated Debord for the content of his writings, wrote after his death that "Debord is already a classic among the classics," although he qualified this by noting "not aesthetically but in terms of teaching about life. To live happily, live hidden" (Sollers, contribution to "Considérations," p. 34).

11. Bibliographic orientation may be found in numerous entries of John Gray, *Action Art: A Bibliography of Artists' Performance from Futurism to Fluxus and Beyond* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1993) and in Simon Ford, *The Realization and Suppression of the Situationist International: An Annotated Bibliography, 1972–1992* (Edinburgh and San Francisco: AK Press, 1995).

of the accounts that have so far been offered in order to better understand what remains lacking in them. Striking in these accounts is the near-universal tension between the desire to situate the S.I. at a particular historical juncture and the opposing wish to separate their works from the specific circumstances in which they were produced, with all the simplifications and misreadings this almost inevitably entails.

This tension is evident from the earliest reception of the Situationists in England and America. In the wake of May '68, the perpetuation of the group's legacy was undertaken primarily by those labeled "pro-Situs," i.e., those claiming the Situationist project to some degree as their own.¹² Much of their work consisted in making the S.I.'s often hard-to-find texts available to a broader audience, a task begun by Christopher Gray with his anthology *Leaving the Twentieth Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International*. Gray had briefly been a member of the S.I., which gives his selection of texts a certain weight, but the quality of his translations is notably poor. More familiar to an American audience will be Ken Knabb's *Situationist International Anthology*, which was published in 1981 and marks the effective end of this first phase of reception. While the value of such a groundbreaking work must be acknowledged, the obvious prejudices of Knabb's selection of texts for translation makes the book particularly problematic. First, Knabb adheres to a strict chronological definition of the S.I., one that largely coincides with the eleven-year run of the group's eponymous journal (1958–69). This means that the first six years of the group's existence, when it was known as the Lettrist International, are omitted except for a handful of texts that give little sense of the richness of this period, when the group was finding its place in the cultural avant-garde of the immediate postwar years, with its roots in the struggle over the legacy of the historical avant-garde (in particular that of Surrealism).¹³ Knabb's chronology also omits much of the—admittedly less interesting—post-1968 debate within the S.I. over the organization of an artistico-political avant-garde.¹⁴

Even within Knabb's temporal boundaries, the material he selects consistently obscures cultural analyses in favor of political ones—to the extent that these two can be separated in Situationist writings. This extends as far as a selective editing of articles to deemphasize the S.I.'s abiding interest in issues of visual and literary culture. Knabb deletes significant portions of the S.I.'s preliminary program (written by Debord in 1957 in preparation for the group's founding

12. For a history of the English pro-Situ milieu, see George Robertson, "The Situationist International: Its Penetration into British Culture," *Block* 14 (1989), pp. 39–53. No such account exists for the American milieu.

13. The significance of this early history becomes clear when one reviews the material compiled in the magisterial volume *Documents relatifs à la fondation de l'Internationale Situationniste, 1948–1957*, ed. Gérard Berreby (Paris: Editions Allia, 1985). A companion volume covering later years is forthcoming.

14. Some material from this debate has been collected in *The Veritable Split in the International*, 3d rev. ed. (London: Chronos Publications, 1990).

conference), which proffered a triangulation of contemporary cultural possibilities (modernism—avant-garde—socialist realism), gave a brief history of the context out of which the S.I. emerged, and outlined its future means of action. In this bowdlerized version, the arguments lose much of their complexity, and the distinct voice of Debord—its paradoxical blend of the concreteness of the political manifesto with a poetic elusiveness—similarly disappears.¹⁵ Even more striking is his abridgment of a text by Debord that appeared in a 1963 exhibition catalogue; here all reference to cultural politics is erased from an essay that was *solely* concerned with such questions in the original.¹⁶ The cumulative effect of Knabb's choices is to enforce a misleading construction of the S.I.'s history: because cultural politics are placed in a decidedly secondary position, the reader is free to see the Situationists as one of many anarchist "groupuscules" formed in the wake of the leftist critique of the Stalinist French Communist Party (1956–58).¹⁷

The tension implicit in Knabb's anthology—a tension between the need to acknowledge the S.I.'s particular place in history and the desire to see it as the realization of a broadly valid critique of capitalist society—becomes even more conspicuous in the most recent and ambitious attempt to deal synthetically with the group: British cultural historian Sadie Plant's 1992 book, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. The cover mysteriously features a 1920s photo of a Bauhaus costume design by Oskar Schlemmer set against a vertiginously spiraling background; the relation of this image from one of the most optimistic moments of machine-age modernity to the S.I. or even to what she calls the "postmodern age" is never clarified. The insensitivity to history demonstrated by the use of this photograph appears symptomatic of the text as a whole. On the first page of the book Plant asserts that many aspects of Situationist theory "can be found in . . . the tradition of avant-garde artistic agitation which includes movements like Dada and surrealism."¹⁸ Yet in the chapter purporting to address this tradition, we are treated to merely the tritest clichés of Dada and Surrealism's "will to gain immediate experience of the world and transform the everyday into a reality desired and created by those who live in it" (39). These

15. This crucial document has yet to be fully translated into English. For the French original, see *Documents relatifs*, pp. 607–19.

16. This essay has since been translated in full by Thomas Y. Levin in *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1957–1972*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, and Boston: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1989), pp. 148–53.

17. For more accurate political contextualizations of the S.I., see Richard Gombin, "French Leftism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 7 (1972), pp. 27–50; Gombin, *The Origins of Modern Leftism*, trans. Michael K. Perl (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1975); and Mark Shipway, "Situationism," in *Non-Market Socialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Maximilien Rubel and John Crump (Houndsmills, England: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 151–72.

18. Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 1.

movements are then seen as providing the foundation for Situationist Raoul Vaneigem's notion of the "radical subject"—an aspect of Situationist thought that will continue to seem ridiculous so long as it is seen as rooted in such claims for immediacy.¹⁹

Throughout the book Plant regards the Situationists as producers of a singular "theory," rather than as cultural producers in their own right. It is this reduction of the group to a purely textual level that allows her to slot it in as the inheritor of an avant-garde project of "agitation" and "contestation," without addressing its relation to other artists claiming the avant-garde mantle in the 1950s and early '60s. This reduction similarly marks Plant's concern with the Situationists' relation to a loosely defined "postmodernism," which for the author basically coincides with the works of Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard. For Plant, "in spite of the radical opposition of situationist and postmodern thought, all theorizations of postmodernity are underwritten by situationist theory and the social and cultural agitations on which it is placed" (5)—a statement that at first reading appears clearly incorrect, while at second reading is so very vague ("the social and cultural agitations" covering the entire history of the past century) as to be utterly meaningless. She then specifies this statement and claims that "the situationist spectacle prefigures contemporary notions of hyperreality, and the world of uncertainty and superficiality described and celebrated by the postmodernists is precisely that which the situationists first subjected to passionate criticism" (5). On the one hand, this is, as I have remarked above, a fairly typical post-*Commentaires* analysis of Debord, which identifies the latter's spectacle-thesis with Baudrillard's diagnosis of contemporary society. On the other hand, even this more circumscribed thesis is open to multiple avenues of critique. As Jonathan Crary has repeatedly pointed out, the social conditions described by the terms "spectacle" and "hyperreality" are not parallel but successive, the hyperreal superseding an earlier spectacle-culture in Baudrillard's chronology.²⁰ But this is to accept Baudrillard's technologically deterministic reading of contemporary culture. Another option would be to consider the spectacle in terms of a more concrete intellectual history: instead of affirming a specious link to later concepts of postmodernism, Plant could have located it as a development out of Henri Lefebvre's work on *modernité* (which was also a touchstone for his former teaching assistant, Baudrillard).²¹ The spectacle remains a reading of the *modern* world, indebted to the Lukacsian concept of

19. In this, Plant is simply echoing Alfred Willener's platitudes regarding Dada and Surrealism in his *The Action-Image of Society: On Cultural Politicization*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), pp. 193–229. This book was briefly critiqued by the S.I. itself in the text "On the decomposition of our enemies," which appears in *The Veritable Split*, pp. 109–10.

20. See, notably, Jonathan Crary, "Eclipse of the Spectacle," in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (Boston: David R. Godine, 1984), pp. 283–94.

21. For an account of Lefebvre's work, see Remi Hess, *Henri Lefebvre et l'aventure du siècle* (Paris: Editions A. M. Métailié, 1988).

reification (as Plant rightly points out, following others' leads [19–20])—and it is a reading in which postmodernism could figure only as the latest ideological claim of the end of all ideology.²²

Plant's reasons for arguing postmodernism's indebtedness to Situationist theory become clear only later in her book, when she writes that "postmodern philosophers are the sold-out situationists who wander without purpose" and that "postmodern discourse is filled with chatterings about a concept [the spectacle] it never imagines was once saturated with revolutionary intent" (150). Ultimately, her goal is to reassert the theoretical validity of the Situationist project, to detach it from its history and transfer it wholesale to the present moment. (This belief is also evident in her sympathy for the adolescent manifestations of British pro-Situs of the 1980s like Stewart Home [177–80].) In *The Most Radical Gesture*, the long-standing tension between the need to historicize the S.I. and the desire to see its project as eternally legitimate reaches its breaking point;²³ the book's failures make clear the need definitively to separate these two opposing readings at this point. Such a time comes in the posthistory of all avant-gardes—recall how long the writing of Surrealism's history was dominated by those who wished to extend its undertaking, from Maurice Nadeau to Franklin Rosemont, before an effective historicization of the movement was possible. A similar process must begin for the Situationist International, a process that will recognize that—in Debord's words—"avant-gardes have only one time, and the best thing that can happen to them is, in the full sense of the term, to have *had their day*. . . . A historical project certainly cannot claim to preserve an eternal youth protected from blows."²⁴

*

Typically, the "time" of the S.I. has been divided into two discrete segments: an early aesthetic position that evolved, by 1968, into a political vanguardism.

22. As when Debord characterizes contemporary society as tyrannical to the extent that it has "dispensed with that disturbing conception which was dominant for over two hundred years, in which a society was open to criticism or transformation, reform or revolution" (Debord, *Comments of the Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Malcolm Imrie [London: Verso, 1990], pp. 21–22).

23. An identical point could be made for the 1989 Situationist exhibition, organized at the Centre Pompidou, Paris, and the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. Here the tension was between an organizer like Peter Wollen, who saw the material as historical evidence, and an organizer like Elisabeth Sussman, who saw it as a proto-postmodernism, linking Situationist ideas and art works to the works of a 1980s appropriation-aesthetic via the concept of *détournement*. (A more complex articulation of this same thesis can be found in Giorgio Maragliano, "The Invisible Insurrection," *Flash Art* 147 (Summer 1989), pp. 87–90.) For a critique of the latter position, see Peter Smith, "On the Passage of a Few People: Situationist Nostalgia," *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 14, no. 1 (1991), pp. 118–25.

24. Quoted from Debord's final film; see Guy Debord, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni: A Film*, trans. Lucy Forsyth and Michael Prigent (London: Pelagian Press, 1991), pp. 63–64.

This view sees the S.I. as split into “artistic” and “radical” factions, the former grouped around the Italian painter Guiseppe Pinot-Gallizio and the Dutch architect Constant, the latter around Debord. As the radicals’ fear of art’s co-optability grew, and as their analyses of contemporary society became more sophisticated (with the development of the concept of the “spectacle” after exposure to Lefebvre’s sociology), the more political wing was able more forcefully to advance its agenda within the organization. By 1961 most of the artists had already left the organization—whether voluntarily or by expulsion—and in the late summer of that year, at the S.I.’s fifth conference, the creation of art was officially dropped from the program.²⁵ Knabb quotes a segment from Raoul Vaneigem’s report to the conference that appears to confirm this new antiartistic tendency:

It is a question not of elaborating the spectacle of refusal, but rather of refusing the spectacle. In order for their elaboration to be *artistic* in the new and authentic sense defined by the S.I., the elements of the destruction of the spectacle must precisely cease to be works of art.²⁶

Yet a closer examination of Vaneigem’s address calls into question this neat bifurcation of the Situationist’s history. If certain modes of artistic creation were abandoned, this did not entail a wholesale withdrawal from the sphere of culture in favor of direct political action. Vaneigem’s concrete suggestions following his report (not translated by Knabb) make this clear: in the short term, he proposed “a potlatch of destruction of selected artistic values”;²⁷ in the longer term, “intervention against UNESCO and the foundation of a first situationist base.” Continuing the military metaphor, he concluded his discussion by noting that for the S.I. “the refusal of reformism and the impossibility of creation *ex nihilo* delimit the field of action,” hence the group should reach out and attempt to locate “bases of support in contemporary society likely to strengthen its future bridgehead. . . . We will be the *shop stewards of cultural producers*, in the broadest

25. Such is the story recounted in the brief but rather exceptional article by Myriam D. Maayan, “From Aesthetic to Political Vanguard: The Situationist International, 1957–1968,” *Arts Magazine* 65 (January 1989), pp. 49–53.

26. Raoul Vaneigem, quoted in “The Fifth S.I. Conference in Göteborg (excerpts),” in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, Calif.: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 88. It should be noted that Debord himself lent credence to this version of the S.I.’s history when he wrote—in the heady months preceding May ’68—that the group’s activities could be divided into two periods, the first of which (1957–62) “centered around the supersession of art” (Debord, “The Organization Question for the S.I.,” in *ibid.*, p. 298).

27. The exhibition organized by the S.I. in 1963 at the Galerie EXI in Odense, Denmark—“Destraktion af RSG-6/En kollektiv manifestation af Situationistisk Internationale”—was perhaps the most noteworthy attempt at such a project.

sense of the term.”²⁸ This was hardly a forsaking of action within an “artistic” realm, but a redefinition of what such action might be.

In the same year that this discussion occurred in Göteborg, Debord released his third film, *Critique de la séparation*, which contains some of the most profound reflections on art, memory, and the decomposition of communication in late capitalism. (The poetry of his language in this film is largely absent from his other writings in the 1960s; it only comes through in brief moments in *La Société du spectacle*, for example. It is in the following decade, most notably in his last film, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* [1978], that these themes and this language begin to reappear in his work.) The imbrication of culture and politics, of the private and the social, that marked the whole history of the S.I. is nowhere more clearly articulated than in this film. Against a tracking shot of the Gare St.-Lazare (Parisian topos of the unexpected *rencontre* and of loss, long favored by the avant-garde) that then pans up the rue du Havre, crowded with traffic (reminding us that this is also the utterly banal site of numbing repetition in the daily commute), Debord tells us that

everything that concerns the sphere of loss, that is to say particularly what I myself have lost: the past; and disappearance, flight; and more generally the passage of things, and even what in the prevalent and therefore most vulgar social sense of the timetable is called lost time—all this meets strangely in that old military expression, *en enfants perdus*, meets with the sphere of discovery, of the exploration of a terra incognita, with all the forms of the quest, of adventure, of the avant-garde. It is the crossroads where we found and lost ourselves.²⁹

Few studies of the Situationists have been able to account for the complexity of these positions taken by Vaneigem or Debord. A notable exception is the work of Peter Wollen, which explicitly locates the S.I. as the final manifestation of the historical avant-garde and attempts to tell “the whole story of the relation between art and politics” and to do justice “to the theoretical work of the S.I. and of Debord in particular.”³⁰ Wollen sees the S.I. as the fruit of two distinct legacies

28. Raoul Vaneigem, quoted in “La cinquième conférence de l’I.S. à Göteborg,” *Internationale situationniste* 7 (April 1962), p. 27. Emphasis in original.

29. Guy Debord, “Critique de la séparation” (1961), in *Oeuvres cinématographiques complètes, 1952–1978* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), pp. 51–52. This remarkable passage loses all its nuances in Knabb’s translation. The *enfant-perdu* is military slang for a scout, a true “avant-garde” charged with ferreting out hidden enemies in the path of an army’s progress. Debord provides a veritable catalogue of “wasted” time, of time stolen from the managers of the spectacle, from the most existential level of time forever lost to the past, to workers’ resistance to the impositions of Taylorized time and motion studies (what the French call *la perruque*). It is precisely on this common ground of opposition to the pseudocyclical time of spectacle-culture that the political and aesthetic avant-gardes meet in the S.I.

30. Peter Wollen, “The Situationist International,” *New Left Review* 174 (1989), p. 72.

of the interwar years: that of Western Marxism (communicated to Debord via Lefebvre and the *Socialisme ou barbarie* group) and that of Bretonian Surrealism (communicated via Lettrism and CoBrA). This dual inheritance enables Wollen to construct the most thorough account of the S.I.'s engagement in cultural politics. Yet at two key moments the account fails. The first is in its discussion of Debord's encounter with Surrealism. According to Wollen, Debord developed a theoretical critique of Surrealism that led him in the early 1950s to join the Lettrist movement (81–82). Historically, this is simply wrong: Debord worked out his critique of Surrealism only after meeting the Lettrists at the screening of one of their films at the 1951 Cannes Film Festival. This point is not as minor as it may seem—Debord as a young man entered a Parisian cultural scene in which certain lines had already been drawn. Lettrism had noisily announced itself as the new avant-garde, in opposition to both Breton's attempt to reassert Surrealist hegemony and to the veneration of a socialist-realist poetry of resistance, and it was being taken seriously as such. Debord, along with others assembled around the charismatic figure of Isidore Isou, would soon break away from this movement, which was increasingly mired in stale repetitions of Dadaist scandal (making Lettrism a notable model for the neo-avant-garde) in search of a broader intervention in the linked spheres of cultural politics and everyday life. Debord's critique of Surrealism, developed through the later 1950s, is hence less a refusal, as Wollen insists, than a working through of a history previously dismissed out of hand. (In his 1957 summary of the Surrealist legacy contained within the S.I.'s preliminary program, Debord after all wrote that "the surrealist program . . . is much richer in constructive possibilities than is generally thought.")³¹

Wollen also makes much of the Situationist renunciation of art for politics, which has marked all other histories of the group. For Wollen an early "artistic" phase (dominated by Asger Jorn, Pinot-Gallizio, and Constant) was followed after 1962 by "a total elimination of art" from the group's practice: "in fact, the S.I. simply reappropriated the orthodox Marxist and Leninist triad of theory, propaganda, agitation" (94). The texts translated in this issue, along with others already translated by Knabb,³² already demonstrate the error of this statement. But it was Debord himself who articulated the most convincing argument against Wollen's

31. Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action (excerpts)," in *Situationist International Anthology*, p. 19. It should also be noted that Wollen only briefly discusses the Bataille inheritance of the S.I. in terms of an interest "in festivity, in play and in waste or excess" ("The Situationist International," p. 89); there remains much to explore here.

32. See, for example, J. V. Martin, J. Strijbosch, R. Vaneigem, and R. Viénet, "Response to a Questionnaire from the Center for Socio-Experimental Art," in *Situationist International Anthology*, pp. 143–47; Mustapha Khayati, "Captive Words: Preface to a Situationist Dictionary," in *ibid.*, pp. 170–75; René Viénet, "The Situationists and the New Forms of Action against Politics and Art," in *ibid.*, pp. 213–16; and "Cinema and Revolution," in *ibid.*, pp. 297–98.

reading of the S.I.'s history. At the group's seventh congress, held in Paris in 1966, he contended that

the development of situationist theory has kept pace . . . with the development of the dominant cultural world itself. The idea of unitary urbanism, the experience of the *dérive*, must be understood today in their *struggle* with modern forms of utopian architecture, the Venice Biennales, or happenings. In the same way, our possible use of "communication containing its own critique" must impose itself against recuperated neo-dadaism or neo-aesthetic collaborations (a "Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel" constructing situations in the streets of Paris, etc.).³³

The crucial point is that throughout its history, the S.I. was engaged in a struggle over the possible meanings of culture, as over the legacy of the historical avant-garde, with a broad spectrum of postwar cultural producers. The Situationists participated in this struggle—to use a Debordian strategic metaphor—on a field coextensive with figures ranging from the *nouveaux romanciers* to the *nouveaux réalistes*, "behind enemy lines," so to speak. It has been our inability to grasp this central fact that has allowed the S.I. to be assimilated into Greil Marcus's "secret history of the twentieth century," in which it becomes merely another irruption of millenarian transgression, reduced to the level of punk's adolescent nihilism.³⁴ But it is not because of its eternal truths, nor for its anticipations of postmodernism, nor for its superb melancholic style that we return to the Situationist International a quarter century after its auto-dissolution. We return, rather, to complete the record of the historical avant-garde, and to reassess the role of Debord, one of its most complex figures. The articles collected herein mark a turn to this project of historicization.

Acknowledgments

Foremost thanks for this issue go to the authors who have contributed such stimulating readings of this often-marginalized area of study, and to the two translators who have ensured access to this material for an English-speaking audience. I would also like to thank the entire editorial board of *October* for its support, patience, and perseverance regarding this project, and in particular Benjamin H. D. Buchloh and Hal Foster, without whose advice and aid at all stages this anthology could never have been assembled. A personal debt of gratitude is

33. Guy Debord, "Report to the 7th Conference of the S.I. in Paris (excerpts)," in *The Veritable Split*, p. 121. The Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel is discussed at greater length by the Situationists in the article "The Avant-Garde of Presence," translated in this issue.

34. Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

owed to the journal's managing editor, Melissa Mathis, who oversaw innumerable details and kept this issue as close to schedule as my own lack of organization allowed. Conversations with Thomas Y. Levin and Donald Nicholson-Smith helped to shape this anthology and gave me valuable insights into the history of the S.I. Finally, I would like to acknowledge a grant from the Florence Gould Foundation, which generously funded the translations featured in this issue.

Why Art Can't Kill the Situationist International

T. J. CLARK AND DONALD NICHOLSON-SMITH

What does it matter to us what judgments may later be passed upon our obscure personalities? If we have seen fit to record the political differences that exist between the majority of the Commune and ourselves, this is not in order to apportion blame to the former and praise to the latter. It is simply to ensure that, should the Commune be defeated, people will know that it was not what it has appeared to be up to now.

—Gustave Lefrançais addressing constituents, May 20, 1871¹

No sooner were Guy Debord's ashes safely cast from the Pointe du Vert-Galant into the Seine, no sooner had death quelled his remorseless tendency to respond to everyone who made the least mention of him, than an emboldened pack of commentators bounded from their kennels, all desperately eager to position themselves, pro, con, or otherwise with respect to Debord's person, writings, and *faits et gestes*.

A case in point is the intrepid dabbler Régis Debray, sometime focal point of Guevarism, sometime advisor to President Mitterand. Debray, who by his own (wholly unreliable) account had never before engaged with Debord in any way, now felt an urgent need to denounce Debord's ideas, and specifically the concept of the spectacle, for their supposed idealism, for their young-Marxism and young-Hegelianism, for their unreconstructed Feuerbachianism—but most of all for their strict incompatibility with Debray's own positivist sociology of mass communications, which goes by the name of “mediology.”²

Sometimes modestly described as a small thing (Debray is prone to talking about “notre petite médiologie”), this would-be new discipline has high ambitions. It pretends to the throne of semiology, no less—even though, to use Debray-speak, “‘semio’ had a good half-decade's start on ‘medio’.” But Debray also needs to keep his neo-empiricist baby away from the very slightest taint of totalizing or negative

1. Cited in *Internationale situationniste* 12 (September 1969), p. 23.

2. Régis Debray, “A Propos du spectacle: Réponse à un jeune chercheur,” *Le Débat* 85 (May–August 1995).

thought, and this is where Debord's global condemnation of the spectacle comes in handy: "For the Situationists . . . mediation is evil. For us, mediation is not only a necessity, it is civilization itself. For us man is man solely by virtue of technological mediation, and he needs the spectacle to gain access to his truth. It is via illusion that man discovers his reality. [etc., etc.]"³

We were members of the Situationist International in 1966–67. This gives us no special vantage point with respect to the really interesting questions about the S.I. in its final, extraordinary years. In particular the key issue, of how and why the Situationists came to have a preponderant role in May 1968—that is, how and why their brand of politics participated in, and to an extent fueled, a crisis of the late-capitalist State—is still wide open to interpretation. (And, for that matter, to simple factual inquiry. The scoffing and evasion and doctoring of the evidence about May 1968 shows no sign of letting up.) We shall get to some of these subjects in a moment. But we make no apology for starting from the bottom. Debray's maunderings are typical. And in a sense necessary. The efforts of organized knowledge to discredit the Situationists—to pin on them a final dismissive label and have them be part of "infantile Leftism" or "the politics of authenticity" or "the 1960s" or some such accredited pseudo-phenomenon—are at once entirely sensible (organized knowledge is at least good at identifying its real enemies) and wonderfully self-defeating. For some reason the S.I. will not go away.

All the same, one might well ask why we are responding to *this particular* piece of nonsense. Perhaps the Debray piece was irksome because it really did manage to plumb new depths, even in such a hotly contested field. Certainly we never expect to see it bettered for oily chat-show authoritativeness plus bare-faced amnesia about the writer's own part in the period and debates referred to; not to mention the more or less lunatic (but of course calculated) "esteem" that Debray ends by confessing for Debord "as an individual"—and as that rarity, "a professional moralist" who actually had "a personal moral code."

But there was something else, we realize, that got under our skin. It so happened that the British journal *New Left*⁴ *Review* chose to publish a (somewhat

3. Régis Debray, interview with Nicolas Weill, *Le Monde*, July 19, 1996.

4. The word "Left" recurs in what follows, and inevitably its meaning shifts. Much of the time it is used descriptively, and therefore pessimistically, to indicate a set of interlocking ideological directorships stretching roughly from the Statist and workerist fringes of Social Democracy and Labourism to the para-academic journals and think tanks of latter-day Trotskyism, taking in the Stalinist and lightly post-Stalinist center along the way. But of course there would be no point in using this description if we did not think it still worth doing so in the name of, and hopefully for the benefit of, another Left altogether (we ask the indulgence of those, and they are many, who reject the term "Left" as irrevocably compromised). This is a Left whose struggles with the late-capitalist State are at present local and multiform ("identity" and "ecological" politics being merely those forms that the spectacle chooses for now to (mis)represent—and many others will surely be given the same cynical treatment in years to come); a Left, however, that increasingly senses the enormity of its enemy and begins to think the problem of contesting that enemy in terms not borrowed from Marxist-Leninism or its official Opposition; a Left whose insubordination is the theme of endless jeremiads from the "actually existing" Left, whose dismal battle cry—to unite and fight under the same old phony-communitarian banners—it persists in ignoring.



Moscow, 1917. Toppled Alexander III.

abbreviated) version of Debray's eulogy in its issue for November/December 1995.⁵ This was only the second time in the *Review's* history that it had addressed—and misrepresented—the question of the Situationists (the first, of which more in a moment, came in 1989, after a quarter-century of eloquent silence⁶). But contradictions will out, and as luck (or bad management) would have it, the Debray piece was placed in nice juxtaposition to lengthy and reverential discussions, in the same issue, of Eric Hobsbawm's "history of the short twentieth century"—his "report," as one wag put it, "to a Central Committee that just isn't there any more." The very idea of pressing too hard on Hobsbawm's omissions and excuses as a historian was denounced *a priori* by *NLR* as "anti-Communist." One law for young-Hegelians, it seems, and another for unrepentant Stalinists. To have been over-optimistic about the revolutionary potential of the Watts proletariat is one thing; to have spent one's life inventing reasons for forced collectivization, show trials, the Great Terror, the suppression of the East German and Hungarian uprisings, and so on *ad nauseam*, quite

5. "Remarks on the Spectacle," *New Left Review* 214.

6. Peter Wollen, "The Situationist International," *New Left Review* 174 (March/April 1989). Versions of this article then appeared in *An Endless Adventure . . . An Endless Passion . . . An Endless Banquet. A Situationist Scrapbook*, ed. Iwona Blaswick (London and New York: ICA/Verso, 1989), and *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957–1972*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, 1989). The publications accompanied a traveling exhibition designed to illustrate Wollen's thesis.

another. The former is the ranting of primitive rebels, the latter the hard analytic choices of Marxist history.

Naturally this steered our thoughts back to the *NLR*'s earlier effort to invent a history of "Situationism" that would somehow avoid dealing with the moment, in the last years of the 1960s, when forms of Situationist-influenced politics actually confronted the journal's own so-called "mainstream" or "classical" Marxism. Mighty was the labor of *NLR*'s writer on art matters, Peter Wollen, when he was finally called in for the issue of March–April 1989; and many were the main currents and imaginative genealogies and thumbnail sketches of this important -Ism and that: all in order to buttress the *essential* declaration, on the last page but one of his *Shorter and Shorter Twentieth Century*, that from 1962 onward in the work of the S.I., "The denial by Debord and his supporters of any separation between artistic and political activity . . . led in effect not to a new unity within Situationist practice but to a total elimination of art except in propagandist and agitational forms. . . . Theory displaced art as the vanguard activity, and politics (for those who wished to retain absolutely clean hands) was postponed till the day when it would be placed on the agenda by the spontaneous revolt of those who executed rather than gave orders."⁷ Again the Michael Ignatieff authoritativeness is breathtaking. It so happens we remember Wollen in 1968, not yet having transferred his affections from Trotskyite center to avant-garde periphery, making the

7. Wollen, "Situationist International," p. 94.



Petrograd, 1918. Dedication of a statue of Heinrich Heine (stage center: Lunacharsky).

rounds of the main sites/sights of “student revolution” in Britain as a kind of New Left observer, and recoiling in horror from the ideological impurities he discovered there—of course reserving his full Jonathan Edwards for “those damned Situationists, the lowest of the low!” That remark we recall specifically (we wore such verdicts as a badge of honor).

Far be it from us to suggest that this makes Wollen an unreliable guide to the same scene after twenty years’ reflection. Age brings wisdom, even repentance. But it means he has—how shall we say?—an interesting perspective on the events he has chosen to narrate.

*

Enough, enough. In the end the interest of the Debray/*NLR* proceedings lies in the way they reveal, just a little more flagrantly than usual, the structure (and function) of what now passes for knowledge of the S.I. from 1960 on. The established wisdom, let us call it. It can be broken down into four essential propositions, though obviously these overlap and repeat themselves.

Proposition 1: The Situationist International was an art organization (a typical late-modernist avant-garde) that strayed belatedly into “art politics.” Judged as art, its politics do not amount to much. And surely they are not meant to be judged as politics!

Proposition 2: The S.I. in its last ten years was an art-political sect, consumed with the lineaments of its own purity, living on a diet of exclusions and denunciations, and largely ignoring the wider political realm, or the problems of organization and expansion that presented themselves in an apparently prerevolutionary situation. Call this the clean-hands thesis. Or the burning-with-the-pure-flame-of-negativity thesis. (Proposition 2 is subscribed to, be it said, by many of the S.I.’s admirers.)

Proposition 3: Situationist politics was “subjectivist,” post- or hyper-Surrealist, propelled by a utopian notion of a new “politics of everyday life” that can be reduced to a handful of ’68 graffiti: “Take your desires for reality,” “Boredom is always counter-revolutionary,” etc.

Proposition 4: Situationist theory, especially as represented by Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*, is hopelessly young-Hegelian—rhetorical, totalizing, resting on a metaphysical hostility to “mere” appearance or representation, and mounting a last-ditch defense of the notion of authenticity, whether of individual or class subject.

Like all good travesties, these four propositions are not simply lies. All of them point to real problems in the work of the Situationists after 1960, and the last thing we want to do is suggest those problems did not exist. What we do think, however, is that each of the propositions is a flimsy half-truth, never properly argued by Left opinion-makers, and contradicted by a body of evidence with which these opinion-makers are intimately acquainted but which they choose not to mention. The reason is not far to seek. Each proposition has a barely hidden corollary, and it is the truth of the corollary that this Left wants (and needs) to affirm.

Corollary 1: Therefore, the bone-hard philistinism of the Left in the 1960s and after—the fact that it called on the likes of Peter Fuller, *Tel Quel*, Roger Garaudy, John Berger, Ernst Fischer, etc.,⁸ as guides to the new regimes of representation then being ushered in—did not and does not matter.

Corollary 2: Therefore, the failure of the established Left to pose the problems of revolutionary organization again, and come to terms with the disaster of its Leninist and Trotskyite past, likewise does not matter. Such things are distractions. Dirty hands make light work. And the Left's love affairs with the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,⁹ or the *foci* of Che Guevara and the Ecole Normale Supérieure, or the Burmese road to Socialism, or the Italian Communist Party, or Tony Benn and Tom Hayden—or a hundred other objects that left the Situationists cold for reasons stated by them in detail at the time—are now so much water under the bridge. *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball*, apparently. The Left may have prostrated itself in front of Mao's starving and stage-managed utopia. But at least it was not fooled by black uprisings in the United States. So many misled, premature lumpens,

8. The reader is invited to supply other names. We had a hard job thinking of any.

9. On 17 May 1968 the Sorbonne Occupation Committee, in which the Situationists were then still the majority, cabled the Chinese Communist Party as follows: "TREMBLE BUREAUCRATS STOP [etc.] LONG LIVE THE GREAT CHINESE PROLETARIAN REVOLUTION OF 1927 BETRAYED BY THE STALINIST BUREAUCRATS STOP LONG LIVE THE PROLETARIANS OF CANTON AND ELSEWHERE WHO HAVE TAKEN UP ARMS AGAINST THE SO-CALLED PEOPLE'S ARMY STOP LONG LIVE THOSE CHINESE WORKERS AND STUDENTS WHO HAVE ATTACKED THE SO-CALLED CULTURAL REVOLUTION AND THE BUREAUCRATIC MAOIST REGIME STOP LONG LIVE REVOLUTIONARY MARXISM STOP DOWN WITH THE STATE STOP COMITÉ D'OCCUPATION DE LA SORBONNE AUTONOME ET POPULAIRE." Contrast this communication with the fact that for a full decade after 1968 a large portion of the Left continued to flounder about in myriad versions of Maoism. The consensus of the French Left intelligentsia and its *vedettariat* (naming names would, we assume, be superfluous for readers of *October*) was almost iron-clad in this regard—a state of affairs it is now strictly forbidden to recall. At the time, incidentally, one of the few opposing voices raised against the Parisian Mao-cult was that of the former Situationist René Viénet.

lacking (the Left's) direction, unaware that the time was not ripe for insurrection (for these guys it never is or will be). "Spontaneity"! The very word brings on a shudder or a giggle.

Corollary 3: Therefore, the grounds of Left theory and practice need not shift. The regime of policy-studies-plus-theory-refereeing needs no renewal to speak of. Raising the problem of the social construction of "subjects" in late capitalism, and possible forms of resistance to such construction, and above all exploring the implications of the invasion and restructuring of whole realms of representation that had once been left largely outside the commodity regime—the set of issues the Situationists broached under the rubric "the colonization of everyday life"—all of this leads in the wrong direction. It leads to "identity politics," which every good 1960s survivor is supposed to blame for the demise of the Left.

Corollary 4: Therefore, the Left's infatuation with the wildest and most dubious forms of anti-Hegelianism—semiotic Maoism, PCF paranoid not-the-subject-but-the-Party-ism, uninhabited universes made up of apparatuses, instances, structures, subcultural tics, and *systèmes de la mode*, weightless skepticisms and eternal battlings with the ghastly specters of "empiricism" and "scientism"—is entirely valid, and has nothing to do with the Left's being listened to these days, on matters of theory, by no one who is not a subscriber to *Representations* or *Diacritics* or *Modern Language Notes*.

You will notice that the hidden corollaries have a lot more substance than the original arguments about the S.I. And that is appropriate. The arguments are ridiculously thin. It is the corollaries that count. It would be tedious, then, to go point by point through the cheery misrepresentations and present the evidence for their untruth. Better to take one or two topics at random, and convey the general flavor.

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Who would ever have thought, for a start, that the S.I. as pictured by the established wisdom had time, in the intervals between exclusions and anathemata, for analyses of political events in the world outside? For example, the series of interventions in the evolving situation in Algeria, at the time of Ben Bella and Boumedienne, culminating in the long article "Les Luttes de classes en Algérie" (published in the Situationist journal for March 1966, and then as a wall poster). Or the pamphlet of August 1967 on Mao's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, "Le Point d'explosion de l'idéologie en Chine" (reprinted in the journal later



Budapest, October 23, 1956. Toppled Stalin.

that year). We are obviously biased judges, but we persist in thinking that these texts are classics of Marxist analysis. (In both cases the S.I. benefited from having members who possessed real knowledge of the language and history of the countries concerned, as opposed to forming opinions from books by fellow-travelers and editorials in *Le Monde*.) We wonder if those who now dismiss the “political” S.I. could come up with commentaries on the same or comparable subjects from the same period that strike them, in retrospect, as even roughly as good. Good meaning disabused and passionate.

Then there is the question of Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*. Again, a few topics at random. The book was published in November 1967. It was written, that is, at the same time as the political analyses we have just mentioned (along with various others published in the S.I. journal or as pamphlets: on Watts and the commodity economy, on the Six Day War and the Middle East, on the first peculiar stirrings of “youth revolt,” and so on), and it was clearly meant to be read alongside those analyses.¹⁰ It is very much more a “political” book than you would ever dream from reading most accounts of it by detractors or enthusiasts. How would anyone suspect, from Debray’s account and many others like it, that by far the book’s longest chapter is entitled “The Proletariat as Subject and Representation,” and that this hinge of the overall argument turns (once again)

10. Most of these texts can be found in English translation in Ken Knabb’s *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981).

on the question of Leninism, the Party, and the history of the working-class movement? Of course our question is *faux naïf*. This aspect of *The Society of the Spectacle* must not be talked about. Either because it would pull commentators back from the dreamworld of simulacra they wish to believe Debord inhabited or predicted, or because arguing with it would involve remembering one's own "positions," then and now.

Let us concede one or two points. Of course *The Society of the Spectacle* was conceived as a work of "high theory," and depends on a dialogue with texts, mostly drawn from the deep past of Marxism, German philosophy, and French classical literature, which it finds a way to ventriloquize and exacerbate. (Debray's suggestion that the book "admits to plagiarism only in extremis"—in a single thesis toward the end—is pure bad faith. Quite apart from the fact that Debray knows perfectly well, as everyone does, that at that moment Debord is quoting Lautréamont on plagiarism, *The Society of the Spectacle* voices its dependence on the past in every paragraph. That dependence is far deeper and weirder than a speed-reader like Debray has time to bother with.) The question to ask is what might have been the strategic point of such a way of writing in 1967. Dates matter. Althusser's *For Marx* and *Reading "Capital"* were two years old, and sweeping the Left in Europe. When Debray says airily that "we were all Feuerbachians in our



Vilnius, August 30, 1991. Toppled Lenin.
Courtesy AP/Wide World Photos.

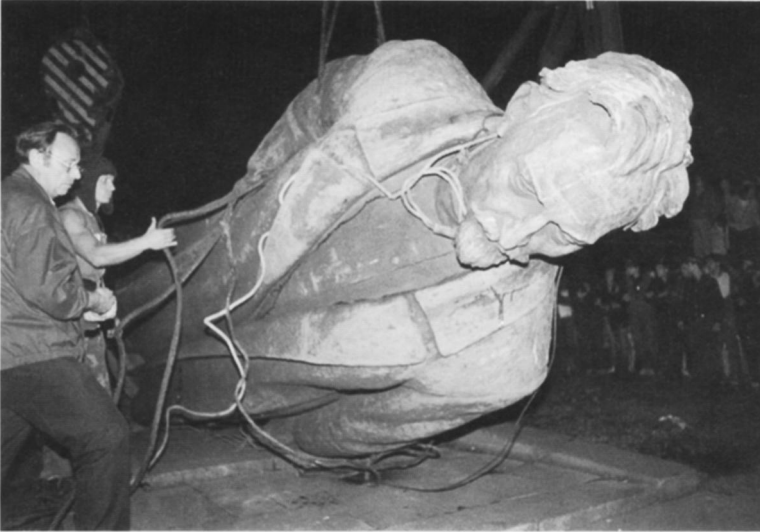
youth, all great enthusiasts for the young Marx," the little confession conjures away what "we" all became a few years later.¹¹

What Debray produced in 1967, the year the Debord book appeared, was *Revolution in the Revolution*, which does for Fidel Castro what Sidney and Beatrice Webb did for Stalin. Fashions in cybernetics and hard-line structuralism had then just promoted (or given new prominence to) the discipline of semiotics. This was the moment, in other words, when the very word "totality," and the very idea of trying to articulate those forces and relations of production which were giving capitalism a newly unified and unifying form, were tabooed (as they largely still are) as remnants of a discredited "Hegelian" tradition.¹² These things were on Debord's mind. One of us remembers him at the Collège de France in 1966, sitting in on Hyppolite's course on Hegel's *Logic*, and having to endure a final session at which the master invited two young Turks to give papers. "Trois étapes de la dégénérescence de la culture bourgeoise française," said Debord as the last speaker sat down. "Premièrement, l'érudition classique"—he had in mind Hyppolite himself, who had spoken briefly at the start of things—"quand même basé sur une certaine connaissance générale. Ensuite le petit con stalinien, avec ses mots de passe, 'Travail,' 'Force' et 'Terreur.' Et enfin—dernière bassesse—le sémiologue." In other words, *The Society of the Spectacle* was conceived and written specifically as a book for bad times. It was intended to keep the habit of totalization alive—but of course to express, in every detail of its verbal texture and overall structure, what a labor of rediscovery and revoicing (indeed, of restating the obvious) that project would now involve.

The obvious it has to be, then, once again—since there is such a determination not to face it. For the Situationists, the overwhelming reality was Stalinism: the damage and horror it had given rise to, and its capacity to reproduce itself, in ever

11. Not that the "we" became just one thing. Debray's own sinuous trajectory is not our concern here; the curious (if they exist) may trace it through his voluminous autobiographical writings, or take a look at his *Media Manifestoes*, recently published in English translation (London and New York: Verso, 1996). But a shared need to avoid the hard core of Debord makes strange bedfellows. Thus Philippe Sollers's recent discovery that Debord's work is "one of the greatest of the century," that Debord is "un classique parmi les classiques," etc. (see, for example, *Libération*, December 6, 1994, p. 34), is ridiculed by Debray as so much "brandishing of the mystical corpse" and "psalmodizing of pale *détournements* into dazzling inventions" (*Le Débat*, art. cit., p. 6). What all this dueling hyperbole papers over is that both Debray and Sollers, the one disparagingly, the other admiringly, want above all to imprison Debord's negativity in an ivory tower. As an antidote to Debray and Sollers, see Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (Pescara: Edizioni Tracce, 1993); French (and revised) edition, translated by Claude Galli: *Guy Debord* (Marseille: Via Valeriana, 1995)—a straightforward, honest, and non-hagiographical study.

12. No one is pretending that the effort at totalization in Debord is risk-free; still less that his example should point us back to some ludicrous Hegel revival. But it is time to retire the claim that "the pursuit of totality" necessarily equals "undifferentiation," "organic unity," "refusal of specificity and autonomy," etc. A good first step would be to reread the analytic sections of *The Philosophy of Right*, and then contrast Hegel's account of the constitution (and contradictions) of social identities with, say, those little myths of absence and difference—generalized from a pseudo-psychology to any and every scale and social circumstance—which are all the Left currently has to offer an "identity politics" in search of a theory and practice.



Moscow, KGB headquarters, August 22, 1991.
Toppled Dzerzhinsky. Courtesy Reuters/Bettmann.

newer and technically more plausible forms, within a Left that had never faced its own complicity or infection. (We shall never begin to understand Debord's hostility to the concept "representation," for instance, unless we realize that for him the word always carried a Leninist aftertaste. The spectacle is repugnant because it threatens to generalize, as it were, the Party's claim to be the representative of the working class.) *The Society of the Spectacle's* forced conversation with the early Marx, and with the shades of Feuerbach and Hegel, is an answer to this situation. "Forced" in two senses: it is ostentatious and obviously pushed to excess (so that even Debray cannot miss it); and these qualities are precisely the signs of the tactic being a tactic, forced on the writer by the history—the disaster—he is recounting.

We are not saying the book does not suffer from the strategy it thinks it has to adopt. Of course it does. But we are saying that the strategy made possible a kind of sanity—inseparable from the book's overweening hubris, its determination to think world-historically in the teeth of specialists from Left and Right—which could be purchased no other way. And we are saying that to choose not to recognize what other modes of Left discourse *The Society of the Spectacle* was launched *against* is to continue the very habits of amnesia and duplicity that the book had full in its sights.

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Lastly, and perhaps centrally, a word on the question of organization. That the S.I. in the 1960s was a small group is true. That its policy of aiming for con-

stant agreement on key matters, and fighting against the reproduction of hierarchy and ideological freezing within the group, led to repeated splits and exclusions, ditto. We parted company with the Situationists in 1967 on just these questions, as applied to the S.I.'s actions in Britain and the U.S. We are not likely, therefore, to think the Situationists always got these things right. All the same, what we find nauseating in the received account is the implication that concern for problems of internal organization—above all a determination to find a way out of the legacy of “democratic centralism”—is one more token of these art-politicians’ lack of seriousness. Anyone who actually reads what the S.I. wrote in 1966 and 1967 will quickly realize that it could not have issued from a group of people walled into their own factional struggles. There were such struggles. They were thought (sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly, in our view) to be the necessary condition of the kind of revolutionary clarity that informs the best of Situationist writing. But the Situationists never got stuck in their own turmoil, and they went on thinking, especially as things heated up in the course of 1967, about how they were to act—to “expand”—if the capitalist State offered them an opportunity. Here, for instance, are extracts from a working document entitled “Réponse aux camarades de Rennes—sur l’organisation et l’autonomie.” Signed by Debord, Khayati, and Viénet, and dated July 16, 1967, this text came out of a series of discussions (and joint actions) with other small groups on the Left.

The discussion begun on July 3 between us and the comrades of two groups affiliated with the Internationale Anarchiste seems to us to have revealed the existence—alongside our agreement on the essential, and indeed as the outcome of that very agreement—of divergent views on the question of organization. . . . These divergences may be summed up as follows: Whereas we are definitely in favor of a *proliferation of autonomous revolutionary organizations*, Loïc Le Reste [of the Rennes group] thinks far more in terms of a *fusion* of such groups. This is not to say, of course, that Le Reste ultimately favors a single revolutionary organization claiming to “represent” either a class or the revolutionary movement as a whole; nor do we for our part have some kind of formal attachment to artificial distinctions between groups that rightly recognize their own fundamental unity on the main theoretical and practical issues.

The question does not therefore turn on some abstract definition of an absolute organizational model, but rather on a critical examination of present conditions, and on particular choices regarding the prospects for real action.

. . . It is well known that the S.I. has never “recruited” members, though it is always willing to welcome individuals on an ad hoc basis; and both aspects of this policy have been determined by the concrete



Paris, Place Clichy, March 10, 1969. Anarcho-Situationist “commandos” installing a replica of Charles Fourier’s statue on a plinth left empty since the removal of the original by the Nazis.¹³

conditions which in our view have circumscribed our practical activity—that activity conceived as means and ends, inseparably—and thus the issue does not depend merely on an individual’s capacity to understand, or willingness to espouse, particular theoretical positions. (As for the theoretical positions themselves, we naturally hope that all who are able, in the full sense of the term, to *appropriate* them, will make free use of what they appropriate.) Very schematically, we may say that the S.I. considers that what it can do at present is work, on an international level, for the reappearance of certain basic elements of a modern-day revolutionary critique. The activity of the S.I. is a *moment* which we do not mistake for a *goal*: the workers must organize themselves, they will achieve emancipation through their own efforts, etc. . . . We cannot accept the idea that numerical “reinforcement” is a virtue per se. It can be harmful from an internal point of view, if it produces an imbalance between what we really have to do and a membership which can serve those ends only in an abstract way, and which is thus subordinate, whether for geographical or other reasons. It can be harmful from an external point of view, to the extent that it presents another example of the Will to Pseudo-Power, after the

13. See *Internationale situationniste* 12 (September 1969), pp. 97–98.

fashion of those many Trotskyite small groups possessed of a “ruling party vocation.” . . .

Even more strongly, we disagree with Loïc Le Reste when he argues that the autonomy of different organizations can introduce a *hierarchy* among them. On the contrary, we think that hierarchy threatens to appear within an organization as soon as some of its members can be constrained to approve and execute what the organization decides, while possessing less power than other members to affect the decision. But we do not see how an effectively autonomous organization—and of course one that has rejected any notion of double allegiance—could become subordinate to an outside power. *L'Unique et sa propriété*¹⁴ charges that “Whenever the S.I. affects to debate theoretical issues with various other revolutionary organizations . . . things always degenerate into bureaucratic farce, in which judgment is passed on these movements and their programs from the lofty and abstract point of view of a disembodied radicalism.” But it is only if the kind of relationship in question was really bureaucratic—that is, aiming at *subordination*—or if our root-and-branch radicalism was indeed abstract and disembodied (which remains to be proven . . .) that one could legitimately talk of the S.I. seeking a *superior role*—in the first case practically, in the second as empty wish-fulfilment. Anyway, what kind of revolutionary organization, composed of what kind of idiots, would actually *let itself* be subordinated in such a way? . . .

As for the possibility of fusions in the future, we believe that they will best take place at revolutionary moments, when the workers’ movement is further advanced. . . .

We do not claim to have the secret formula that will solve the organizational problem of the period ahead. In any case, this question can be neither raised nor resolved entirely within the context of today’s small radical groups. We (and some others) are sure only of a few basic principles: for instance, the necessity of not following old models, without, however, falling back into the pseudo-innocence of purely informal relationships. These principles are our starting point; and without question one of them is respect for the autonomy of the many groups that are worth talking to, and a determination to go on talking to them in good faith.

This is a working document, as we said, unremarkable in itself, and never published subsequently. To a large extent, its approach to the problems of political organization was overtaken by the events of 1968. (Though of course the text is

14. A pamphlet published in 1967 by a group of recent S.I. excludées known as the “Garnautins.”

haunted by a premonition of those events. And to say, as Wollen does, that the May revolution “duly came to the surprise of the Situationists as much as anyone else”¹⁵ is pure face-saving on “anyone else”’s part. Except that the section of the Left Wollen belonged to was not so much surprised as horrified. Events refused to follow the required neo-Gramscian script.)

We cite the “Réponse aux camarades de Rennes” because its contents contradict the current travesty-history of the S.I. during this period, and not least that travesty-history’s favorite *political* claim—that the Situationists were simply “council communists” whose only answer to the practical questions of revolutionary politics was to hypostatize past experiments with workers’ councils as a way of solving all problems of organization in advance. Again, this charge is not simply empty. The invocation of Kiel and Barcelona could be, at times, a kind of mantra. But in practice the invocation coexisted with a whole range of actions and negotiations that aimed to throw the issue of organization back into the melting pot. And consider the invocation itself! Of course any revolutionary practice has to learn from the past, and no doubt idealize that past in doing so. But better an idealized image of 1918 and 1936 than of the years, and kinds of power, that most of the Left put on a pedestal.

*

We realize that by concentrating on the issues we have selected from the Situationists’ final years we run the danger of seeming to fall in with the established notion of some form of epistemological (and practical) break in the S.I.’s history, taking place in the early 1960s, by which “art” gave way to “politics.” It is a crude model, shedding about as much useful light on the difference between “early” and “late” Situationists as Althusser’s does on “early” and “late” Marx. All of the activity we have mentioned was conceived as an aspect of a practice in which “art”—meaning those possibilities of representational and antirepresentational action thrown up by fifty years of modernist experiment on the borders of the category—might now be realized. This was the truly utopian dimension of S.I. activity. And it could and did become a horizon of possibility that meant too little in practice. But only at moments. Surely the remarkable thing, which it now takes a massive effort of historical imagination to recapture, is how active—how instrumental—this utopian dimension was in what the Situationists actually did. It was the “art” dimension, to put it crudely—the continual pressure put on the question of representational forms in politics and everyday life, and the refusal to foreclose on the issue of representation versus agency—that made their politics the deadly weapon it was for a while. And gave them the role they

15. Wollen, “Situationist International,” p. 94.

had in May 1968. This is the aspect of the 1960s that the official Left wants most of all to forget.

Inevitably, we have focused here on the S.I. and the Left. It was the Left (as opposed to, say, the art world) that the Situationists most hated in the 1960s and thought worth targeting. Whether the Left is still worth targeting we are not sure. We have tried several times to write a conclusion to these pages that did so, and have come up hard against the emptiness of the present. As usual, Debord is the best guide to this state of affairs. "Long ago," he says in his 1992 preface to *The Society of the Spectacle*,

Thesis 58 had established as axiomatic that "The spectacle has its roots in the fertile field of the economy, and it is the produce of this field which must in the end come to dominate the spectacular market."

This striving of the spectacle toward modernization and unification, together with all the other tendencies toward the simplification of society, was what in 1989 led the Russian bureaucracy suddenly, and as one man, to convert to the current *ideology* of democracy—in other words, to the dictatorial freedom of the Market, as tempered by the recognition of the rights of Homo Spectator. No one in the West felt the need to spend more than a single day considering the import and impact of this extraordinary media event—proof enough, were proof called for, of the progress made by the techniques of the spectacle. All that needed recording was the fact that a sort of geological tremor had apparently taken place. The phenomenon was duly noted, dated, and deemed sufficiently well understood; a very simple sign, "the fall of the Berlin Wall," repeated over and over again, immediately attained the incontestability of all the other *signs of democracy*.¹⁶

The "very simple sign" still rules. It does so for all kinds of reasons, including the utter failure of the Left to face what the sign might mean for *it*—what it might say about its fifty-year collaboration with Stalinist counterrevolution, and the kinds of theoretical and practical monsters such collaboration bred. The sign still rules. Therefore no move to the apodictic or universal rings true, and yet we gag at the current rhetoric of detotalization: "We move from place to place and from time to time,"¹⁷ etc. Sooner or later the history of the S.I. is bound to serve in the construction of a new project of resistance. The sooner the better; there is no reason to think the moment will be long coming. What that project will be like is still guesswork. Certainly it will have to struggle to reconceive the tentacular unity of

16. Guy Debord, "Preface to the Third French Edition" [Paris: Gallimard, 1992], in *The Society of the Spectacle* (New York: Zone Books, 1994), pp. 9–10.

17. Wollen, "Situationist International," p. 95.

its enemy and articulate the grounds of a unity capable of contesting it. The word “totality” will not put it at panic stations. It will want to know the past. And inevitably it will find itself retelling the stories of those moments of refusal and reorganization—the S.I. being only one of them—that the dreamwork of the Left at present excludes from consciousness.

CLAIRE GILMAN

Throughout his writings, Guy Debord made his stance on Dada clear. Statements like “Dadaism . . . has become an acknowledged cultural style,”¹ and his assertion that “since the negation of the bourgeois conception of art and artistic genius has become pretty much old hat, [Duchamp’s] drawing of a mustache on the *Mona Lisa* is no more interesting than the original version of that painting,”² position the Situationist International as a distinctly post-Dada movement. But if Debord’s rejection of his radical predecessors is this emphatic, why don’t critics accept him at his word?

Sadie Plant’s recent critical history is a case in point. Although Plant explicitly claims the Situationists for a “postmodern age,” likening the group’s radical artistic strategy to pastiche and deconstruction, her analysis ends up tracing old ground. Equating these methods with “subversive violence” and critical negation, Plant concludes that S.I. tactics represent “[a] reworking . . . of those strategies employed by the dadaists and surrealists, extended by the Situationists to every area of social and discursive life.”³ In the same way, even the excellent catalogue from the major ICA Boston exhibition positions the group squarely in line with their Dada and Surrealist precursors, with the result that the Situationists seem bound to prewar avant-garde methods, albeit in wider spheres and to greater extremes.

* This paper was originally conceived for a seminar on European art from 1945 to 1968, taught by Benjamin Buchloh at Columbia University. Buchloh’s advice and criticisms were crucial to the project from its inception to its current form. I would also like to thank Tom McDonough and Hal Foster for their editorial assistance, and Hannah Feldman and Roger Rothman for their critical comments. Finally, I am deeply indebted to Alexander Greenawalt for his suggestions and support throughout the project.

1. Guy Debord, “Les Situationnistes et les nouvelles formes d’action dans la politique ou l’art,” in *Destruction of RSG: En Kollektive manifestation of Situationist International* (Odense, Denmark: Galerie EXI, 1963), pp. 15–18. Translated as “The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Politics and Art,” in *On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International: 1957–1972*, ed. Elisabeth Sussman (Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art, 1989), p. 151. (Also translated in the *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. and trans. Ken Knabb [Berkeley, Cal.: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981], pp. 317–18 (hereafter *SIA*).

2. Guy Debord and Gil Wolman, “Methods de Détournement,” *Les Lèvres Nues*, no. 8 (May 1956). Trans. as “Methods of Detournement,” in *SIA*, p. 9.

3. Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.



Asger Jorn. The Avant-Garde Doesn't Give Up. 1962.

Asger Jorn's *Modification* paintings assume particular significance in relation to Debord's rhetoric. Take, for example, *The Avant-Garde Doesn't Give Up* from 1962.⁴ The found painting of a young girl inscribed with mustache and beard immediately recalls Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.*, as well as Debord's statement that Duchamp's gesture is now "pretty much old hat." It is possible to accept Jorn's painting at its word, in which case it becomes a simplistic reinscription of Duchampian negation, although in light of Debord's statement, it could equally be that the title (also scrawled across the surface of the canvas) is an ironic commentary on the pathetic mutilation of an already valueless kitsch painting.

Yet there is a third way to view the work, one that does not fundamentally depend on the relationship between image and text. It is crucial to recognize that Jorn's defacement of the girl is, as a reference to Duchamp, less an instance of mutilation than an unmanipulated appropriation. If Duchamp's act is primary—overturning the stable icon which is further undone by its status as photo reproduction—Jorn's mark is necessarily secondary—a received rather than a productive gesture. Duchamp's work makes us laugh; regardless of anything else, it is indisputably comic. When confronted with Jorn's painting, we are also tempted to laugh, but for other reasons. Our laughter is tinged with embarrassment—for ourselves viewing but, more important, for Jorn. "What is going on here?" we ask. "What can be the point?" Where Duchamp's line visibly (and texturally) mars the flat, photo reproduction, Jorn's painterly defacement enters the work only to merge with its surface. Moreover, on closer look the girl proves to be merely one motif among others, which include Jorn's scrawled title and his childlike forms painted on the black ground. This work is not a reference to Duchamp so much as a reflection on several previous styles that come together with no apparent rhyme or reason.

If the appropriationist method typical of Jorn's paintings relates to montage/collage tactics, it does not find its parallel in Duchamp's parodic maneuvers or, alternatively, in the propagandistic interventions of someone like John Heartfield. Instead, Jorn's works differ from traditional collage aesthetics in their express departure from previous structures of visibility and spatiality. With their painterly marks that collect in abstract equivalence like mindless traces on a window pane, Jorn's "paratactic" surfaces reject Dada's "syntactic" organization, in which disjunction and fragmentation, shock and simultaneity, ultimately combine in new, synthetic configurations.⁵ In other words, instead of employing internal fragmentation and rupture to provide critical meaning, Jorn's works function as a sort of neutral collection in which meaning has not been

4. This work does not belong to the original *Modifications* series from 1959, but rather to a group entitled *New Disfigurations*. See n. 26.

5. I am indebted here to Benjamin Buchloh's contrast between Marcel Broodthaers's photo vitrines and Dada and Surrealist collage tactics. See Buchloh, "Contemplating Publicity: Marcel Broodthaers's Section Publicité," in *Marcel Broodthaers: Musée d'Art Moderne, Département des Aigles, Section Publicité*, ed. Maria Gilissen and Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (New York: Marian Goodman Gallery, 1995), pp. 96–97.

overturned but evacuated. Jorn's paintings (and Debord's statements regarding Duchamp) do not suggest an elaboration of earlier, critical efforts, but rather a view from a place where such gestures are no longer considered possible. In this light, Jorn's banal image quotations find a certain purpose.

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Executed in 1959, Jorn's *Modifications* were first displayed in May of that year at the Galerie Rive Gauche in Paris. Jorn made approximately twenty-three of these paintings, all second-rate canvases that the artist found in flea markets and decorated with Pollock-like drips or Dubuffet-inspired childlike forms. Needless to say, an initial look at these paintings is a discouraging one. To interrupt second-rate canvases with painterly scrawls hardly seems a relevant critical strategy for the late fifties. Indeed, if we confine such moves to "playful irreverence" and active, critical vandalism, then Jorn's paintings would seem to render that strategy hopelessly naive. Must these paintings be seen to depict, as Peter Wollen would have it, "objective beings . . . broken open, vandalized, and mutilated to release the 'becoming' latent within them," transformed through "magical actions" into "living signs"?⁶ Although interpretations like Wollen's are consistent with Jorn's early paintings from his CoBrA period—fields of anonymous, magical encounters and wondrous, festive beings—they do not adequately account for the *Modifications*, which instead constitute a relatively isolated moment in Jorn's career.

An offhand remark made by Guy Atkins, the author of the "official" multi-volume work on Jorn, suggests another way to read these works. Atkins notes that in the kitsch, rural images where fishermen fish and shepherds tend their flocks, the figures as well as the main event are always protected from "the rampaging hoards that he [Jorn] unleashes on the scene."⁷ Put another way, these painterly creatures that Wollen describes as "mutilating" the forms on which they are overlaid precisely do *not* interrupt the original image. The central figures and composition remain intact and the mood undisturbed.

An excellent example is *Paris by Night* (1959), a found painting of a man leaning over a balcony looking down on the streets—or river?—of Paris, which Jorn has overlaid with paint in the bottom right and upper-left-hand corners. At the top, a schematic, ovoid face is discernible, while at the bottom, attempts at figuration have degenerated into a web of tangled lines and isolated drops of paint. The dusky blue tones create a heavy stillness that Jorn's additions, despite their valiant efforts, cannot enliven. Rather than encroaching on the man's contemplative solitude, or disrupting the pictorial space in any significant way, these forms read as what they literally are: impotent paint splotches encrusted on the canvas. Instead of "vandalizing" or "breaking open" the picture plane,

6. Peter Wollen, "Bitter Victory: The Art and Politics of the Situationist International," in *On the Passage*, pp. 47–48.

7. Guy Atkins, *Asger Jorn: The Crucial Years, 1954–1964* (New York: Wittenborn Art Books, 1977), p. 60.



Asger Jorn. Paris by Night. 1959.



Asger Jorn. *Untitled*. 1954.

Jorn's *nonalterations* testify to the impenetrability of the mute canvas and the failure of immanent deconstructive strategies.

This work begs comparison with a typical pre-Situ painting like *Untitled* (1954), in which a monstrous, swirling face emerges from pools of paint. Jorn's thick strokes are here deeply impressed, as though attacked by clawing fingers, their violent motions still registered in the dizzying eddies that both compose and dissolve the central face. Is this figure bursting forth from or being sucked back into the hot, viscous lava that oozes around it? The painting is a volatile space indeed. Five years later, a similar ovoid face appears, but this time it is limp and colorless, a mere ghost of its former self. What had read as incisions in the earlier painting now look like stains. Thick and pulsing paint has given way to thin, white dribbles that settle on the surface like milk skim.

Paris by Night can also be productively compared with an untitled modification performed by Jorn and his CoBrA peers Constant, Appel, and Corneille in 1949.

In this case, the original painting has been completely eradicated as bright, playful forms dance triumphantly over its surface. These figures assert their brute authority, whereas in *Paris by Night* Jorn's motifs are relegated to the sides. It is all too easy to ignore these invaders and conclude that the man at his balcony remains alone.

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The year 1959 falls in the middle of Jorn's involvement with the S.I., which lasted from 1957 to his resignation in April 1961, and concludes an intense period of collaboration with Debord (the second of two joint book projects, *Mémoires*, was published in early 1959). Although the *Modifications* are not the only works that Jorn executed during his involvement with the S.I. (in fact, many of his works from these years recall his CoBrA period), nor the only time that Jorn experimented with modifying old canvases, they are the paintings that Situationist texts and contemporary critics hold up as the quintessential manifestation of Situationist art practice. As reused canvases, they are a primary example of the artistic strategy of *détournement*, literally defined in S.I. essays and manifestos as "the integration of present or past artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu."

For critics like Plant, *détournement* is easily understood as a form of critical sabotage, parallel, once again, to Dada and Surrealist collage tactics. Taken in isolation, many Situationist statements would seem to support this view. For example, the article "Détournement as Negation and Prelude," published in the *Internationale situationniste*, explains, "*détournement* is a game made possible by the capacity of 'devaluation' . . . all the elements of the cultural past must be 'reinvested' or disappear." The next point, however, is somewhat more surprising and suggests a dimension that has been all but ignored by critics, one that takes on particular significance when applied to Jorn's work. Quoting "Methods of Détournement" (1956), the text concludes, "it is necessary . . . to conceive of a parodic-serious stage where the accumulation of detoured elements, far from aiming at arousing indignation or laughter by alluding to some original work, will express our *indifference* toward a meaningless and forgotten original, and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity."⁸

Debord and Gil Wolman provide an instructive illustration of this idea, using D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. They explain that "it would be better to detourn it as a whole, without necessarily even altering the montage, by adding a soundtrack that made a powerful denunciation of the horrors of imperialist wars and of the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, which are continuing in the United States even

8. Emphasis mine. "Le détournement comme négation et comme prélude," *Internationale situationniste* 3 (1959). Translated as "Detournement as Negation and Prelude," in *SIA*, pp. 55–56. Sublimity must be understood here in line with Debord's statements about "art's brilliant colors" (see below) as manifesting the art work's reified impotency. This idea recalls Jean-Paul Sartre's concept of the "sacred" and its thickening of life and consciousness.

now." This method is common, but the authors' conclusion is not: "Such a *detournement*—a very moderate one—is in the final analysis nothing more than the moral equivalent of the restoration of old paintings in museums."⁹ In short, instead of dismantling the original work of art to make an effective political statement, appropriation *preserves* the work, albeit as inert artifact. The work is not superseded by a new, enlightened meaning, but reconfirmed as a mere object suitable for the museum. Such a recontextualization exposes the very fallacy of radical claims for reinvestment or "indignation," and ultimately positions the film as an object of "indifference." The work of art, it seems, permits neither free expression or Dadaist negation. In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord suggests as much: "The fact that the language of real communication has been lost is what the modern movement of art's decay expresses *positively*. What it expresses *negatively* is that a new common language has yet to be found . . . in a praxis embodying both an unmediated activity and a language commensurate with it."¹⁰ And again, in an S.I. article: "When a newly independent art paints its world in brilliant colors, then a moment of life has grown old. By art's brilliant colors it cannot be rejuvenated but only called to mind. The greatness of art makes its appearance only as dusk begins to fall over life."¹¹

The art object is capable only of reflecting life, a life grown old as soon as it is registered on the work's surface. It cannot produce or activate—it does not speak a viable critical language—but only solidifies with its "brilliant," impotent forms. And yet, in this alone it possesses some value. In Debord's thinking, the only positive thing about modern culture is that its very inertia testifies to its own disintegration, to "its withering away, its witness against itself."¹²

By registering their own impotency, Jorn's painterly marks testify to the end of the art work as a critical arena—to its failure to speak as a revolutionary tool. Treating the original canvas with "indifference," Jorn's mute scribbles collect like so many colored traces. As such, they represent the antithesis of avant-garde rupture and penetration embodied succinctly in Walter Benjamin's cinematographer/surgeon who "operates" on reality and the filmic surface through effects like cutting and splicing, who "greatly diminishes the distance between himself and the patient by penetrating into the patient's body, and increases it but little by the caution with which his hand moves among the organs."¹³ Benjamin's description finds an apt parallel in a photomontage by John Heartfield that shows the artist preparing to cut off the head of Zorgiebel, the Berlin Chief of Police. Brow furrowed in intense concentration, he wields an enormous pair of scissors. Heartfield is here the surgeon, and although what

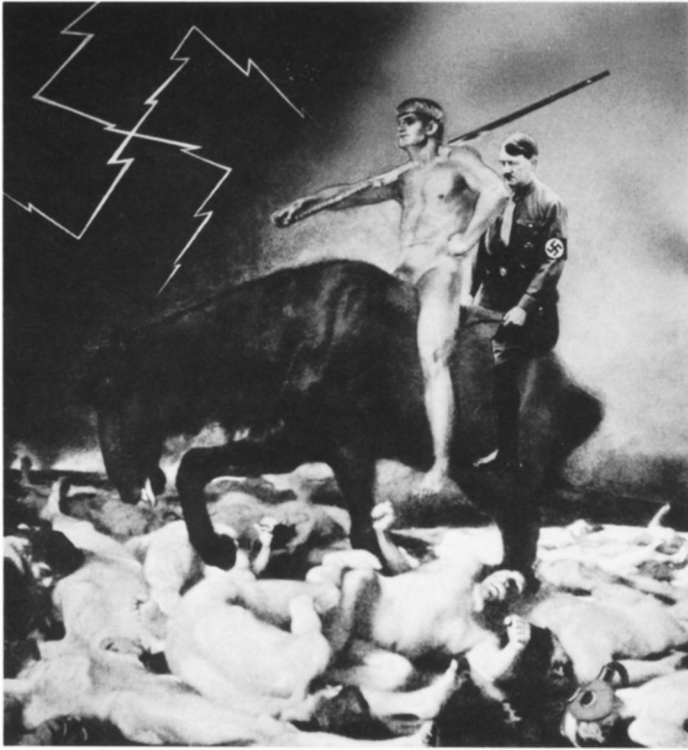
9. Debord and Wolman, "Methods of *Detournement*," p. 12.

10. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 133.

11. Debord, "For a Revolutionary Judgment of Art" (1961) in *SIA*.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 310.

13. Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936), in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), p. 233.



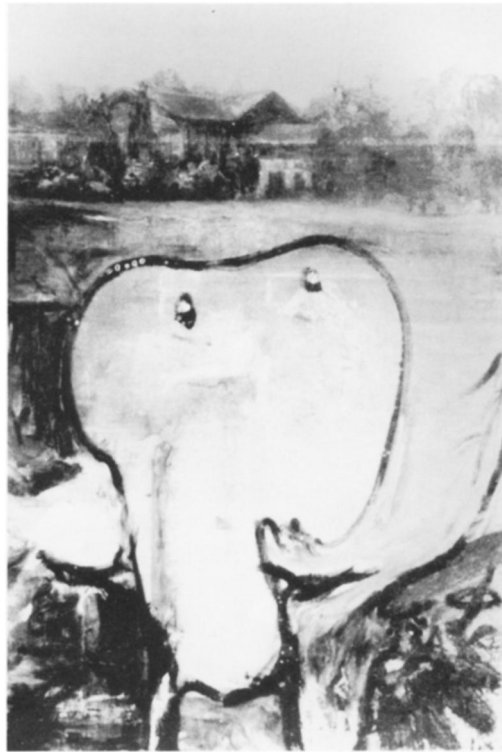
Heartfield dismantles in the image is not undone in reality, there remains nonetheless the suggestion that the picture surface is a valid place for criticism to begin. Internal rupture can at least be *compared* to real, revolutionary action.

Heartfield also modified old paintings, and the difference between his and Jorn's works is illuminating. One such picture is *War: (A Painting by Franz v. Stuck Brought up to Date by John Heartfield)* (1933). Several alterations to the original are immediately apparent, most notably the photograph of Hitler inserted on the buffalo's back behind the victorious warrior and the gas mask placed over the face of the prostrate victim in the bottom right corner. The final image takes on a variety of connotations. At a most basic level it likens Hitler to the brute warrior, and the masked figure to his potential victims. Stiffly positioned and with head bowed, Hitler appears ridiculous as he takes a back seat on the buffalo's rump. Equally interesting is the way in which the original painting, a typical example of the mythical images promoted by Hitler, is transformed into the degenerate art he despised, precisely through the insertion of his own image. In this way, each individual element is undermined and yet brought together to form a new, startling composite. The photo slices through the painted surface in such a way that it both combines with it illusionistically—as a logical part of the scene—and speaks its own alienation.

This kind of "breaking open," this dismantling of two different realities and their recombination into a new, meaningful whole is exactly what is *not* achieved in works like *Paris by Night* or, alternately, *Story of the North*, in which an abstract,

Left: John Heartfield. War: A Painting
by Franz v. Stuck Brought up to Date
by John Heartfield. 1933.

Right: Asger Jorn. Story of the North.
1959.



ghostlike face is traced over the lower portion of the painting to stop just below the horizon line on which the house and foliage sit. Gliding over the water below the house, this figure is a passive observer. Its eyes look out (or in) blankly, but it has no mouth with which to speak or protest. The compact layers exclude penetration and fragmentation, presenting an amalgam of images that do not interrelate in any significant way.

If Heartfield's strategy recalls Benjamin's surgeon, then Jorn and Debord's degradation of the art object to a position of "self-liquidation" finds a surprising parallel in the writing of Theodor Adorno, that champion of the radical, autonomous art work. In his *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno lauds Baudelaire for being the first to acknowledge that art in a mature commodity society is powerless to do anything but look on as that society takes its course. Art can transcend capitalist society's reign only by integrating its own autonomy with society's images. "The modernity of art lies in its mimetic relation to a petrified and alienated reality. This, and not the denial of that mute reality, is what makes art speak."¹⁴ Like Debord, Adorno holds that the work of art can no longer justify itself through strategies such as montage, for "now that shock has lost its punch, the products of montage revert to being indifferent stuff or substance."¹⁵ In plagiarizing images, themes, and ideologies, the Situationist work does not negate these forms, but

14. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: International Library of Phenomenology and Moral Sciences; Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 31.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

rather, presents them as “surplus,” revealing prior avant-garde strategies to be “indifferent stuff and substance,” undone by their own irrelevance within contemporary culture. Jorn’s paintings reveal previous critical gestures to be mere crust on the canvas.

According to Adorno, art’s very repulsiveness carries a certain “catastrophic potential” that conjures up the possibility of “the unutterable, which is Utopia.”¹⁶ It is with Adorno’s utopian view of the art object that he and the S.I. part. While Adorno holds that the “realist” work can “transcend” reification precisely through its honest self-criticism, the S.I. reaches an opposite conclusion. For the Situationists, this authentic possibility can be realized only by transcending the work of art, which, as mere mimetic object, is itself mired in alienation. This is the sentiment of the Situationists’ father figure Jean-Paul Sartre,¹⁷ who, despite his recognition that the self is rooted in the world, claims that the liberated subject is realized in an active negation of societal forms and relationships, in withdrawing itself from these ties and positing them “as if they were painted objects.”¹⁸ *Détournement* acts like Sartrian prose, by which “I transfix [a situation], I display it in full view; at present I dispose of it,” and through which, in conjunction with social praxis, “I involve myself a little more in the world, and by the same token I emerge from it a little more, since I go beyond it towards the future.”¹⁹ By bracketing reality in the mute, congealed art work, the Sartrian subject is able to bypass worldly claims for unfettered motion into the world.

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If Jorn’s paintings are mute, mimetic artifacts, they are also archives. With their dense planes that “preserve” and collect bankrupt gestures (including both the kitsch paintings and the painterly marks that overlay them), they parallel that classificatory system that looks on past moments from an external vantage point, avoiding all interpretation or the belief that originary, intimate meaning can be rediscovered or reapplied to the present. In likening these works to archives, I am thinking not of methods of hierarchical ordering so much as of the way in which Jorn’s works function as memory tableaux, which, nonetheless, do not provide intimate, internal access to past moments.²⁰ In this way we are reminded of Foucault’s archaeological method, whose function “is not to awaken texts from

16. Ibid., p. 48.

17. Sartre and his philosophy of the situation are fundamental to the S.I.’s notion of everyday life authentically experienced. For an excellent clarification of this relationship, see Peter Wollen, “Bitter Victory,” p. 30.

18. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint-Genet*, quoted in Bernd Jäger, “Sartre’s Anthropology,” in *The Philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1981), p. 481.

19. Jean-Paul Sartre, *What Is Literature?* and *Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 37.

20. Once again, my analysis is inspired by Buchloh’s discussion of Broodthaers’s photo arrangements and their relation to archival ordering systems. However, as pointed out above, my use of the term differs from Buchloh’s emphasis on the archive as a site of administrative, programmatic display.

their present sleep, and, by reciting the marks still legible on their surface, to rediscover the flash of their birth; on the contrary, its function is to follow them through their sleep" to discover in what mode of existence "they are preserved, in which they are reactivated, and used, in which they are also—but this was not their original destiny—forgotten, and possibly even destroyed."²¹

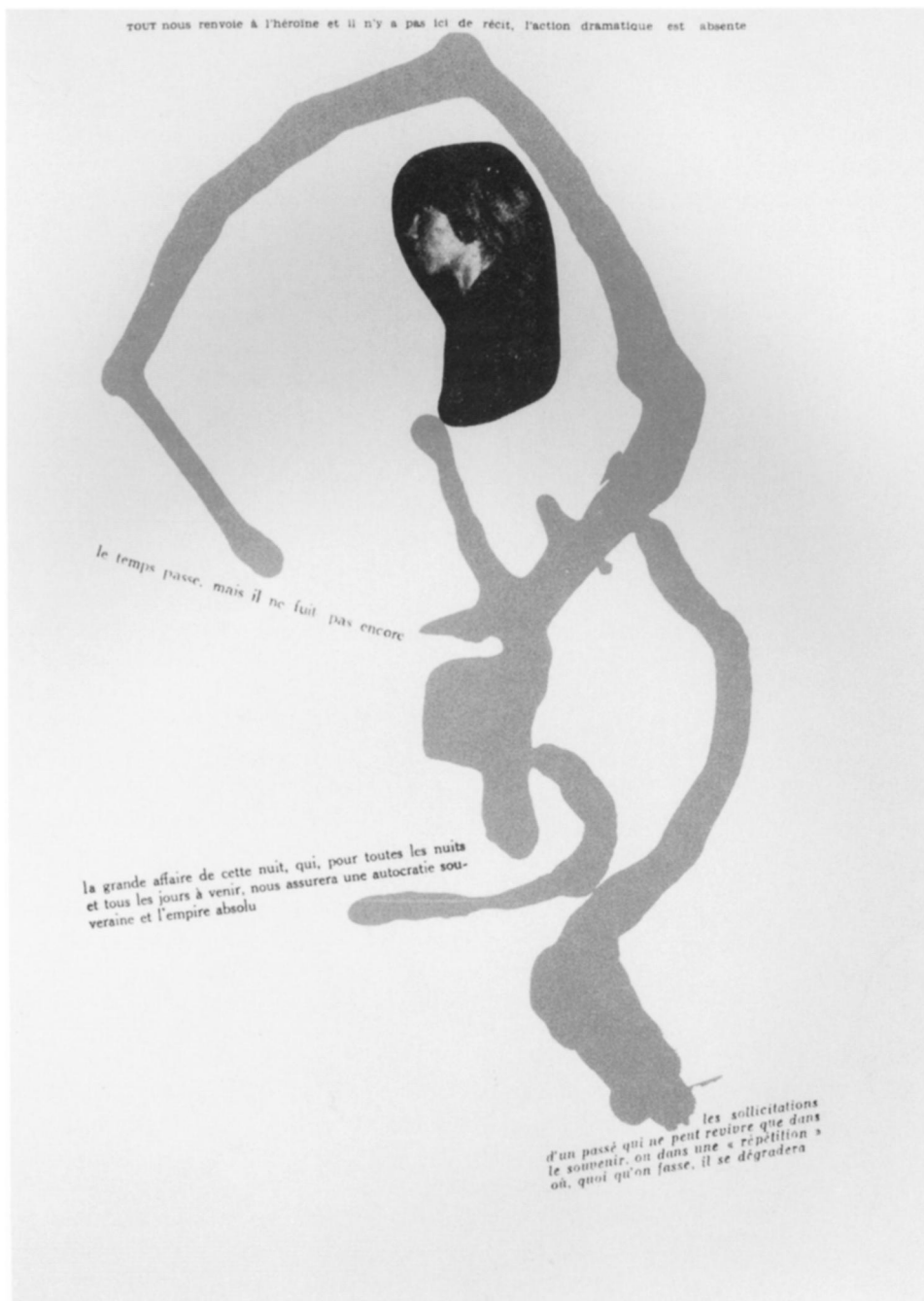
Debord and Jorn's second book, *Mémoires*,²² assumes particular significance in relation to this archival strategy.²³ Approximately fifty pages long, the book is divided into three sections, labeled June 1952, December 1952, and September 1953 respectively—roughly the time frame of the first two years of Debord's radical, pre-Situ group the Lettrist International (1952–57). Within each section, the white pages are strewn with photo reproductions, anonymous texts clipped from a variety of sources, and Jorn's overlapping swirls ranging from bright reds and blues to hot pink and acid green. Greil Marcus has likened the rivulets of paint and print which seem to form routes and passages on the book's pages to the Situationist *dérive*, and the book in general to a blueprint or map of these routes through everyday life and space.²⁴ And yet, at the same time as it is a map, laying the ground for an active course, it is also a memoir—specifically, the story of the Lettrist International. This conflation of map and memoir is significant, for as a means of describing, recording, and translating the external features of a path or place, a map would seem to preclude access to the intimate, internal arena of memory. Composed entirely of borrowed phrases, *Mémoires* acknowledges this tension between a desire to record and remember, and the fact that once solidified on the pages of a book or art work, the relevancy of these moments is long gone. In this vein, the quotations seem to alternate between utopian optimism—"the grand affair of this night, which, for all nights and days to come assures us a sovereign autocracy and absolute empire"—and a melancholic sense of failure—"the solicitations of a past which can only be revived in remembrance, or in a repetition where, whatever one does, it degrades itself." More than describing events and desires, *Mémoires* tells of the external conditions surrounding the for-

21. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 122. This pairing of the Situationists and Foucault may seem surprising, considering that they represent manifestly different philosophical positions particularly as regards the role of the subject. In citing Foucault, I am drawing a parallel between the Situationist/Debordian art object and the impotency that grounds Foucault's "self." I do not mean to diminish the discrepancy between the Situationist's Lukacs- and Sartre-inspired quest for free, unalienated subjectivity and Foucault's all-pervasive, insurmountable economy of "power."

22. Guy Debord, *Mémoires* (1958; reprint, Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert aux Belles Lettres, 1993). All translations from *Mémoires*, unless otherwise specified, are my own.

23. *Fin de Copenhague* (1957; reprinted in *Documents relatifs à la fondation de l'Internationale situationniste*, ed. Gérard Berreby [Paris: Éditions Allia, 1985]). Jorn and Debord's first book from 1957 is equally interesting and deserves consideration in its own right. However, for lack of space I have limited my remarks to *Mémoires*. The general format of the two books is very similar, and much of my discussion of *Mémoires* can be applied to the earlier book. One crucial difference is that *Fin de Copenhague*, with its interspersed cartoons and advertising slogans, must be seen as a commentary on consumer society associated, in this way, with Pop gestures. This is not, I would argue, the way that *Mémoires* should be read.

24. Greil Marcus, "Guy Debord's *Mémoires*: A Situationist Primer," in *On the Passage*, p. 128.



*Asger Jorn and Guy Debord.
Page from Mémoires. 1958.*

mulation of past moments: “on the deserted streets,” “in the quarter,” *Mémoires* gives us where, when, and how but not what. It translates the past, as it were, “through secondary details.” Admitting the impossibility of intimately appropriating one’s own words and actions, *Mémoires* enters the domain of the already said: “Ours is a singular profession: enormous labor, fatigue beyond words, never respite, a destiny on the fringes of that of others.”²⁵

Alienated from the originary sites that it translates, the book becomes its own structural space with specific material conditions. As *Mémoires* recognizes, “the passion to speak and remember rests on a material base.” In this vein, the book becomes a leveling surface on which Jorn’s painted swirls, printed text, and photo reproductions collect in banal equivalence. The reference to Pollock is unmistakable in Jorn’s splatterings of color, and yet the photo-lithographed drips and splatters undermine the rhetoric of gestural authenticity surrounding Pollock’s work. In contrast to Heartfield’s photo, however, which ruptures the thick, painted plane into which it is inserted, *Mémoires* reduces everything—including the painted marks—to the state of the photographic. As reproductions, word and image confront no primary model. Rather, they participate in a space of rootless exchange in which there can be no criticism precisely because there is no way to differentiate one gesture from another. The failure to dismantle or disrupt is poignantly underscored by the frenetic splotches that overlay but, as with Jorn’s detoured paintings, do not hide or erase the typed text beneath. Moreover, these frantic jumbles of color, words, and photos are followed by more static, gridded pages, in which the colored lines serve the sole function of scoring the text. In this way, they parallel the mechanistic diagrams of rooms and houses that run throughout the book—tautological word/image illustrations. Toward the end of *Mémoires*, a washy blue/green splotch that seems to hover almost magically on its page is followed on the next page by a bubble-shaped, hot pink, cartoon-like alter ego. The text underneath the figure reads: “the mess goes away!” Attempts at spontaneous expression in the manner of Dada collage poems or Futurist *Parole in Libertà* are replaced by the codified, graphic signs that characterize the book’s serial structure.

Mémoires is predicated on the alienating effect of language, specifically as it enters the domain of the aesthetic object. As archival recollection, the book conjures up “the epoch [that] itself is the frame of the whole work”²⁶ at the same time as it relegates those moments to mere shadows. The anguished voice that speaks through anonymous phrases calls to mind Foucault’s fictitious interlocutor from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: “What! All those words, piled up one after another, all those marks made on all that paper . . . all that and nothing remaining of the poor hand that traced them, of the anxiety that sought appeasement in them, of that completed life that has nothing but them to survive in? . . . Must I suppose . . . that in speaking I am not banishing my death, but actually establishing it?”²⁷

25. Translated in *ibid.*, p. 125.

26. Guy Debord, *Mémoires*, n.p.

27. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, p. 210.

Foucault's image of words piled up one after another recalls not only *Mémoires* but Jorn's detoured paintings as well, and none more so than *The Avant-Garde Doesn't Give Up*.²⁸ Given Jorn's Duchampian gesture in conjunction with the scrawled words, the childlike primitive figures overpainted on the black ground, and the red, yellow, and blue paint splotches that turn this field into a kind of action painting, the entire image reads as a recollection of earlier artistic forays, a kind of archive of the avant-garde. Registered on the painting's surface—"one after the other"—each motif becomes a distinct, borrowed style, made equivalent with all other artistic interventions, and preserved, albeit as a mere trace, for posterity. Like the book, the painted surface becomes its own discursive space—grounding Duchamp's strategy in precisely that arena that the Dadaists sought to destroy. These paintings admit the paradox of modernism whereby avant-garde movements ultimately succumb to their own aestheticism. The avant-garde may not have given up, but, as a result, it has become a received gesture indistinguishable (both literally and figuratively) from Jorn's kitsch paintings.

For Debord, "the very fact that such 'recollections' of the history of art have become possible amounts to the *end of the world of art*." He writes: "Only in this era of museums, when no artistic communication remains possible, can each and every earlier moment of art be accepted—and be accepted as *equal in value*—for none, in view of the disappearance of the prerequisites of communication *in general*, suffers any longer from the disappearance of its own *particular* ability to communicate."²⁹ This ability to recollect, which is complicit with art's failure to signify, is not to be lamented. Rather, in Debord's thinking, such a testament to art's dissolution is necessary in that it promotes recognition of the current need to supersede the work of art entirely. The museum, as an institution that kills any authentic relation between art and society once and for all, is therefore the final catalyst. It is only in this age of the museum and the archive that, according to Debord, any obstructive illusions about the revolutionary potential of art will finally be put to rest, and real, communal praxis can begin.

In the catalogue essay to his 1959 show, Jorn writes: "Be modern, collectors, museums. If you have old paintings do not despair. Retain your memories but detourn them so that they correspond with your era. . . . Painting is over. You might as well finish it off. Detourn. Long live painting."³⁰ The detoured work functions both as a form of preservation and, as such, as a recognition of the death

28. This painting (part of a series entitled *New Disfigurations*) was executed after the *Modifications* and, for that matter, after Jorn's resignation from the S.I. in 1961. Atkins notes the difference between these works' "more serious intention" and the earlier paintings. The title of the series alone—most fully applicable to a work like *Sugar Tart*, in which a woman's face has been replaced by the head of a pig—suggests its departure from the *Modifications* as I have discussed them. Nevertheless, many of these paintings read as similarly tired gestures. Paintings like *The Avant-Garde Doesn't Give Up* or *The Two Penguins* bear particular affinity with the earlier works.

29. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 135.

30. Asger Jorn, "Peinture détournée," in *Vingt peintures modifiées par Asger Jorn* (Paris: Galerie Rive Gauche, 1959). Translated as "Detoured Painting" in *On the Passage*, p. 140.

of painting (and the art work in general) as a vital field for critical investigation. It is significant that these works remain paintings, not only because, as such, they reinforce the naiveté of mechanical strategies like photography that once carried such utopian potential, but also because through their inert opacity they become ciphers of their own demise. Jorn notes: "it is impossible to establish a future without a past. The future is made through relinquishing or sacrificing the past." He concludes: "In this exhibition I erect a monument in honor of bad painting. Personally I like it better than good painting. But above all, this monument is indispensable, both for me and for everyone else. It is painting sacrificed." Jorn is not the cinematographer/surgeon who "moves among the patient's organs." Instead, Jorn stands back as his paintings self-destruct before his eyes: "I solemnly tip my hat and let the blood of my victims flow while intoning Baudelaire's hymn to beauty."³¹

*

What sort of beauty is Jorn referring to here? Is he speaking of that ephemeral quality that mirrors the age it typifies and, in this way, comes to parallel Adorno's autonomous art work, or is he instead referencing Baudelaire's other beauty—the eternal and immutable—and implying that this kind of rigidity must ultimately be rejected? It is this second appeal that speaks to the paradox at the heart of Jorn's *Modifications* and Debord's writing. For it is important to emphasize that utopian aspirations do not disappear from Situationist theory even if they can no longer be located within the domain of the art object. In fact, in their very bounded materiality, Jorn's paintings suggest that avant-garde failures can be contained and so disposed, that one should transcend the spectacle and reified art forms for a space that resembles Sartrean negativity: pure creative spirit unencumbered by obstacles. Gradually the Situationists came to reject artistic structures altogether as, one by one, artists affiliated with the S.I. either were excluded or, like Jorn, chose to resign. As Debord concluded in 1972 after the disbanding of the S.I., it was now necessary to go into hiding: "And now when we can flatter ourselves that we have achieved the most shocking notoriety . . . we will become even less accessible, we will go even further underground. The more famous our theses become, the more obscure we ourselves will be."³²

This rhetoric manifests a certain idealism. For all their radicalism, the Situationists maintain a strangely limited view of art, one that holds that the relevancy of the art work ends with the death of its critical/creative function. In fact, in this respect, the Situationist scorn for neo-avant-garde "repetitions" recalls Peter Bürger's condemnation of postwar movements as pathetic, repetitive failures.³³ In

31. Ibid., p. 142.

32. Debord, *La Véritable Scission dans l'Internationale* (Paris: Éditions Champ Libre, 1972). Quoted in Roberto Ohrt, "If I wasn't Alexander I would like to be Diogenes" (*Durch* 3–4 [November 1987], p. 37).

33. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

the end, "bad painting" is just that. Jorn's painterly carcasses cannot conceive of an art that would offer a provocative analysis of the way in which we come to meaning *within* discursive frameworks and *without* complete subjective control. Responding to a desperate need to escape from reified objects and relationships, the Situationists looked to rediscover a utopian space of free, creative subjects.

The garden/building complex that Jorn constructed in Albisola, Italy, was such a place. In "On Wild Architecture,"³⁴ Debord contrasts contemporary architecture, "a form that to this day is like oil stains on 'the frozen waters of egotistical calculation,'" with Jorn's

concrete . . . appropriation of space, demonstrating that everyone could undertake to reconstruct around themselves the earth which badly needs it. The painted and sculpted sections . . . the trees . . . a cistern, vines, the most varied sorts of always welcomed debris, all thrown together in a perfect disorder, compose one of the most complicated and ultimately, one of the best unified landscapes that one can traverse.

While the spectacular space of "accumulation" is characterized by inert surfaces like "oil stains on 'the frozen waters,'" which we can only look on from a position of passive contemplation, Jorn's landscape is one in which objects bow to a creative will. The result is rich, traversable ambiances. If the work of art fails as internal critical intervention and comes to resemble the spectacular surface, it can be reused, as such, as the building blocks of alternative, imaginative environments. Nonetheless, Jorn's world remains a fantasy. It is the realm of kings and castles situated far away "on a hill overlooking the Ligurian coast." It is, essentially, as Debord puts it, a "private property," demonstrating what one can do "'with a little time, luck, health, money, thought (and also) good mood,'"³⁵ a utopian oasis within which one can shut the door on reality for a time.

It seems that, ultimately, it is in the world of the imagination, as manifest in Jorn's fantastical garden and Debord's place of "underground" retreat, that the Situationists find a home. Beyond the spectacle's domains, "we wander around in a circle in the night and are consumed by fire."³⁶ A noble pursuit, a heroic endeavor, and yet one that can only take place in far-off realms.

34. Debord, "De l'architecture sauvage," in *Jardin d'Albisola*, text by Ezio Gribaudo, Alberico Sala, and Guy Debord (Turin: Edizioni d'Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1974). Translated as "On Wild Architecture" in *On the Passage*, pp. 174–75.

35. Greil Marcus has helpfully suggested that "*bonne humeur*"—translated here as "good humor"—should instead be translated as "high spirits."

36. This is the accepted translation of the title of Debord's final film, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978).

Angels of Purity

VINCENT KAUFMANN

Translated by John Goodman

1. *Black Art*

The fact that the language of real communication has been lost is what the modern movement of art's decay, and ultimately of its formal annihilation, expresses *positively*. What it expresses *negatively* is that a new common language has yet to be found—not, this time, in the form of unilateral conclusions like those which, from the viewpoint of historical art, *always came on the scene too late*, speaking to others of what had been experienced without any real dialogue, and accepting this shortfall of life as inevitable, but rather in a praxis embodying both an unmediated activity and a language commensurate with it. The point is to take effective possession of the community of dialogue and the playful relationship to time, which the works of the poets and artists have heretofore merely *represented*.¹

The merit of modern artists, Guy Debord writes in *The Society of the Spectacle*, is to expose artistic communication to the incommunicable, and thus to be a critical reflection of the “society of the spectacle,” characterized by an absence of all authentic communication. But this passion for decomposition—as attributed to Mallarmé, for example, or to Joyce—is also what condemns modern art to a definitive aporia requiring its transcendence. Situationism is intent on succeeding precisely where Dadaism and Surrealism remained unfinished projects: “Dadaism sought to *abolish art without realizing it*, and Surrealism sought to *realize art without abolishing it*. The critical position since worked out by the situationists demonstrates that the abolition and the realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art.”² Genuine community will lead to an absence of that art which had failed it by becoming increasingly detached from the religious and mythic ground that held it together. To regain vitality or be transcended, art must

1. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1971), trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1994), p. 133.

2. Ibid., p. 136. Emphasis in original.

stop being a language of address, a “speaking to,” and transform itself into a “speaking with” that, like the Mallarméan Book, is no longer identified exclusively with either the author or the reader-spectator, but becomes the work of everyone.

“We are artists precisely insofar as we are no longer artists: we come to realize art” (IX, 25), one reads in the same vein in the *Internationale situationniste*.³ An art transcending art, Situationism is characterized by its invisibility, by its irreducible opposition to all forms of representation, of spectacle. The Situationists mustered some enthusiasm for a newly established Situationist library in Jutland, but this was primarily because it included a “copy section” denouncing everyone who had seen and imitated the real Situationists, themselves determined to remain out of sight: “Finally, and this is probably its most interesting initiative, this library has opened a *copy section* for the preservation of works imitating any of the realizations of our friends whose strange role, due to their very membership in the S.I., is not voluntarily acknowledged” (V, 11). Situationist art functions as an invisible model: any (re)presentation of it constitutes treason, even when it is the work of real Situationists, always vulnerable to being raked over the coals when they expose (themselves) to the light of day. It exists only for those who have eyes not to see, for those who are not blind victims of the society of the spectacle, anesthetized by the barrage of images. It is alive for those capable of recognizing the evidence of the invisible, evoked one last time by the Situationists at the moment of the movement’s self-dissolution (in 1972): “Never have we been seen mixing in affairs, rivalries, and frequentations, mingling with the most extreme leftist politicians or the most advanced members of the intelligentsia. And now that we can flatter ourselves to have acquired among this rabble the most revolting celebrity, we are going to become *still more inaccessible*, still more clandestine. The more famous our theses become, the more obscure we ourselves will become.”⁴ As Flaubert might have put it, if Situationism is to flourish, I must diminish myself, make myself even more obscure, at least as obscure as Mallarmé, unreadable on the ground of the invisible Book.

This commitment of the Situationists to obscurity does not date from 1972. In fact, their attempt to transcend art was always coincident with a gesture toward dissolution and disappearance, with a will to secrecy. As early as 1962, the message is clear; the Situationists are fish soluble in the water of the people: “We are totally popular. We take into consideration only those problems that are already in suspension in the entire population. Situationist theory is in the people like fish are in water. To those who believe the S.I. is building castles of speculation, we affirm the contrary: we are going to dissolve ourselves in the population that lives our project at every moment, living it first, of course, as lack and repression” (VII, 17). Situationism tends toward invisibility due to its popular character: it is invisible

3. *Internationale situationniste 1958–69* 9 (Paris: Champ Libre, 1975), p. 25. All citations from the twelve issues of this journal are from this edition and are hereafter cited in the text by issue number and page number.

4. *La véritable scission dans l'Internationale* (Paris: Champ Libre, 1981), pp. 79–80.

because popular, and popular because invisible. It realizes itself in the people, all the more so because the latter, like Mallarmé's crowd, is slow to speak its mind: the populace lacks Situationism but lives it in the form of something it lacks, but needs in order to make its will known. Not only does the Situationist Book revel in the disappearance of the poet's voice and obscurity, it comes to pass only with its own dissolution; it realizes itself as a popular lack (as we speak of the popular front), and it is coincident with an invisible community whose visible reverse will be revolution, the crowd making its will known. It is the culmination of a certain history of the avant-garde: raising the stakes behind the Situationists' backs is impossible because they are no longer visible, from the front, the back, or head-on. They have become more transparent, more incontestably authentic than Breton would ever have imagined possible.

Situationism thus represents the most Mallarméan version of the adventure of realizing art in life, for the most exemplary thing about the Situationists is their gift for obscurity, or what might be called their autobiographical discretion. From the Situationist perspective, everything visible is false, impure. I see or, worse, I present for viewing, I self-present for viewing, thus I am blind to the illness of my own life. The source of infection is the image: hence the startling therapeutic strength of Debord's film *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (Howls for de Sade), celebrated for its final twenty-four minutes of darkness and silence. To reestablish communication and re-create community, the subject must be purged of what it sees; its eyes must be opened by a dark screen, and it must be purged simultaneously of anything that it itself might present to view. The originality of Situationism consists in stripping the subject not only of its passion for the visible but also of its own visibility. Debord's exemplarity is that of a dark screen, of a subject reduced to a blind stain, thereby avoiding the loss of authenticity and the fall into representation. Autobiography, a genre dear to both the Surrealists and Artaud, is genuine only when it is not written, when it remains virtual; it should be impersonal and collective, dreaming of itself as autobiography without a subject. To avoid the errors and compromises of its predecessors, to liberate the subject from its tainted allegiance to the seductions of the image (or the imaginary), Situationism decrees a blackout. Open season is declared on fantasy and self-love.

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The Situationist ego is detestable, and the use of *I* is permissible only when certain requirements are met. It must be emptied of all desire for self-representation and all singular qualities, which are to be replaced by the "radical theory" of Situationist theses. This is apparent in what might be called Situationism's lyrical tendency, exemplified by the *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* [The Revolution of Everyday Life] by Raoul Vaneigem, published in 1967.⁵ At the outset,

5. *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968; new edition, 1989).

Vaneigem warns his readers: "I have no intention of rendering what there is of lived experience in this book palpable to readers not prepared to relive it fully for themselves, in full consciousness. I expect them to lose and rediscover themselves in a general movement of minds, just as I am so bold as to think that present conditions will erase themselves from human memory."⁶ This is not autobiography, or, to be more precise, whatever in the book is autobiographical is not visible because it is not meant to be read but rather experienced firsthand by readers who are no longer readers. I write to separate myself from my book, to disappear as a speaking subject, to be forgotten in the general movement of the revolution to come. The knowledge that I propose be lived as opposed to read about is exemplary because it is anonymous and anyone can experience it: "That is why there is nothing in the following notes that is not subject to trial and correction in light of anyone's immediate experience."⁷ No autobiography: Vaneigem is exemplary because he doesn't represent himself, because he writes himself off, disqualifying in advance what he has written, something he emphasizes again in a "Toast aux ouvriers révolutionnaires" (Toast to Revolutionary Workers), added in 1972: "Evidence supporting the principal theses of the *Traité* should now manifest itself in the hands of its anti-readers in the form of concrete results. No longer in student agitation but in total revolution."⁸

True poetry results when the subject renounces self-representation, when, precipitated by a kind of certitude of its own transparency, it dissolves, by anticipation, in an anonymous and collective life to come, in accordance with the logic "I am where they will be, where there is no *I*": "However, men also use words and signs in attempts to perfect their interrupted gestures. And because they do this, a poetic language exists that, for me, is indistinguishable from radical theory, from theory penetrating the masses and becoming a material force."⁹ True poetry is indistinguishable from the realization of Situationist theory by the masses. As long as there is something to write and someone to write for, the subject itself remains theoretical, virtual, advancing only under the dark cloak of theory, which, in sum, constitutes the provisional form of a supreme language, of a total communication reinvented in and through the revolution to come.

Under a Situationist regime, as under an *oulipiste* one, true communication entails the disappearance not only of the speaking subject but also of the poet-as-writer. It is not encompassed by any book, unless it be a Situationist dictionary in which language is explained exclusive of any subject, of any speech, one whose project would be to liberate words from the meaning—or the absence of meaning and force—imposed on them by power. Realization of the supreme Situationist language would require completion of a dictionary to take its place, one that would also be a kind of total book, a depository of the incorruptible transparency

6. Ibid., p. 7.

7. Ibid., p. 17.

8. Ibid., p. 289.

9. Ibid., p. 103.

of a new symbolic order to come, announced in the following terms in “*Les mots captifs* (Préface à un dictionnaire situationniste)” (Captive Words [Preface to a Situationist Dictionary]): “Our dictionary will be a kind of grid with which to decipher information, and rip the ideological veil covering reality. We will provide possible translations making it possible to comprehend different aspects of the society of the spectacle, and demonstrating how the slightest indexes (the least signs) contribute to its maintenance. In a sense, it will be a bilingual dictionary, for every word has an ‘ideological’ meaning and a ‘real’ meaning” (X, 55).

Reinvention of communication entails a lexicographical operation, a reappropriation of the meaning and work of words. To give purer meanings to the words of the tribe, to make communication more immediate, such would be the Situationist project: “The establishment of liberated creative activity will be at the same time the establishment of true communication, finally liberated, and the advent of transparent human relations, which will replace the poverty of words under the old regime of opacity” (ibid.). The restoration of purer meanings to the words of the tribe, and especially the totality of those meanings, which power contrives to forfeit in order to produce its own discourse: “Power’s seizure of language is assimilable to its seizure of the totality. Only language that has lost all reference to the totality can serve as a foundation for information. Information is the poetry of power, the media-based dissemblance of what is” (VIII, 30–31). The Book is lacking? That is the result of power’s recycling of it in the form of news and information. Language deprived of totality and hence of authenticity constitutes the poetry of a power responsible for the degradation of language into coarse speech, a currency intended only to be passed silently from one hand to the next. True poetry, by contrast, is essential speech; it is totality recovered, communication that is authentic and immediately efficient, supported by a language all of whose qualities have been newly liberated—a language again made perfect: “Conversely, poetry should consist of immediate communication in the real and of genuine modification of this real. It is nothing other than a liberated language, a language that regains its richness and, smashing its signs, encompasses simultaneously words, music, cries, gestures, painting, mathematics, deeds” (ibid.). True poetry begins where it casts off the defects of language (for which power is responsible) to make itself a perfect, total language in synch with the real. A supreme language in which meaning, image, sound, gesture, and number function as one. One that is no longer lacking and is on the verge of being very beautiful.

But perhaps we must still summon up our patience. The status of this Situationist supreme language remains profoundly equivocal. The Situationists do not really believe in the possibility of a Book that is the repository of a universal or mathematical language, one purified of subjectivity’s throws of the dice, any more than Mallarmé did. On the contrary: they recognize in such a language—glimmers of which are perceptible in cybernetics and computer science—the desubjectivizing project of the society of the spectacle: “Since its rise, the bourgeoisie has dreamed of a universal language like the one cyberneticians are trying to realize

electronically today. Descartes dreamed of a language (the ancestor of *novlangue*) in which thoughts would follow one another with mathematical rigor like numbers: the *mathesis universalis*, or the durability of bourgeois categories" (ibid., 55). In fact, the Situationist dictionary was to implement an operation of *diversion* (*détournement*), an alleged response to the first diversion or confiscation effected by power: "The critique of the dominant language, its *détournement*, will become the permanent practice of the new revolutionary theory" (ibid., 50). The permanent revolution will be lexicographical or it will be nothing. It is not a matter simply of opposing the language of power with another language encompassable by a dictionary, but of destabilizing language in order to liberate its virtualities. Of necessity, the Situationist dictionary will never get beyond its preface, for it is an affirmation of the linguistic imaginary *détournée* by power (later echoed by certain "lexicographical" passages in Debord's *Commentaires sur la société du spectacle*¹⁰ [Commentaries on the Society of the Spectacle]).

The notion of *détournement*, which the Situationists apply to texts and images as well as to words, is doubtless the best-known feature of their "aesthetic," and this has led inevitably to its banalization. Its prominence in the project for a "Preface to a Situationist Dictionary" makes it possible to reach a more precise understanding of what is at stake in the idea. It should be noted first of all that, insofar as the dictionary is to be limited to its preface, such *détournements* do not serve the work, but effect an "unworking" (*désœuvrement*) of it. Preface to a dictionary, preface to a Book: doubtless this would be very beautiful. Next, it should be emphasized that these *détournements* blur the boundary between the personal and the impersonal: Who is the author of a text that has been *détourné* in this way? Who signs it? *Détournement* is a poetry produced by several individuals and theoretically by everyone, given that in principle it is within anyone's reach, like automatic writing and oulipian inventions (which the Situationists reject vigorously because they reduce the diverting subject to a pure mathematical contrivance, for Situationism requires a subject that diverts out of revolutionary conviction, a subject constituting itself through confrontation with the language of power). Finally, the prominence of *détournement* in the dictionary project underscores the degree to which it should be understood not in terms of play but as the key component in a politics of communication. The Situationist community is constituted by *détournement* precisely because of its character as an act: it institutes a pragmatics at the heart of poetic language. Declaring his support for anarchists accused of planning to plant bombs, Mallarmé referred to them as "angels of purity" who had failed to understand that books, too, produce effective explosions ("The only bombs I know are books)."¹¹ With the Situationists, angels of purity born in the age of the cathode tube, angelic messengers of communication regained, the book no longer explodes: it implodes as a result of *détournement*, the

10. (Paris: Gérard Lebovici, 1988).

11. Cited by Henri Mondor, *Vie de Mallarmé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1941), p. 687.

contemporary equivalent of the restrained form of intervention dear to their ancestor and accomplice.

2. *How to Do Everything with Words*

In an article published in the *Internationale situationniste* (one crediting Dadaism with having affirmed, after de Sade, the right to say all), one reads the following lines pertaining to the failure of Dadaism: “*Saying all* cannot exist without the liberty to do all. Dada had a chance for realization in *Spartakus*, in the revolutionary practice of the German proletariat. The latter’s defeat rendered its own inevitable” (X, 51–52). Such is almost the consensus view today, when the immediate postwar period in Germany, like the Paris Commune, is widely regarded as one of those paradisiacal moments for revolutionary art premised upon the bitter defeat of a workers’ movement. On the other hand, the “theoretical” dimension of such a statement merits careful examination for saying that all is possible only when reinforced by a readiness to do all. If one is to say all, one must become an agent; the word must be immediately convertible into action. The authenticity, the totality in question cannot be solely a matter of speech: acts must follow, acts that deprive the prior utterances of all reason for being.

The only authentic communication is the one presenting itself from the outset as a form of a common action, of everyday life collectively reinvented, in an immediacy dispensing with all representation (if not linguistic, then at least artistic). The Situationist is an essentially impatient being. Not only is he averse to making himself visible, he is also at no pains to make himself heard. He speaks only to those who no longer need to hear him because they have proceeded to action: “To those who follow one step behind us, we prefer those who reject us with impatience because our language is not yet authentic poetry, which is to say the free construction of everyday life” (VIII, 38). Situationism is a communicative project intolerant of delay. Resolutely avant-gardist, it is not for those who linger, who follow a step behind, but for those who are ahead of it, those situated where statements give way to realizing deeds, those who have already made themselves the subjects of political action.

From this perspective, one might also say that, as a matter of principle, Situationism brooks no delay in the realization of desire. No sooner desired than realized: such is its watchword. Desire must not be given the time to become caught in images or fantasies, which are open doors to the society of the spectacle. Situationist desire is itself quite literally avant-garde; it anticipates every possible representation of a desired object, and it tries to situate itself beyond such objects, thereby making their conversion into images useless. A hunt for the imaginary, a struggle for the invisibility (obscurity?) of the object of desire, it is psychoanalysis become absolutely efficient (at the risk of total inversion of its meaning). It dispenses with desire for the labyrinthine dramaturgy characteristic of the talking cure (even in the shortest of sessions). It unloads all

phantasmatic weight to dedicate itself from the outset to the angelic purity of the unrepresentable:

Hence it is necessary to envision a kind of psychoanalysis for Situationist ends, each participant in this adventure being obliged to find precise ambient desires *in order to realize them*, contrary to the aims pursued by the currents issuing from Freudianism. Everyone must search for what he likes, what attracts him (and here again, contrary to certain modern literary endeavors—that of Leiris for example—what matters to us is not the individual structure of our minds, nor the explanation of their formation, but their possible application in constructed situations) (I, 11).

No more dreaming: the new agenda calls for the invention of situations favorable to the realization of desires that in turn generate new situations. Situationism purges desire of its phantasmatic indolence and politicizes it, attempting to make its realization coincide with a moment of pure consciousness of this desire, made possible by the uprooting of representation, and more generally of the society of the spectacle: “Consciousness of desire and the desire for consciousness together and indissolubly constitute that project which in its negative form has as its goal the abolition of classes and the direct possession by the workers of every aspect of their activity. The opposite of this project is the society of the spectacle, where the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making.”¹² In other words, no subjectivity is possible without a break with the order of the commodity, without destruction of the class society. Situationism is Freud diverted and politicized: “Where economic id was, there ego shall be. The *subject* can only emerge out of society—that is, out of the struggle that society embodies. The possibility of a subject’s existing depends on the outcome of the class struggle.”¹³ This makes it easier to understand the Situationist prohibition against all forms of subjective expression, against all self-representation. The advent of the subject—and thus of a form of expression distinct from that of power—depends on the existence of the class struggle, whose aim is nothing other than the realization of art, against a background of the obliteration or oblivion of the degraded art of the spectacle: “Situationists will place themselves in the service of the necessity of *oblivion*. The only force from which they can expect something is the proletariat, theoretically without a past and obliged permanently to reinvent itself, of which Marx said that it ‘is revolutionary or it is nothing.’ Will it be in our time, or not? The question is important for our purpose: the proletariat should realize art” (I, 8).

Marx also affirmed that art, as a complementary and ideal world, can only be transcended by its realization in a classless society. The Situationists take up this

12. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, p. 34.

13. Ibid.

assertion, but with a difference, imperceptibly reversing means and ends. It is as though realizing art through Situationist transcendence would make the classless society possible. "Communism realized will be the work of art transformed into the totality of everyday life," writes Asger Jorn.¹⁴ Communism, then, is the work of art become totality, the total *oeuvre* realized, the Book made by everyone and integrated into everyday life, and Situationism is but the implementation of such a Book: a fish dreaming itself in the water of the people-become-artist. Revolution is a precondition for realization of the Book, and vice versa. Paraphrasing the Surrealist dictum of Lautréamont, Vaneigem suggests that revolution is poetry made not by an individual but collectively, in everyday life.¹⁵ Thus Situationism has the advantage of taking into account the political equivocations characteristic of the twentieth-century avant-garde, whose revolutionary pretensions have never prevented literature from following its course. If there is a point at which making revolution and realizing the Book are one and the same, it is only logical that, pursuant to the first of these goals, and despite itself, the avant-garde so often frequented the rue Sébastien-Bottin.

By means of its performative becoming, poetry simultaneously reinvents itself and makes itself revolution: "Recovering poetry can merge with reinventing revolution, as evidenced by certain phases of the Mexican, Cuban, and Congan revolutions" (VIII, 30). And in the same article one reads the following: "The program of realizing poetry entails nothing less than the simultaneous and indissoluble creation of events and their language" (*ibid.*). Poetry is by definition productive of revolution, or to be more precise, it is already revolution, but in a virtual state. It is a summons to the real revolution that should somehow place itself at its disposal, something the Surrealists dared not say: "It is not a matter of placing poetry in the service of revolution, but one of placing revolution in the service of poetry" (*ibid.*). At the very least, poetry is always a figure for revolution. It is revolution *in absentia*, become its phantom; it tries to ward off its absence by reiterating its promise: "Between the revolutionary periods in which the masses gain access to poetry through action, one can think that the circles of poetic adventure remain the only places where the totality of revolution subsists, as an unfulfilled but proximate virtuality, like the shadow of an absent personage" (*ibid.*). The circles of poetic adventure are the circles of the revolution provisionally out of view, communities that nurture and celebrate the possibility of the Book, incarnating the "absent personage" of the revolution all the better insofar as they themselves tend toward disappearance, making themselves invisible to the gaze of the spectacle of which they are the virtual interruption. Never were the Situationists simultaneously so close and so distant from Mallarmé, a determined adept of obscurity in all its forms, as well as of subterranean depths and scarcely visible circles, absent a present, absent the crowd's speaking its mind.

14. Asger Jorn, *Critique de la politique économique* (Brussels, 1960), cited by Jean-François Martos, *Histoire de l'Internationale Situationniste* (Paris: Gérard Lebovici, 1989), p. 103.

15. *Traité de savoir-vivre*, p. 207.

The circles of poetic adventure are the depositories of revolution because it is in them, and in them only, that authentic communication is reinvented: "The goal, and the effective result, of all of them is the immediate transparency, reciprocal recognition, and harmony of a certain communication" (ibid.). Communal desire coincides with revolutionary desire because true poetry is communication in action, impersonal and hence collective. Thus the greatest *poetic* event of the century was May '68 (a status held in the previous century by the Paris Commune). Everything in the Situationist world came to fruition in the streets of May '68: in poetry become graffiti, in the endless deliberations in the Odéon and the Sorbonne, in the workers' occupations, described as "a *generalized critique* of all alienation, of all ideology, and of the entirety of old organizations of real life. . . . An *acknowledged desire* for dialogue, for integrally free speech, a taste for true community" (XII, 3, emphasis in original).

3. *Invisible Games*

Putting the psychoanalytic couch in the street, transforming the city into an immense divan, a site for applying and realizing the slightest desire, for making the fabulist and weaver of confidences disappear behind a new kind of architect or urbanist who undertakes to give body, in the very fabric of the city, to the vain dreams of mortals, to render visible their most secret fantasies, to build and even improve upon their dreams, with no need to purify them of the unavowable—such remained the terms of the Situationist project some thirty or forty years later, as evidenced by the following pronouncement, which I have already cited: "Hence it is necessary to envision a kind of psychoanalysis for Situationist ends, each participant in this adventure being obliged to find precise ambient desires *in order to realize them*, contrary to the aims pursued by the currents issuing from Freudianism" (I, 11).

To transform into reality that which on the couch remains fantasy, to move from a reclining position to the construction of lived situations, is to allot desire its time and space. There is an urbanist-architectural phase of the Situationist experiment that represents a radicalization—doubtless the last—of the Surrealist project, of which it constitutes a kind of vanishing point, a horizon beyond which there can be no return through swinging doors. With the Situationists, all the doors are resolutely open; because everything happens outside, there is no longer room for either interior or interiority. Henceforth subjectivity is lived or expresses itself externally; it is collective or it is nothing. It is detached from all individual representation, and consequently from all literary practice. Bedrooms and sleep are off-limits for the Situationists. Poetry will be made by everyone, but outside.

This radicalization also can be understood as a determination to transcend everything aesthetic, all formal and figural production, and replace it with the ludic requirement to "construct lived situations." Passage must be made from the white page and the blank canvas—*détournée* or not—to a place

favoring the concrete realization of desires, to a place where life, all of it, is *play*. The communal promise represented by art will be kept in concrete terms, through spatial investments. Situationist man lives not by bread alone but also through the recasting of space. Where the white page was, there the ideal city shall be. From signifying networks, whose attractions were becoming a matter for concern, one passes to resolutely urban networks, to writing on the ground. The death of individualized diction assumes a spatial dimension, and thanatography becomes “psychogeography.” Realization of the Book entails a conquest of space, even the totality of space, because the construction of situations is meant to infiltrate all of life. The game will not be a discreet activity limited in time and space but a wholesale reinvention of life, or if one prefers, poetry realized, poetry liberating itself from subjugation to the society of the spectacle:

The construction of situations begins beyond the modern collapse of the notion of spectacle. It is easy to see at what point the very principle of the spectacle is linked to the alienation of the old world: nonintervention. Conversely, one sees how the most valuable revolutionary cultural research has sought to shatter the spectator’s psychological identification with the hero, sweeping him into action by challenging him to unsettle his own life. It is in this way that situations are made to be lived by their own constructors.¹⁶

The same text goes on to specify that situations, while made to be lived individually, are at the same time necessarily collective. It could even be said that the construction of situations is nothing other than a stimulus to community, an art of sharing and participation—if, that is, the term “art” were not a portal through which the spectacular regime might reassert itself. For if the construction of situations proceeds by means of theatrical effects, and even through a director (or *opérateur*, as Mallarmé would say), it is nonetheless quite distinct from the theater. It is an experience, as opposed to a performance or representation, because ideally everyone takes part in it and no one assumes the passive role of spectator:

Against a unilateral art, Situationist culture will be an art of dialogue, of interaction. Artists—along with all of visible culture—have become totally separate from society, just as they are isolated from one another by competition. Even before the impasse of capitalism art was essentially one-sided, without replies. It will transcend this hermetic primitivist era to become a complete communication.

Since everyone will become an artist at a superior stage, that is to say inseparably both producer and consumer of a total cultural creation, we will witness a rapid dissolution of the linear criterion of novelty. . . . We

16. Guy Debord, *Rapport sur la construction des situations*, cited in *Histoire de l'Internationale Situationniste*, pp. 62–63.

are now inaugurating what will be, historically, the last of the *métiers*, or crafts. Even the role of Situationist, of professional amateur, of anti-specialist will remain a specialization until the moment of economic and mental abundance when everyone becomes an “artist,” in a sense that artists have never before attained: the construction of their own lives (IV, 37–38).

Such clarification brings comfort. If it is possible to confuse the construction of situations with theater, if unsympathetic critics even connect such construction with the contemporary happenings and performance art toward which the Situationists were in fact quite hostile, that is because everyone is not yet a Situationist or an artist. When the Book is realized, when poetry has infiltrated everyone’s everyday life, this ambiguity will disappear of its own accord, because all passive desire for spectacle will have disappeared. There will be no parasitic third parties to mitigate communicative authenticity. Everyone will be occupied with living and “playing” their lives. But the idea of playing the voyeur to one’s neighbor will occur to no one, for poetry realized in the everyday lives of all, and in a space restored to all, precludes spectatorship.

In the meantime, the Situationists make considerable efforts to maintain the distinction between the construction of situations and parodic spectacular performances. Situationist constructions are typified by their exemplary invisibility, proof simultaneously of their existence and of their revolutionary character. Unlike Surrealist frolics, their own ludic actions [*jeux*] remain clandestine; they are made neither for visual consumption nor for publication, only being made visible when presented in a theoretical and obscure way. Their presentation is always restrained: their texts never propose anything more than conditions of possibility. The desired outcome is indeed a stage, but one from which the actors who set out to build it have disappeared into the wings, leaving it indefinitely empty.

*

This becomes clear with the mythic *dérives* (drifts or driftings), the most practical phase of the Situationists’ spatial investigations. Relating to “psycho-geography” much as textual analysis does to literature, these are exercises in territorial reconnaissance or interpretation of the urban text, exploratory forays into singular surroundings. At a moment when drifting at the mercy of the signifier was becoming ubiquitous, the Situationists opposed the *dérive* to space itself, as different from the classical practice of strolling and *flânerie* as fire is from water: “The concept of *dérive* is indissolubly linked to the recognition of effects that are psychogeographical in nature, and to the affirmation of a ludic-constructive behavior, something that opposes it in all respects to the classical notions of travel and promenade” (II, 19). To be an artist is to take psychogeographic bearings, to make oneself a theorist of space as others are of text, and the artistic enterprise, again like that of textual theorists, is a collective one: “One can *dérive* alone, but

everything indicates that the most fruitful numerical distribution consists of several small groups of two or three persons who have reached a similar state of consciousness, for comparing the impressions of these different groups makes it possible to reach objective conclusions" (ibid., 20).

In the history of the French avant-garde, walking is decidedly a must. But with the Situationists, the subjective impressionism of a Breton, who strolled only to know and (above all) to show who he was, and the *flâneries* of an Aragon, who explored Parisian *passages* with a voyeur's eye, give way to promenades whose goal is to attain an impersonal objectivity of impression through the regulated use of chance:

One or several persons delivering themselves to the *dérive* renounce, for a more or less extended period of time, their customary rationales for moving and acting, the relations, work, and leisure proper to them, abandoning themselves to the solicitations of the terrain and the encounters corresponding to it. The part of chance is less determinant here than one might think: from the point of view of the *dérive*, cities have a psychogeographical relief with running currents, stable points, and whirlpools that make entering and exiting certain zones very uncomfortable (ibid., 19).

Thus, walking changes from a subjective activity to an objective one. Impersonal, it obliges the subject to renounce his or her customary practices in the interest of obtaining a kind of cure on the urban couch: to listen attentively to the city, like others listen to language, the Other having shifted. By the same token, the modalities for describing the "promenade" must also change. It might even be said that the *dérive* is walking purged of autobiographical representation, that it is a practice requiring the enunciatory and ambulatory disappearance of the walker. Where the *flâneries* of Breton and Aragon were, there shall be the impersonal theory of the *dérive*, which makes potential sites for this activity shimmer furtively but precludes the display of the *I* in any of them:

Slipping by night into a house undergoing demolition, traversing Paris ceaselessly during a transport strike by hitchhiking, on the pretext of aggravating the confusion by having oneself taken anywhere and everywhere, wandering through underground passages of the catacombs off-limits to the public, such actions would take the bearings of a more general feeling that would be nothing other than the feeling of the *dérive*. Whatever one might write would be worthwhile only as passwords to this grand game (ibid., 22).

The real game—the grand game—begins where descriptions cease, being mere passwords granting access to an initiation to take place on different terrain. Surrealist street adventures are replaced by impersonal psychogeographic surveys, and photographic illustrations of *Nadja* by Boiffard and Man Ray give way to plans

of Parisian neighborhoods, which are to the Situationists as railroad timetables were to Mallarmé and Proust: so many *cartes du Tendre* over which to dream or desire, but as if in the absence of all dreamers and all images (in number three of the *Internationale situationniste*, a reproduction of the *Carte du Tendre* is juxtaposed with an aerial view of the center of Amsterdam [deemed a potential subject for psychogeographic investigation], as if Situationism were a reincarnation of the preciousness of the French classical age).

As for the players, they remain invisible, literally blending into the landscape. Their preference runs, if not to secret places, then to deserted ones, like the forementioned catacombs and houses slated for demolition—or the *métro*, which should be opened at night after the trains have stopped running, its corridors only dimly illuminated. Also noteworthy from this perspective is the frequency of the figure of a labyrinth from which the Situationists have no intention of exiting, a kind of ultimate refuge from the society of the spectacle. The world is to culminate in a beautiful labyrinth in which little Situationist monsters can hide to outwit the formidable beast that is the society of the spectacle, which is too large to follow them inside, or, should it manage to gain access, would summarily be devoured by them.¹⁷ That the role formerly assumed by the *ventre de Paris* would fall to the labyrinth, such is the implication of the “Essai de description psychogéographique des Halles” (Attempt at a Psychogeographic Description of Les Halles): “The first architectural measure obviously would be to replace the present pavilions [in the Paris central market] with autonomous series of small Situationist architectural complexes. In the vicinity of these new structures . . . labyrinths should be raised that are perpetually changing with the aid of objects more adequate than the crates of fruit and vegetables that provide the material for the only barricades of today” (II, 17). Contrary to their mythic predecessor, the new labyrinths will change constantly. Like all architectural projects complicit with utopian instability, a notion prevalent since the nineteenth century, that of the Situationists had little chance of being realized. But in this case the impossibility of realization is essential, for the Situationists regard mobility as fundamental. They are builders of movement; they interest themselves only in buildings earmarked for demolition or endlessly transformable into new labyrinths, sites constantly productive of desire in which one can lose one’s way:

In architecture itself, a taste for the *dérive* tends to sanction all kinds of new forms of labyrinth, which are facilitated by modern architectural

17. Such a labyrinth would itself be an image of a recent work by Guy Debord entitled “*Cette mauvaise réputation . . .*” (Paris: Gallimard, 1993). In addition to refuting the quasi-totality of criticism leveled against Situationism over the last several decades, it is also meant to devour, in effect, all those who dared to penetrate the labyrinth so cunningly arranged by Debord. *Cette mauvaise réputation* consists largely of extended citations from contemporary assessments of Debord’s work, which makes it a Situationist version of the Mallarméan Book: a work produced not individually but collectively, one that verifies the disappearance of the isolated poetic voice in the name of objectivity, of impersonality, something Mallarmé often attempted in his *Tombeaux* and his sepulchral correspondence.

possibilities. Thus in March of 1955 the press announced the construction in New York of a building that showed the first signs of applicability of the *dérive* to apartment interiors: "The rooms in the helicoidal house will be like slices of cake. They can be made larger or smaller at will by shifting movable partitions. . . . This system makes it possible to transform three four-room apartments into a single apartment with twelve or more rooms in six hours" (II, 23).

Project for New York: the world is to culminate in a beautiful cake with slices that can be reshaped, renewed, multiplied each day. Such is the solution proposed by the Situationists: a being-together, a desiring-together in which desire would lose none of its essential mobility, none of its resistance to structural permanence and stability in any form. The Situationist labyrinth is at the service of movement and the *dérive*: *cartes du Tendre* for invisible monsters. How could one resist the temptation to become lost in them?

4. Elevations

Unlike his Surrealist ancestor, the Situationist walker is sometimes equipped with a walkie-talkie, a device still rare during the interwar period. As for signs of destiny, he occasionally influences chance with the aid of a little modern technology. He walks, he deciphers the surrounding environment, but at the same time he communicates with other *dériveurs*, and together they transform the urban space into a clandestine communications network devised to elude power. The same holds for the projected psychogeographic investigations of Amsterdam: "The *dérives* to be undertaken by the Situationist International in Amsterdam in the spring of 1960, with considerable transportation and communication resources, are envisioned both as an objective study of the city and as a communicative game" (III, 14–15). In more general terms, the goal of "unitary urbanism," which is to say Situationist urbanism (whose "unitary" character seems to echo the "organic" urbanism of the Saint-Simonians), is the reestablishment of the same communication that official urbanism contrives to interrupt, notably by confiscating the street, by doing everything possible to prevent its becoming once more the communal space it supposedly was when large cities first developed—in other words, immediately prior to the dehumanizing interventions of Haussmannization. The *dérive* is, simultaneously, the street reclaimed and communication reestablished. In the end, the only authentic communication takes place in and through the street, which is the *bête noire* of the society of the spectacle:

Urbanism is the modern way of tackling the ongoing need to safeguard class power by ensuring the atomization of the workers dangerously *massed together* by the conditions of urban production. The unrelenting struggle that has had to be waged against the possibility of workers

coming together in whatever manner has found a perfect field of action in urbanism. The effort of all established powers since the French revolution to augment their means of keeping order in the street has eventually culminated in the suppression of the street itself.¹⁸

The more boulevards, railways, and expressways pierce the city, the smaller the chances for encounter and assembly. The development of means of communication is actually intended to suppress communication, and the multiplication of modes of transportation (especially public ones) is at odds with genuine transport, with flights of passion. Too much street, and especially too much speed in the street, effectively makes the street disappear, while the Situationists, by contrast, dream—even more systematically than Breton with his glass house—of introducing the street even into places of residence. Breton occasionally risked leaving the door of his hotel rooms open to the street. The Situationists imagine houses constantly open to circulation in which everything would be communication, or at least communicative. We have already had a glimpse of this in the New York helicoidal house, and further verification is provided by the “Description de la zone jaune” (Description of the yellow zone), which includes a description of a model housing block: “Everything else is interconnected and constitutes a large common space. . . . By means of movable partitions, each floor is broken into many rooms accessible to one another—horizontally as well as vertically, by means of stairways—whose various environments are changed continually by Situationist teams in collaboration with a technical support staff. They are used primarily for intellectual games” (IV, 24–25).

In another part of the same block, there will of course be labyrinths for random wanderings. The idea of opening the roofs of Paris to promenades by outfitting them with emergency stairs and connecting footbridges is proposed elsewhere.¹⁹ This amounts to saying that insofar as a unitary urbanism takes hold, the street will be delivered to one’s doorstep, key in hand. And a good thing, too, for “Description de la zone jaune” figures in a vast project for a “covered” city, or more precisely a hanging city, one premised on the complete suppression of the street as a communal space. Unlike official urbanism, which uses the imperative for circulation to impede communication, the Situationist hanging city gives over the entirety of its ground level to functional transport. Circulation is to take place *below* the space of everyday life, which by the same token reclaims its communicative essence. Real life ascends one floor to unfold in an infinity of communicating spaces that no boulevard can interrupt or pollute. The street is relieved of its functionality and restored to desire by an elevation effect. It is divided into a ground floor of need, surrendered to individualizing automobiles and spurious communal transportation (Sartre saw buses as the emblem *par excellence* of the serial, alienated

18. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, pp. 121–22.

19. *Pottlach*, October 23, 1955.

group), and a first floor reserved for real transport and real mobility: that of a desire allergic to all circulation but its own. Finally, there would be yet another floor of edenic gardens conducive to still more extraordinary transports—and increasingly aerial ones, for unitary urbanism foresaw the imminent development of private helicopters that would make traffic jams a thing of the past. To change life, to recover community, it is sufficient to raise the standard of living. We are much more “Situationist” than we think.

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Like his Surrealist ancestor, Situationist man tends toward elevation, toward disencumberment. He is weightless, like an angel. The resistance of things, their weight and tendency to fall, their downward inclination, their putrefaction, their reversion to earth, such are not his strong points. Angels never age, being beautiful children who never become corpses. Situationist man, too, is forever young. The games he imagines often resemble those of children for whom the world is a kind of continuous Luna Park, as conceived by the Situationist Pinot-Gallizio: “The world will be the stage and parterre of a never-ending performance. The planet will be transformed into a boundless Luna Park producing new passions and emotions” (III, 32).

In a sense, the boundless games of the Situationists are meant to be played out not in urban space but in the sky, as suggested later in the same article: “Thus we should paint the routes of the future with unknowable material, stake out the great way of the heavens with signals of a kind commensurate with our grandiose enterprises. Where today there are sodium flares, tomorrow there will be rainbows, fata morganas, aurora borealis constructed by ourselves” (ibid.). Not only the world but also the sky exists to become the *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Pinot-Gallizio, who certainly knows how to take the long view when it comes to “the total work.” What became of the Situationists when they decided to become even more obscure, even more clandestine? They went to heaven. By dint of elevation and *angélisme*, they dissolved in interstellar space, whence they play the invisible redeemers of the society of the spectacle. Perhaps from that altitude they intend to be for the capitalist spectacle what the FTC is for planet earth and its poor ozone layer.

The Situationist city ascends to heaven because it has been unburdened of its weight and resistant capacity, having been lightened of all matter, that of stones as well as that of bodies, especially when the latter fall asleep, age, or become corpses. According to the Situationist ideal, even death’s ward will be made for life—for living in peace: “Ward of death, not for dying but for *living there in peace*” (I, 19). At its worst, Situationist death is a kind of unjustly slandered mishap, but it comes across more often as a form of serenity. In any event, it never really occurs because there is never any lack of time in the Situationist world—except, that is, when it has been confiscated by power, like the rest. Situationist life is a tragedy that ends happily, or more precisely, one that never ends: “The *construction of situations*

will be the continuous realization of a grand game resolutely chosen, the passage between decors and conflicts like those that would dispatch the characters in a tragedy within twenty-four hours. But time for living will no longer be lacking.”²⁰ In the Situationist ideal city, time is accomplice to a life impervious to death. It is a city with no place for the phantoms and vampires of the society of the spectacle, so keen on messages and gestures suitable for interception and *détournement* into representation. It is a city of gods, or at least of invisible mortals, installed between a planetary Luna Park and Never-Never Land. Only the dead bury the dead.

*

There is no place for tombs in the Situationist city. Consequently, the dead themselves must move about, becoming if not angels then at least phantoms, and requiring transformable tombs with movable walls, sliding doors, and even footbridges (they, too, must have their communications network). But the dead generally move little; they want not so much to live in peace as to rest in peace, preferring immobility, even stonelike rigidity (corpse-like or not). That is why there is really no place for them in the land of the Situationists, so hostile to stone, to buildings made of stone, to the edifying and immobilizing powers of stone. Some Situationists call for the outright demolition of religious edifices, while others advocate their transformation into fun houses (effectively combining Notre-Dame with Disneyland), but all agree, following Stendhal, that aesthetic objections to such destruction or transformation should be rejected: “Beauty, *when it is not a promise of happiness*, should be destroyed.”²¹

The beauty of the beyond, the beauty of death, the beauty captured in stone has no currency in the Land of Situationism. It is only one short step from contemplation of the portal of Chartres to faith, but the Situationists carefully avoid taking it, despite their penchant for the *dérive*: art indeed “derives” from religion, but it also provides the surest means of returning to it. More generally, the Situationist project to realize or transcend art implies a relentless struggle against all things religious, an openly adversarial stance against them: from the Situationist perspective, art is but the spectacular degradation of old religious practices that fostered community. By contrast, Situationist *angélisme* is to be resolutely profane, compulsorily secular. It has nothing to do with the perverse defiance of a Bataille; it is an outright attempt to suppress religion and replace it with a sovereign community purged of all forms of transcendence, whether philosophical or religious. The priest will give way to the architect, the constructor of situations, who measures himself against the theater as well as against religion: “One might say that the construction of situations will replace the theater only

20. *Potlatch*, August 7, 1954.

21. *Potlatch*, October 23, 1955.

in the sense that the real construction of life has increasingly replaced religion" (I, 12). In sum, what is in question is a reappropriation of the life coefficient that was lost to art when it became distinct from religion: a dream of imminence, of community without transcendence.

Situationist man is to take up what is good about religion to realize it in its integrity, in its sovereignty. Hence the necessity of replacing the religious buildings that were the glory of ancient architecture with new symbolic structures figuring communal desires, with "personal cathedrals" emptied of all transcendence:

The new vision that is to serve as the theoretical basis for the constructions to come is not yet fully developed, and it won't be until urban experiments are conducted that systematically combine facilities indispensable for a minimum of comfort and security with symbolic edifices figuring desires, forces, and events of the past, the present, and the future. The need for rational expansion of old religious systems, of old tales, and above all of psychoanalysis in the interest of architecture becomes more urgent every day, as the reasons for becoming impassioned disappear. In some way, everyone will inhabit his personal "cathedral." There will be rooms that stimulate dreams better than drugs, and houses in which love will be impossible to resist. Others will exert an irresistible attraction over travelers (I, 18–19).

To personalize cathedrals, to expand religious systems, but rationally, without the imposture of transcendence or belief, to reinvent places charged with mythic or symbolic force and capable of reinvigorating passion and making it generally accessible—such are the goals of the architect-therapists, in heated competition not only with priests (who have the considerable advantage of the indulgence conferred by faith) but also with psychoanalysts, licensed specialists in the nonrealization of desire: where desire was that of the Other rather than my own, there shall be the mobile houses of a universal community of angelic lovers, or labyrinths for passionate *dériveurs* determined to cede nothing in the matter of desire.

But sometimes the competition is so intense that one cannot help but suspect a kind of complicity, or at least a mimetic rivalry, between the Situationists and those they wish to replace. The Situationists are implacable when it comes to the vestiges of religion, but in the context of a society that, as they themselves emphasize, is governed by a spectacular regime whose sole divinity is merchandise, which makes all authentically transcendent experience impossible. Are the cathedrals to be destroyed because they serve a purpose or because they do not? Will new cathedrals be necessary, or are they to be replaced by personalized cathedrals, and what exactly is the difference between the two? These questions become especially pressing when the Situationist critique of functionalist architecture takes on something that ought not concern it, namely church construction:

The functionalists, who express the technical utilitarianism of an era, cannot manage to build a single successful church, in the sense that cathedrals were the unitary success of a society that must be called primitive, being much more deeply entrenched than we are in the miserable prehistory of humanity. In a period when technical developments have made functionalism possible, Situationist architects seek to create new frameworks for behavior delivered from banality as well as from old taboos, and are absolutely opposed to the edification, and even to the conservation of religious buildings, with which they find themselves in direct competition. The interests of unitary urbanism are objectively consistent with those of general subversion (III, 12).

Situationist architects want to destroy the churches that functionalist architects are incapable of building. "Do not construct the churches that we alone know how to build," they tell them. They aim to replace religious edifices with secular temples of communication whose construction requires some kind of "general subversion," which effectively postpones their becoming visible to the advent of utopia, to which Situationism is so closely related through its attempts to produce divinity by rational means. The Situationist city remains utopian, mythic, a pure promise of community. In the end, it is nothing but a figure given to myth, something that might realize art and by the same token bring art to an end, something that constitutes its perpetually evanescent horizon, something that coincides with the Book. Something that doubtless would be very beautiful.

Lefebvre on the Situationists: An Interview

KRISTIN ROSS

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In the introduction to a recent anthology of Henri Lefebvre's writings on the city, the editors of the volume comment that the relationship between Lefebvrian and Situationist concepts awaits a serious study.¹ What follows is less a serious study than an at-times-playful conversation in which Henri Lefebvre recalls his relationship with Guy Debord and the Situationist International. The interview, if it may be called that, took place in 1983 at the University of California at Santa Cruz, where Lefebvre, on the invitation of Fredric Jameson, was a visiting scholar in residence. I had then just begun my own reading of Lefebvre and the Situationists, research that would result in a book on Rimbaud and an issue of *Yale French Studies* coedited with Alice Kaplan on "everyday life."² From the outset of the conversation it was evident that Lefebvre, then in his eighties, had very clear ideas of the directions he wanted to pursue.

H.L. Are you going to ask me questions about the Situationists? Because I have something I'd like to talk about.

K.R. Fine, go ahead.

H.L. The Situationists . . . it's a delicate subject, one I care deeply about. It touches me in some ways very intimately because I knew them very well. I was close friends with them. The friendship lasted from 1957 to 1961 or '62, which is to say about five years. And then we had a quarrel that got worse and worse in conditions I don't understand too well myself but which I could describe to you. In the end it was a love story that ended badly, very badly. There are love stories that begin well and end badly. And this was one of them.

I remember a whole night spent talking at Guy Debord's place where he was living with Michèle Bernstein in a kind of studio near the place I was

1. Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, ed. and trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Kebas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 13.

2. *Yale French Studies* 73, special issue on "Everyday Life" (1987), ed. Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross.

living on the rue Saint Martin, in a dark room, no lights at all, a veritable . . . a miserable place, but at the same time a place where there was a great deal of strength and radiance in the thinking and the research.

K.R. They had no money?

H.L. No . . .

K.R. How did they live?

H.L. No one could figure out how they got by. One day one of my friends (someone to whom I had introduced Debord) asked him, "What do you live on?" And Guy Debord answered very proudly, "I live off my wits" [*je vie d'expédients*]. [Laughter] Actually, he must have had some money; I think that his family wasn't poor. His parents lived on the Côte d'Azur. I don't think I really know the answer. And also Michèle Bernstein had come up with a very clever way to make money, or at least a bit of money. Or at least this is what she told me. She said that she did horoscopes for horses, which were published in racing magazines. It was extremely funny. She determined the date of birth of the horses and did their horoscope in order to predict the outcome of the race. And I think there were racing magazines that published them and paid her.

K.R. So the Situationist slogan "Never work" didn't apply to women?

H.L. Yes it did, because this wasn't work. They didn't work; they managed to live without working to quite a large extent—of course, they had to do something. To do horoscopes for race horses, I suppose, wasn't really work; in any case I think it was fun to do it, and they didn't really work.

But I'd like to go farther back in time, because everything started much earlier. It started with the CoBrA group. They were the intermediaries: the group made up of architects, with Constant in particular (the architect from Amsterdam), and Asger Jorn (the painter), and people from Brussels—it was a Nordic group, a group with considerable ambitions. They wanted to renew art, renew the action of art on life. It was an extremely interesting and active group, which came together in the 1950s, and one of the books that inspired the founding of the group was my book *Critique de la vie quotidienne*.³ That's why I got involved with them from such an early date. And the pivotal figure was Constant Nieuwenhuys, the utopian architect who designed a Utopian city, New Babylon—a provocative name, since in the Protestant tradition Babylon is a figure of evil. New Babylon was to be the figure of good which took the name of the cursed city and transformed itself into the city of the future. The design for New Babylon dates from 1950. And in 1953 Constant published a text called *For an Architecture of Situation*. This was a fundamental text based on the idea that architecture would allow a transformation of daily reality. This was the connection with *Critique de la vie*

3. Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne*, 3 vols. (Paris: L'Arche, 1947–81); English translation of volume 1, *Critique of Everyday Life* (London: Verso, 1991).

quotidienne: to create an architecture that would itself instigate the creation of new situations. So this text was the beginning of a whole new research that developed in the following years, especially since Constant was very close to popular movements; he was one of the instigators of the Provos, the Provo movement.

K.R. So there was a direct relationship between Constant and the Provos?

H.L. Oh yes, he was recognized by them as their thinker, their leader, the one who wanted to transform life and the city. The relation was direct; he spurred them on.

It's important to understand the periodization of the times. Politically, 1956 was an important year because of the end of Stalinism. There was Khrushchev's famous report to the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party in the USSR, where he demolished the figure of Stalin—a report that was much discussed, argued about. In France people claimed that it was false, that it had been invented by the American secret service. In fact it was entirely the work of the one who succeeded Stalin, Nikita Khrushchev—and who demolished the figure of his predecessor. We have to keep the periodization in mind. During the postwar years, the figure of Stalin was dominant. And the Communist movement was *the* revolutionary movement. Then, after '56 or '57, revolutionary movements moved outside the organized parties, especially with Fidel Castro. In this sense, Situationism wasn't at all isolated. Its point of origin was Holland, Paris too, but Holland especially, and it was linked to many events on the world scale, especially the fact that Fidel Castro succeeded in a revolutionary victory completely outside of the Communist movement and the workers' movement. This was an event. And I remember that in 1957 I published a kind of manifesto, *Le romantisme révolutionnaire*, which was linked to the Castro story and to all the movements happening a little bit everywhere that were outside of the parties. This was when I left the Communist Party myself. I felt that there were going to be a lot of things happening outside the established parties and organized movements like syndicates.

There was going to be a spontaneity outside of organizations and institutions—that's what this text from 1957 was about. It was this text that put me into contact with the Situationists, because they attached a certain importance to it—before attacking it later on. They had their critiques to make, of course; we were never completely in agreement, but the article was the basis for a certain understanding that lasted for four or five years—we kept coming back to it.

K.R. And at this point you were working on the second volume of the *Critique de la vie quotidienne*?

H.L. Yes, and also on a book about the Paris Commune.

K.R. You were working on both at once?

H.L. Yes, at the same time, in a state of confusion. It was the moment when I left the Party, the moment of the Algerian War. There was a lot going on . . . I was almost fired. I went before commissions for having . . . I wasn't in the university, I was a research director at the CNRS, and I was almost dismissed for having signed manifestos for the Algerians and for having offered support—a feeble support, of course—to the Algerian cause. It was a moment of intense fermentation. But in France support for the Algerians didn't happen through the Party, nor through the official organizations within the Party or through the syndicates; it went on outside the institutions. The Communist Party only supported the Algerians grudgingly, in appearance only. In fact, they hardly helped them at all, and afterward the Algerians were very angry with the Party. An oppositional group within the Party, and also the movement outside of the Party—these were the only ones that supported the Algerians, and that played a role in this story, since we have to situate it within the context of the times and the political context.

And then there were the rather extremist movements like that of Isidore Isou and the Lettrists. They also had ambitions on an international scale. But that was all a joke. It was evident in the way that Isidore Isou would recite his Dadaist poetry made up of meaningless syllables and fragments of words. He would recite it in cafés. I remember very well having met him several times in Paris.

But even that showed a certain fermentation in French life, which was crystallized in the return of de Gaulle to power in 1958. The Communist Party showed a deep incapacity by not understanding Stalinism, by doing nothing for the Algerians, and by opposing de Gaulle's return to power very ineffectively, limiting itself to calling de Gaulle a fascist, which wasn't exactly the case. De Gaulle wanted to bring order to the Algerian question. He was the only one who could; we realized that later on. But, throughout, the period was one of a great fermentation, comparable to 1936.

K.R. Did the Situationist theory of constructing situations have a direct relationship with your theory of “moments”?

H.L. Yes, that was the basis of our understanding. They more or less said to me during discussions—discussions that lasted whole nights—“What you call ‘moments,’ we call ‘situations,’ but we’re taking it farther than you. You accept as ‘moments’ everything that has occurred in the course of history: love, poetry, thought. We want to create new moments.”

K.R. How did they propose to make the transition from a “moment” to a conscious construction?

H.L. The idea of a new moment, of a new situation, was already there in Constant's text from 1953: *Pour une architecture de situation*. Because the architecture of situation is a Utopian architecture that supposes a new society, Constant's idea was that society must be transformed not in order to continue

a boring, uneventful life, but in order to create something absolutely new: situations.

K.R. And how did the city figure into this?

H.L. Well, “new situations” was never very clear. When we talked about it, I always gave as an example—and they would have nothing to do with my example—love. I said to them: in antiquity passionate love was known, but not individual love, love for an individual. The poets of antiquity write of a kind of cosmic, physical, physiological passion. But love for an individual only appears in the Middle Ages within a mixture of Islamic and Christian traditions, especially in the south of France. Individual love is Dante’s love for Beatrice: *la vita nuova*, new life. It’s the love between Tristan and Yseult, tragic love—courtly love in the south of France. Where I come from near Navarrenx, there is the tower of Prince Gaston Phébus, who was the first prince-troubadour to sing songs about individual love: “When I sing, I do not sing for me, but I sing for my friend who is close to me.” This is already individual love, the tragedy of individual love which endures throughout the centuries, in *La Princesse de Cleves*, in novels, theaters, in Racine’s *Bérénice*, through all of literature.

K.R. But didn’t constructing “new situations” for the Situationists involve urbanism?

H.L. Yes. We agreed. I said to them, individual love created new situations; there was a creation of situations. But it didn’t happen in a day, it developed. Their idea (and this was also related to Constant’s experiments) was that in the city one could create new situations by, for example, linking up parts of the city, neighborhoods that were separated spatially. And that was the first meaning of the *dérive*. It was done first in Amsterdam, using walkie-talkies. There was one group that went to one part of the city and could communicate with people in another area.

K.R. Did the Situationists use this technique, too?

H.L. Oh, I think so. In any case, Constant did. But there were Situationist experiments in Unitary Urbanism. Unitary Urbanism consisted of making different parts of the city communicate with one another. They did their experiments; I didn’t participate. They used all kinds of means of communication—I don’t know when exactly they were using walkie-talkies. But I know they were used in Amsterdam and in Strasbourg.

K.R. Did you know people in Strasbourg then?

H.L. They were my students. But relations with them were also very strained. When I arrived in Strasbourg in 1958 or ’59, it was right in the middle of the Algerian War, and I had only been in Strasbourg for about three weeks, maybe, when a group of guys came up to me. They were the future Situationists of Strasbourg—or maybe they were already a little bit Situationist. They said to me: “We need your support, we’re going to set up a *maquis* in the Vosges. We’re going to make a military base in the Vosges, and from there spread out over the whole country. We’re going to derail trains.” I replied:

"But the army and the police . . . you aren't sure of having the support of the population. You're precipitating a catastrophe." So they began to insult me and call me a traitor. And after a little while, a few weeks, they came back to see me and told me: "You were right, it's impossible. It's impossible to set up a military base in the Vosges. We're going to work on something else."

So I found myself getting along with them, and afterward they became Situationists, the same group that wanted to support the Algerians by starting up military activity in France—it was crazy. But, you know, my relations with them were always very difficult. They got angry over nothing. I was living at the time with a young woman from Strasbourg; I was the scandal of the university. She was pregnant, she had a daughter (my daughter Armelle), and it was the town scandal—a horror, an abomination. Strasbourg was a very bourgeois city. And the university wasn't outside the city, it was right in the middle. But at the same time I was giving lectures that were very successful, on music, for example—music and society. I taught a whole course one year on "music and society"; many people attended, so I could only be attacked with difficulty. Armelle's mother, Nicole, was friends with the Situationists. She was always with them; she invited them over. They came to eat at our place, and we played music—this was scandal in Strasbourg. So that's how I came to have close relations, organic relations, with them—not only because I taught Marxism at the University, but through Nicole, who was an intermediary. Guy came to my place to see Nicole, to eat dinner. But relations were difficult, they got angry over tiny things. Mustapha Khayati, author of the brochure, was in the group.

K.R. What was the effect of the brochure [*De la misère en milieu étudiant*]?⁴ How many copies were given out?

H.L. Oh, it was very successful. But in the beginning it was only distributed in Strasbourg; then, Debord and others distributed it in Paris. Thousands and thousands were given out, certainly tens of thousands of copies to students. It's a very good brochure, without a doubt. Its author, Mustapha Khayati, was Tunisian. There were several Tunisians in the group, many foreigners who were less talked about afterward, and even Mustapha Khayati didn't show himself very often at the time because he might have had problems because of his nationality. He didn't have dual citizenship; he stayed a Tunisian and he could have had real troubles. But anyway, in Paris, after 1957, I saw a lot of them, and I was also spending time with Constant in Amsterdam. This was

4. L'Internationale situationniste, *De la misère en milieu étudiant considérée sous ses aspects économique, politique, psychologique, sexuel et notamment intellectuel et de quelques moyens pour y remédier* (1966; Paris: Editions Champ Libre, 1976). An English translation appears in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley, Calif.: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981).

the moment when the Provo movement became very powerful in Amsterdam, with their idea of keeping urban life intact, preventing the city from being eviscerated by autoroutes and being opened up to automobile traffic. They wanted the city to be conserved and transformed instead of being given over to traffic. They also wanted drugs; they seemed to count on drugs to create new situations—imagination sparked by LSD. It was LSD in those days.

K.R. Among the Parisian Situationists too?

H.L. No. Very little. They drank. At Guy Debord's place we drank tequila with a little mezcal added. But never . . . mescaline, a little, but many of them took nothing at all. That wasn't the way they wanted to create new situations.

K.R. To return to Unitary Urbanism, this way of linking *quartiers* together without creating homogeneity. Each *quartier* retained its distinct aspects, right?

H.L. Yes, they didn't merge together; they're already a whole, but a whole that is in some sense fragmented and is only in a virtual state. The idea is to make of the city a whole, but a whole in movement, a whole in transformation.

The plans for New Babylon were given to the National Museum in La Haye. They were in Constant's studio, which was in a half-demolished brick building. The most striking thing I remember about Constant's studio was what was in an immense cage: an iguana.

K.R. Now, *there's* a new situation.

H.L. He lived on intimate terms with an iguana.

K.R. Was Constant's project predicated on the end of work?

H.L. Yes, to a certain extent. Yes, that's the beginning: complete mechanization, the complete automatization of productive work, which left people free to do other things. He was one of the ones who considered the problem.

K.R. And the Situationists too?

H.L. Yes.

K.R. Do you also situate your work in that lineage? From Lafargue to . . . ?

H.L. Yes, but not from Lafargue. I think my starting point was a science-fiction novel called *City*. It's an American novel by [Clifford] Simak in which work is performed by robots. Humans can't stand the situation; they die because they are so used to working. They die, and the dogs that are left take advantage of the situation. The robots work for them, feed them, and so forth. And the dogs are perfectly happy because they aren't deformed by the work habit. I remember the role played by this novel in our discussions. I don't remember when it came out in the United States, but I think it's one of the first science-fiction novels that was acclaimed and had influence, but it was maybe only in those years. In any case, that was Constant's starting point: a society liberated from work. And it was in the orientation of Lafargue's *Droit à la paresse*, but renewed by the perspective of automation which began in those years.

And so, a complete change in revolutionary movements beginning in

1956–57, movements that leave behind classic organizations. What's beautiful is the voice of small groups having influence . . .

K.R. So the very existence of microsocieties or groupuscules like the Situationists was itself a new situation?

H.L. Yes, to a certain extent. But then again, we musn't exaggerate either. For how many of them were there? You know that the Situationist International never had more than ten members. There were two or three Belgians, two or three Dutch, like Constant. But they were all expelled immediately. Guy Debord followed André Breton's example. People were expelled. I was never a part of the group. I could have been, but I was careful, since I knew Guy Debord's character and his manner, and the way he had of imitating André Breton, by expelling everyone in order to get at a pure and hard little core. In the end the members of the Situationist International were Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem, and Michèle Bernstein. There were some outer groupuscules, satellite groups, where I was, and where Asger Jorn was too. Asger Jorn had been expelled; poor Constant was expelled as well. For what reason? Well, Constant didn't build anything, he never built anything—he was an architect who didn't build, a Utopian architect. But he was expelled because a guy who worked with him built a church, in Germany: expulsion for reason of disastrous influence. It's rubbish. It was really about keeping oneself in a pure state, like a crystal. Debord's dogmatism was exactly like Breton's. And, what's more, it was a dogmatism without a dogma, since the theory of situations, of the creation of situations, disappeared very quickly, leaving behind only the critique of the existing world, which is where it all started, with the *Critique de la vie quotidienne*.

K.R. How did your association with the Situationists change or inspire your thinking about the city? Did it change your thinking or not?

H.L. It was all corollary, parallel. My thinking about the city had completely different sources. Where I come from—an agricultural region—I had been studying agricultural questions for a long time. One bright day, in my region, bulldozers arrived and started leveling the trees—they had discovered oil there. There are oil wells in my region, not very many, but still a significant number; one of the biggest refineries in Europe was at Mourenx, Lacq-Mourenx.

So then I saw a new city being built where before there were only fields and oak forests. This began in 1953–54. Little by little I left the agricultural questions behind, saying to myself, now here's something new, something important. I didn't expect the very brutal urbanization that followed. That new city was called Lacq-Mourenx, "ville nouvelle." Since I was at the CNRS, I sent some people there right away to watch the development. I even wanted to write a book—which I never did, like so many projects—entitled *Birth of a City*. That was the starting point. But at the

same time I met Guy Debord, I met Constant, I knew that the Provos in Amsterdam were interested in the city, and I went there to see what was going on, maybe ten times. Just to see the form that the movement was taking, if it took a political form. There were Provos elected to the city council in Amsterdam. I forget which year, but they pulled off a big victory in the municipal elections. Then after that, it all fell apart. All this was part and parcel of the same thing. And after 1960 there was the great movement in urbanization. They abandoned the theory of Unitary Urbanism, since Unitary Urbanism only had a precise meaning for historic cities like Amsterdam that had to be renewed, transformed. But from the moment that the historic city exploded into peripheries, suburbs—like what happened in Paris, and in all sorts of places, Los Angeles, San Francisco, wild extensions of the city—the theory of Unitary Urbanism lost any meaning. I remember very sharp, pointed discussions with Guy Debord, when he said that urbanism was becoming an ideology. He was absolutely right, from the moment that there was an official doctrine on urbanism. I think the urbanism code dates from 1961 in France—that's the moment when urbanism becomes an ideology. That doesn't mean that the problem of the city was resolved—far from it. But at that point they abandoned the theory of Unitary Urbanism. And then I think that even the *dérive*, the *dérive* experiments were little by little abandoned around then too. I'm not sure how that happened, because that was the moment I broke with them.

After all, there's the political context in France, and there are also personal relations, very complicated stories. The most complicated story arose when they came to my place in the Pyrenees. And we took a wonderful trip: we left Paris in a car and stopped at the Lascaux caves, which were closed not long after that. We were very taken up with the problem of the Lascaux caves. They are buried very deep, with even a well that was inaccessible—and all this filled with paintings. How were these paintings made, who were they made for, since they weren't painted in order to be seen? The idea was that painting started as a critique. All the more so in that all the churches in the region have crypts. We stopped at Saint-Savin, where there are frescoes on the church's vaulted dome and a crypt full of paintings, a crypt whose depths are difficult to reach because it is so dark. What are paintings that were not destined to be seen? And how were they made? So, we made our way south; we had a fabulous feast in Sarlat, and I could hardly drive—I was the one driving. I got a ticket; we were almost arrested because I crossed a village going 120 kilometers per hour. They stayed several days at my place, and working together, we wrote a programmatic text. At the end of the week they spent at Navarrenx, they kept the text. I said to them, "You type it" (it was handwritten), and afterward they accused me of plagiarism. In reality this was complete bad faith. The text that was

used in writing the book about the Commune was a joint text, by them and by me, and only one small part of the Commune book was taken from the joint text.

I had this idea about the Commune as a festival, and I threw it out into debate, after consulting an unpublished document about the Commune which is at the Feltrinelli Foundation in Milan. It's a diary about the Commune. The person who kept the diary, who was deported, by the way, and who brought back his diary from deportation several years later, around 1880, recounts how on March 28, 1871, Thiers's soldiers came to look for the cannons that were in Montmartre and on the hills of Belleville; how the women who got up very early in the morning heard the noise and all ran out in the streets and surrounded the soldiers, laughing, having fun, greeting them in a friendly way. Then they went off to get coffee and offered it to the soldiers, and these soldiers who had come to get the cannons were more or less carried away by the people. First the women, then the men, everyone came out, in an atmosphere of popular festival. The Commune cannon incident was not at all a situation of armed heroes arriving and combating the soldiers taking the cannons. It didn't happen at all like that. It was the people who came out of their houses, who were enjoying themselves. The weather was beautiful, March 28 was the first day of spring, it was sunny: the women kiss the soldiers, they're relaxed, and the soldiers are absorbed into all of that, a Parisian popular festival. But this diary is an exception. And afterward the theorists of the heroes of the Commune said to me, "This is a testimonial, you can't write history from a testimonial." The Situationists said more or less the same thing. I didn't read what they said; I did my work. There were ideas that were batted around in conversation, and then worked up in common texts. And then afterward, I wrote my study on the Commune. I worked for weeks in Milan, at the Feltrinelli Institute; I found unpublished documentation, I used it, and that's completely my right. Listen, I don't care at all about these accusations of plagiarism. And I never took the time to read what they wrote about it in their journal. I know that I was dragged through the dirt.

And then, as for how I broke with them, it happened after an extremely complicated story concerning the journal *Arguments*. The idea had come up to stop editing *Arguments* because several of the collaborators in the journal, such as my friend Kostas Axelos, thought that its role was over; they thought they had nothing more to say. In fact, I have the text by Axelos where he talks about the dissolution of the group and of the journal; they thought it was finished and that it would be better to end it rather than let it drag along. I was kept informed of these discussions. During discussions with Guy Debord, we talked about it and Debord said to me, "Our journal, the *Internationale situationniste*, has to replace *Arguments*." And so *Argument's* editor,

and all the people there, had to agree. Everything depended on a certain man [Herval]⁵ who was very powerful at the time in publishing; he did a literary chronicle for *L'Express*, he was also in with the *Nouvelle revue française* and the Editions de Minuit. He was extremely powerful, and everything depended on him.

Well, at that moment I had broken up with a woman—very bitterly. She left me, and she took my address book with her. This meant I no longer had Herval's address. I telephoned Debord and told him I was perfectly willing to continue negotiations with Herval, but that I no longer had his address, his phone number—nothing. Debord began insulting me over the phone. He was furious and said, "I'm used to people like you who become traitors at the decisive moment." That's how the rupture between us began, and it continued in a curious way.

This woman, Eveline—who, I forgot to mention, was a longtime friend of Michèle Bernstein—had left me, and Nicole took her place, and Nicole was pregnant. She wanted the child, and so did I: it's Armelle. But Guy Debord and our little Situationist friends sent a young woman to Navarrenx over Easter vacation one year to try to persuade Nicole to get an abortion.

K.R. Why?

H.L. Because they didn't know, or they didn't want to know, that Nicole wanted this child just as I did. Can you believe that this woman, whose name was Denise and who was particularly unbearable, had been sent to persuade Nicole to have an abortion and leave me, in order to be with them? Then I understood—Nicole told me about it right away. She told me, "You know, this woman is on a mission from Guy Debord; they want me to leave you and get rid of the kid." So since I already didn't much like Denise, I threw her out. Denise was the girlfriend of that Situationist who had learned chinese—I forget his name. I'm telling you this because it's all very complex, everything gets mixed up: political history, ideology, women . . . but there was a time when it was a real, very warm friendship.

K.R. You even wrote an article entitled "You Will All Be Situationists."

H.L. Oh yes, I did that to help bring about the replacement of *Arguments* by the *Internationale situationniste*. . . Guy Debord accused me of having done nothing to get it published. Yes, it was Herval who was supposed to publish it. Lucky for me that it didn't appear because afterwards they would have reproached me for it.

But there's a point I want to go back to—the question of plagiarism. That bothered me quite a bit. Not a lot, just a little bit. We worked together *day and night* at Navarrenx, we went to sleep at nine in the morning (that was

5. Name unclear on the tape.

how they lived, going to sleep in the morning and sleeping all day). We ate nothing. It was appalling. I suffered throughout the week, not eating, just drinking. We must have drunk a hundred bottles. In a few days. Five . . . and we were working while drinking. The text was almost a doctrinal résumé of everything we were thinking, about situations, about transformations of life; it wasn't very long, just a few pages, handwritten. They took it away and typed it up and afterwards thought they had a right to the ideas. These were ideas we tossed around on a little country walk I took them on—with a nice touch of perversity I took them down a path that led nowhere, that got lost in the woods, fields, and so on. Michèle Bernstein had a complete nervous breakdown, she didn't enjoy it at all. . . . It's true, it wasn't urban, it was very deep in the country.

K.R. A rural *dérive*. Let's talk a bit about the *dérive* in general. Do you think it brought anything new to spatial theory or to urban theory? In the way that it emphasized experimental games and practices, do you think it was more productive than a purely theoretical approach to the city?

H.L. Yes. As I perceived it, the *dérive* was more of a practice than a theory. It revealed the growing fragmentation of the city. In the course of its history the city was once a powerful organic unity; for some time, however, that unity was becoming undone, was fragmenting, and they were recording examples of what we all had been talking about, like the place where the new Bastille Opera is going to be built. The Place de la Bastille is the end of historic Paris—beyond that it's the Paris of the first industrialization of the nineteenth century. The Place des Vosges is still aristocratic Paris of the seventeenth century. When you get to the Bastille, another Paris begins, which is of the nineteenth century, but it's the Paris of the bourgeoisie, of commercial, industrial expansion, at the same time that the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie takes hold of the Marais, the center of Paris—it spreads out beyond the Bastille, the rue de la Roquette, the rue du Faubourg Saint-Antoine, etc. So already the city is becoming fragmented. We had a vision of a city that was more and more fragmented without its organic unity being completely shattered. Afterward, of course, the peripheries and the suburbs highlighted the problem. But back then it wasn't yet obvious, and we thought that the practice of the *dérive* revealed the idea of the fragmented city. But it was mostly done in Amsterdam. The experiment consisted of rendering different aspects or fragments of the city simultaneous, fragments that can only be seen successively, in the same way that there exist people who have never seen certain parts of the city.

K.R. While the *dérive* took the form of a narrative.

H.L. That's it; one goes along in any direction and recounts what one sees.

K.R. But the recounting can't be done simultaneously.

H.L. Yes, it can, if you have a walkie-talkie; the goal was to attain a certain simultaneity. That was the goal—it didn't always work.

K.R. So, a kind of synchronic history.

H.L. Yes, that's it, a synchronic history. That was the meaning of Unitary Urbanism: unify what has a certain unity, but a lost unity, a disappearing unity.

K.R. And it was during the time when you knew the Situationists that the idea of Unitary Urbanism began to lose its force?

H.L. At the moment when urbanization became truly massive, that is, after 1960, and when the city, Paris, completely exploded. You know that there were very few suburbs in Paris; there were some, but very few. And then suddenly the whole area was filled, covered with little houses, with new cities, Sarcelles and the rest. Sarcelles became a kind of myth. There was even a disease that people called the "sarcellite." And around then Guy Debord's attitude changed—he went from Unitary Urbanism to the thesis of urbanistic ideology.

K.R. And what was that transition, exactly?

H.L. It was more than a transition, it was the abandonment of one position in order to adopt the exact opposite one. Between the idea of elaborating an urbanism and the thesis that all urbanism is an ideology is a profound modification. In fact, by saying that all urbanism was a bourgeois ideology, they abandoned the problem of the city. They left it behind. They thought that the problem no longer interested them. While I, on the other hand, continued to be interested; I thought that the explosion of the historic city was precisely the occasion for finding a larger theory of the city, and not a pretext for abandoning the problem. But it wasn't because of this that we fell out; we fell out for much more sordid reasons. That business about sabotaging *Arguments*, Herval's lost address—all that was completely ridiculous. But there were certainly deeper reasons.

The theory of situations was itself abandoned, little by little. And the journal itself became a political organ. They began to insult everyone. That was part of Debord's attitude, or it might have been part of his difficulties—he split up with Michèle Bernstein. I don't know, there were all kinds of circumstances that might have made him more polemical, more bitter, more violent. In the end, everything became oriented toward a kind of polemical violence. I think they ended up insulting just about everyone. And they also greatly exaggerated their role in May '68, after the fact.

The '68 movement didn't come from the Situationists. At Nanterre there was a little groupuscule known as "*les enragés*." They were insulting everyone too. But they were the ones who made the movement. The movement of March 22 was made by students, among them Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who was not a Situationist.

It was an energetic group that took form as the events developed, with no program, no project—an informal group, with whom the Situationists linked up, but it wasn't they who constituted the group. The group took shape apart from them—Trotskyists joined up with the March 22 group,

everybody ended up joining with them little by little. We called it “getting aboard a moving train.” So even though the Situationists at Nanterre may have joined up with the group from the outset, they weren’t the animators, the creative element. In fact, the movement began in a big, crowded amphitheater where I was giving a course, and where students whom I knew well asked me if we could name some delegates to go to the administration to protest the blacklist. (The administration was insisting on establishing a list of the most disruptive students in order to sanction them.) “Of course,” I said. So it was on that podium that the election took place of delegates to protest the blacklist business. And all sorts of people participated in that election, Trotskyists as well as Situationists.

The group of March 22 was formed after these negotiations and arguments with the administration, and then the group occupied the administration building. The stimulus was this business about the blacklist, and I was the one who concocted the blacklist. What actually happened was that the administration phoned my office and asked for a list of the most politically disruptive students. I told them to get lost; I frequently had to say to the dean in those days, “Sir, I am not a cop.” So the blacklist never existed, in black and white. But they were trying to do it, and I told the students to defend themselves; I stirred things up a bit. One has one’s little perversities, after all.

I always tell the story. On Friday evening, May 13, we were all at the Place Denfert-Rochereau. Around the Belfort lion, there were maybe seventy or eighty thousand students discussing what to do next. The Maoists wanted to go out to the suburbs, toward Ivry; the anarchists and the Situationists wanted to go make noise in the bourgeois quarters. The Trotskyists were in favor of heading for the proletarian districts, the eleventh arrondissement, while the students from Nanterre wanted to go to the Latin Quarter. Then some people cried out, “We’ve got friends in the Prison de la Santé—let’s go see them!” And then the whole crowd started off down the Boulevard Arago toward the Prison de la Santé. We saw hands at the windows, we yelled things, and then we headed off toward the Latin Quarter. It was chance. Or maybe it wasn’t chance at all. There must have been a desire to go back to the Latin Quarter, to not get too far away from the center of student life. There must have been some obscure feeling of attachment to the Latin Quarter . . . it was curious, after that hour of floating around, not knowing which way to go. And then, in the Latin Quarter, the television was there, until midnight, that is. Then there was just the radio, Europe No. 1. And at about three in the morning—in complete bedlam, there was noise from all directions—a radio guy handed the microphone to Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who had the brilliant idea of simply saying: “General strike, general strike, general strike.” And that was the decisive moment; it was then that there was action. That was what took the police by surprise. That students were

making trouble, that there was a little violence, some wounded, tear gas, paving stones, barricades, and bombs—that was all just the children of the bourgeoisie having a good time. But a general strike, well, that was no laughing matter.

Selected Situationist Texts

Translated by John Shepley

The texts in this section have been selected from various Situationist publications, primarily the group's eponymous journal, and cover a period from the late fifties through the mid-sixties. They have never before appeared in English (with the exception of a very brief section of "The Avant-Garde of Presence," translated by Ken Knabb), and are intended to provide a sample of the S.I.'s prolific writings on contemporary visual art and urbanism.

The images that appear on pages 86–101 were originally published in *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958). They were meant to address the theme of "everyday life at the advent of the Situationist movement." All other images appear in their original contexts.

One More Try If You Want to Be Situationists (The S.I. *in* and *against* Decomposition)*

GUY DEBORD

To Mohamed Dahou

The collective task we have set ourselves is the creation of a new cultural *theater of operations*, placed hypothetically at the level of an eventual general construction of its surroundings through the preparation, depending on circumstances, of the terms of the environment/behavior dialectic. The depletion of modern forms of art and style is all too obvious; and analysis of this steady trend leads us to the conclusion that in order to overcome the general cultural picture, wherein we see a state of *decomposition* that has arrived at its final historical stage (for the definition of this term, cf. “Rapport sur la construction des situations”), one must seek a higher organization of the means of action in this period of our culture. That is, we must foresee and experiment with what lies beyond the present atomization of wornout traditional arts, with a new state of the world whose most consistent premise will be urbanism and the daily life of an emerging society—and not *go back* to some coherent unity or other. We can clearly see that the development of this task presupposes a revolution that has yet to take place, and that any research is restricted by the contradictions of the present. The Situationist International exists *in name*, but that means nothing but the beginning of an attempt to build beyond the decomposition in which we, like everyone else, are completely involved. Becoming aware of our real possibilities requires both the recognition of the pre-Situationist—in the strict sense of the word—nature of whatever we can attempt, and the rupture, without looking back, with *the division of labor in the arts*. The main danger lies in these two errors: the pursuit of fragmentary works combined with simple-minded proclamations of an alleged new stage.

At this moment the decomposition shows nothing more than a slow *radicalization* of moderate innovators toward positions where outcast extremists had already found themselves eight or ten years ago. But far from drawing a lesson from those fruitless experiments, the “respectable” innovators further dilute their importance. I will take examples from France, which surely is undergoing the most advanced phenomena of the general cultural decomposition that, for various reasons, is being manifested *in its purest state* in Western Europe.

* Potlatch 29 (November 5, 1957), n.p.

Reading Alain Robbe-Grillet's first two columns in *France-Observateur* (October 10 and 17),¹ one is struck by the fact that he is a *timid Isou* (in his arguments, as in the "daring" spirit of his novels), as when he claims "to belong to the History of forms, which in the final analysis is the best (and perhaps only) criterion for recognizing a work of art." With a banality of thought and expression that ends up being quite personal ("let me repeat, it is better to take risks than to settle for a sure error"), and much less invention and audacity, he harkens back to the same *linear perception* of artistic movement, a mechanistic idea whose function is to reassure: "Art goes on, or else it dies. We are among those who have chosen to go on." To go straight on. Who, in 1957, reminds him by direct analogy of Baudelaire? Claude Simon—"all the values of the past . . . would seem in any case to prove it." (This *appearance* of proof in claims for a direct lineage is due precisely to the denial of all dialectics, of any real change.) Indeed, everything that has been put forward, of any interest at all, since the last war naturally takes its place in the extreme decomposition, but with more or less of a desire to look beyond. This desire gets smothered by economic and cultural ostracism and also by the lack of ideas and proposals—these two aspects being *interdependent*. The *best-known* art appearing in our time is controlled by those who know "how far to go too far." (See the endless and profitable death throes of post-Dadaist painting, which is usually presented as a Dadaism *in reverse*, and whereby they mutually congratulate each other. Their aspirations and their enemies are cut to size.) Robbe-Grillet modestly renounces the title of avant-gardist (when one does not even have an authentic "avant-garde" view of the

1. Alain Robbe-Grillet, "Ecrire pour son temps," *France-Observateur*, October 10, 1957, p. 17, and "Littérature aujourd'hui: Il n'y a pas d'avant-garde," *France-Observateur*, October 17, 1957, p. 19. Ed.



Asger Jorn.

"We live subject to change, because if you will allow me to say so, that is the law of the country we live in."

Bossuet

decomposition phase, one might as well reject its inconveniences—especially the noncommercial aspect). He will be content to be a “novelist of today,” but, outside the little cohort of his fellows, it must be admitted that the others are quite simply a “rearguard.” And he courageously takes issue with Michel de Saint-Pierre, which suggests that by talking about cinema he would bestow on himself the glory of insulting Gourguet, while hailing the present-day cinema of an Astruc. Actually, Robbe-Grillet is *up to date* for a certain social group, just as Michel de Saint-Pierre is up to date for a public made up of another class. Both are very much “of today” in relation to their audiences, and nothing more, to the extent to which they exploit, with different sensibilities, neighboring degrees of a traditional *mode of cultural action*. It is no big deal to be *up to date*: one is only more or less *part of the decomposition*. Originality now wholly depends on a leap to a higher level.

It is their timidity that keeps people from looking beyond the decomposition. Unable to see anything after the present structures, and knowing them well enough to sense that they are doomed, they would like to *destroy them piecemeal*, while leaving something for the next generation. They are comparable to political reformers, impotent but just as harmful: living on the sale of false remedies. Anyone who cannot conceive a radical transformation is propping up the *arrangements* of the status quo—practiced with elegance—and is separated only by a few *chronological preferences* from those consistent reactionaries who (whether politically of the right or the left) would like to see a return to earlier (*more solid*) stages of the culture that is breaking down. Françoise Choay’s naive art criticism is quite representative of the tastes of the “free intellectuals of the left” who constitute the chief social base of this timid cultural decomposition, and when she writes (*France-Observateur*, October 17) “The path taken by Francken . . . is presently one of painting’s



Michèle Bernstein.

“This medley of blue sashes, ladies, cuirasses, violins in the hall, and trumpets in the square, provided a spectacle more often seen in novels than elsewhere.”

Retz

chances for survival,"² she betrays concerns *fundamentally akin* to those of Zhdanov ("Did we do the right thing . . . in putting to rout the liquidators of painting?").

We are locked into relations of production that contradict the necessary development of productive forces, in the sphere of culture *as well*. We must breach these traditional relations, *the arguments and fashions they support*. We must direct ourselves *beyond* present-day culture, by a *clear-eyed critique of existing spheres* and their *integration* into a single space-time construction (the situation: a dynamic system in an environment and playful behavior) that will bring about a *higher harmony of form and content*.

But these prospects, in themselves, cannot in any way validate current productions that naturally take on meaning in relation to the prevailing confusion, and that includes in our own minds as well. Among us, useful theoretical propositions may be contradicted by actual works limited to old sectors (on which it is necessary to act *first*, since for the moment they are alone in possessing a common reality). Or often other comrades, who have made interesting experiments on particular points, get sidetracked in outdated theories: thus W. Olmo, who is not lacking in good will, in order to connect his experiments in sound with the construction of environments, employs such defective formulations in a recent text submitted to the Situationist International ("For a Concept of Musical Experimentation") that the whole thing had to be refocused ("Remarks on the Concept of Experimental Art"), a discussion that, in my opinion, no longer offers even the memory of a reality.³

2. Françoise Choay, "La vie des arts: Actualité de l'expressionnisme," *France-Observateur*, October 17, 1957, p. 20. Choay was speaking of the painter Ruth Francken, who was exhibiting work with two other artists at the Galerie Stadler. Ed.

3. Walter Olmo, a member of the Italian section of the S.I., had presented his text to the group in September 1957. Debord's response was issued on October 15, 1957, and denounced Olmo and his supporters for their idealism and conservatism. When Olmo refused to retract the text, he was



*"I rose early above the chimeras of religion,
perfectly convinced that the existence of the
creator is a revolting absurdity that children
no longer even believe in."*

Sade

Just as there is no “Situationism” as *doctrine*, one must not let certain former experiments be called Situationist achievements—or everything to which our ideological and practical weakness now limits us. But, on the other hand, we cannot concede even a temporary value to mystification. The abstract empirical fact that constitutes this or that manifestation of today’s decayed culture only takes on concrete meaning by its connection with the overall vision of an end or a beginning of civilization. Which is to say that in the long run our seriousness can integrate and surpass mystification, as well as whatever promotes it as evidence of an actual historical state of decayed thought. Last June witnessed a scandal when a film I had made in 1952 was screened in London.⁴ It was not a hoax and still less a Situationist achievement, but one that depended on complex literary motivations of that time (works on the cinema of Isou, Marco, Wolman), and thus fully participated in the phase of decay, precisely in its most extreme form, without even having—except for a few programmatic allusions—the wish for positive developments that characterized the works to which I’ve just alluded. Afterward, the same London audience (Institute of Contemporary Arts) was treated to some paintings executed by chimpanzees, which bear comparison with respectable action painting. This proximity seems to me instructive. *Passive consumers* of culture (one can well understand why we count on the possibility of active participation in a world in which “aesthetes” will be forgotten) can love any manifestation of decomposition (they would be right in the sense that these manifestations are precisely those that best express their period of crisis and decline, but one can see that they *prefer* those that *slightly disguise* this state). I believe that in another five or six years they will come to *love* my film and the paintings of apes, just as they already love Robbe-Grillet. The only real difference between the paintings of apes and my complete cinematographic work to date is its possible threatening meaning for the culture around us, namely, a wager on certain formations of the future. And I wouldn’t know on which side to put Robbe-Grillet, when you stop to think that at certain moments of rupture one is either aware or not of a qualitative turning point; and if not, the nuances don’t matter.

But our wager always has to be renewed, and it is we ourselves who produce the various chances to respond. We wish to transform these times (to which everything we love, beginning with our experimental attitude, *also belongs*) and not to “write for it,” as self-satisfied vulgarity intends: Robbe-Grillet and his times are made for each other. On the contrary, our ambitions are clearly megalomaniac, but perhaps not measurable by the prevailing criteria of success. I believe all my friends would be content to work anonymously at the Ministry of Leisure in a government that would finally undertake to change life, along with the salaries of qualified workers.

excluded from the group in January 1958. Cf. Steward Home, *The Assault on Culture* (Stirling, Scotland: AIC Press, 1991), p. 32. Ed.

4. For an account of the June 1957 screening of *Hurléments en faveur de Sade*, see Guy Atkins, *Asger Jorn: The Crucial Years, 1954–1964* (London: Lund Humphries, 1977), pp. 57–58. Ed.

Theses on the Cultural Revolution*

GUY DEBORD

1

The traditional goal of aesthetics is to make one feel, in privation and absence, certain past elements of life that through the mediation of art would escape the confusion of appearances, since appearance is what suffers from the reign of time. The degree of aesthetic success is thus measured by a beauty inseparable from duration, and tending even to lay claim to eternity. The Situationist goal is immediate participation in a passionate abundance of life, through the variation of fleeting moments resolutely arranged. The success of these moments can only be their passing effect. Situationists consider cultural activity, from the standpoint of totality, as an experimental method for constructing daily life, which can be permanently developed with the extension of leisure and the disappearance of the division of labor (beginning with the division of artistic labor).

2

Art can cease to be a report on sensations and become a direct organization of higher sensations. It is a matter of producing ourselves, and not things that enslave us.

3

Mascolo is right in saying (“Le Communisme”) that the reduction of the working day by the regime of the dictatorship of the proletariat is “the most certain assurance that it can give of its revolutionary authenticity.” Indeed, “if man is a commodity, if he is treated as a thing, if the general relations of men among themselves are the relations of thing to thing, it is because it is possible to buy his time from him.” Mascolo, however, is too quick to conclude that “the time of a man freely employed” is always well spent, and that “the purchase of time is the sole evil.”¹ There is no freedom in the employment of time without the possession of modern

* *Internationale situationniste* 1 (June 1958), pp. 20–21.

1. Dionys Mascolo, *Le Communisme: Revolution et communication ou la dialectique des valeurs et des besoins* (Paris: Gallimard, 1953).

instruments for the construction of daily life. The use of such instruments will mark the leap of a utopian revolutionary art to an experimental revolutionary art.

4

An international association of Situationists can be seen as a union of workers in an advanced sector of culture, or more precisely as a union of all those who claim the right to a task now impeded by social conditions; hence as an attempt at an organization of professional revolutionaries in culture.

5

We are separated in practice from true control over the material powers accumulated by our time. The Communist revolution has not occurred, and we still live within the framework of the decomposition of old cultural superstructures. Henri Lefebvre correctly sees that this contradiction is at the heart of a specifically modern discordance between the progressive individual and the world, and calls the cultural tendency based on this discordance revolutionary-romantic. The defect in Lefebvre's conception lies in making the simple expression of discordance a sufficient criterion for revolutionary action within the culture. Lefebvre renounces beforehand all experiments toward profound cultural change while remaining satisfied with a content: awareness of the (still too remote) impossible-possible, which can be expressed no matter what form it takes within the framework of decomposition.

6

Those who want to overcome the old established order in all its aspects cannot attach themselves to the disorder of the present, even in the sphere of culture. One must struggle and not go on waiting, in culture as well, for the moving order of the



*"But I ask in utter and unexpected seriousness:
What reproach does Charles de Gaulle deserve
in all this? What reasons does he give us not to
trust him?"*

Mauriac (L'Express, June 26, 1958)

future to make a concrete appearance. It is its possibility, already present in our midst, that devalues all expression in known cultural forms. One must lead all forms of pseudocommunication to their utter destruction, to arrive one day at real and direct communication (in our working hypothesis of higher cultural means: the constructed situation). Victory will be for those who will be able to create disorder without loving it.

7

In the world of cultural decomposition we can test our strength but not employ it. The practical task of overcoming our discordance with the world, i.e., of surmounting the decomposition by some higher constructions, is not romantic. We will be “revolutionary romantics,” in Lefebvre’s sense, precisely to the degree of our failure.



Gil J. Wolman.

“Whom should I announce to milord the Duke?”

“The young man who picked a fight with him one evening on the Pont-Neuf, opposite the Samaritaine.”

“Some recommendation!”

“You’ll see it’s as good as any other.”

Dumas, Les Trois Mousquetaires

In Praise of Pinot-Gallizio*

MICHÈLE BERNSTEIN

Italian painting occupies an exceptional place in the history of Western culture. Its fruits have not been lost. As always, social habits outlast the conditions of a historically outmoded artistic form, while maintaining material possibilities—economic privileges.

In today's Italy, which is incapable of resolving the problem of unemployment, there is at least a position to occupy: the social function of painter. The role of the painter and the importance of painting, both artificially maintained in a different society whose resources and problems are obviously those of the rest of the world in the twentieth century, have kept all their allure.

Which is why, anxious to prevail on this favored soil and assured of immortality by this geographical identity, some fine ambitions come to grief: what Giotto and Leonardo did in laying down the laws for the construction of painting, Fontana or Baj hope to imitate by providing the equivalent for its destruction. And the candidates do not stop to think that the invention of liquidation, in whatever branch of cultural activity, necessarily goes faster and is forgotten in less time than the invention of a culture. They keep trying.

Most often it is where confusion and decadence have been pushed to the extreme, where their social and economic importance is asserted the most, that one should expect to see the negation of this decadence emerge. Gallizio is accordingly Italian.

Aware of the problems that truly affect us, in this interregnum between civilizations in which we find ourselves caught, Gallizio forsakes painting—whether respectably figurative or abstract, or action painting, and in any case as modern as in 1930. He extends it into other realms, all the realms on which he touches with an extraordinarily inventive spirit. They follow one another in succession and are called chemical experiments, resins, resin painting, scented painting. In 1955, Gallizio was one of the founders of the Laboratoire Expérimental du Bauhaus Imaginiste.

* (Turin, 1958), in *Pinot Gallizio* (Paris: Bibliothèque d'Alexandrie, 1960).

It is then that he perfected, at the cost of unremitting labor and the lengthy patience of genius, the discovery we wish to speak of, one that will deliver the final blow to the little glories of the easel: industrial painting.

Gallizio produces painting by the meter.

Not a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* stretched across fifty meters of wallpaper. No, his painting by the meter is original, its reproduction is forbidden, its process patented.

Its cost price beats all competition. Its sale price too: Gallizio is honest.

His production is unlimited. No more speculators on canvases: if you have money to invest, be content to buy shares in the Suez Canal.

His sales take place preferably outdoors. Also in small shops and large department stores: Gallizio dislikes galleries.

It is hard to grasp all at once the myriad advantages of this astonishing invention. At random: no more problems of size—the canvas is cut before the eyes of the satisfied customer; no more bad periods—because of its shrewd mixture of chance and mechanics, the inspiration for industrial painting never defaults; no more metaphysical themes—industrial painting won't sustain them; no more doubtful reproductions of eternal masterpieces; no more gala openings.

And of course, soon, no more painters, even in Italy.

Obviously one can laugh, and classify this phase of art as an inoffensive joke, or as bad taste. Or get indignant in the name of eternal values. One can pretend to believe that easel painting, which isn't doing so well these days, won't get any worse.

The progressive domination of nature is the history of the disappearance of certain problems, removed from "artistic"—occasional, unique—practice to massive



Michèle Bernstein.

*"Mistress of her desires, she saw the world,
and was seen by it."*

Bossuet

diffusion in the public domain, until finally they tend even to lose any economic value.

Faced with this process, the reactionary inclination is always to restore value to old problems: the authentic Henri II sideboard, the fake Henri II sideboard, the forged canvas that isn't signed, the excessively numbered edition of something or other by Salvador Dali, top quality in all realms. Revolutionary creation tries to define and spread new problems, new productions that alone can have value.

Considering the endowable buffooneries now after twenty years coming back to stay, the industrialization of painting thus appears as an example of technical progress to be taken up without further delay. It is Gallizio's greatness to have boldly pushed his tireless experiments to the point where nothing is left of the old pictorial world.

Anyone can see that previous procedures for overcoming and destroying the pictorial object, whether through abstraction carried to its extreme limits (in the vein opened by Malevich) or painting deliberately subjected to extra-plastic concerns (Magritte's work, for example), have been unable, after decades, to emerge from the stage of repeating an artistic negation, within the framework imposed by the pictorial means themselves: an "inner" negation.

The problem thus raised can only drag on endlessly by repeating the same *données*, in which the elements of a solution have not been included. Meanwhile, all around us, the world keeps changing before our eyes.

We have now reached a stage of experimentation with new collective constructions and new syntheses, and there is no longer any point in combating the values of the old world by a neo-Dadaist refusal. Whether these values be ideological, artistic, or even financial, the proper thing is to unleash inflation everywhere. Gallizio is in the forefront.

Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio.



"And the heat to which they are accustomed is so excessive that they would be chilled by the heat here in the depths of Africa."

Fontenelle

Extracts from Letters to the Situationist International*

CONSTANT

...I have as little taste for individualist primitivism in painting as for so-called cool architecture and abstraction, although people like to stress a quarrel between these two tendencies that is false and artificial.

Industrial and machine culture is an incontrovertible fact, and craft procedures, including the two tendencies in painting (the concept of a “free” art is mistaken), are doomed.

The machine is an indispensable tool for everyone, even artists, and industry is the sole means to provide for the needs, even the aesthetic ones, of humanity on the scale of the present world. These are no longer “problems” for artists; this is the reality that they cannot ignore with impunity.

Those who mistrust the machine and those who glorify it show the same incapacity to utilize it. Machine work and mass production offer unheard-of possibilities for creation, and those who are able to place these possibilities at the service of a daring imagination will be my creators of tomorrow.

Artists have the task of inventing new techniques and of using light, sound, movement, and in general all the inventions that can have an effect on environments.

Otherwise the integration of art into the construction of the human habitat remains illusory. ...

Ten years separate us from CoBrA, and the history of so-called experimental art demonstrates its errors to us.

... For my part, I consider that the aggressive temperament required for the construction of environments excludes such traditional arts as painting and literature,

* (September 1958), in *Constant* (Paris: Bibliothèque d'Alexandrie, 1959).

now worn out and incapable of any revelation. Arts linked to a mystical and individualist attitude cannot be used by us.

We ought therefore to invent new techniques in all domains, visual, oral, and psychological, so as later to combine them in the complex activity that will produce unitary urbanism.

Delegates from groups attending the S.I. meeting at the Alba Congress.



"It's no use for them to scribble, praise one another, wax enthusiastic, enlist women and fops in their cause; they will never be anything but insolent mediocrities."

Fréron, letter to Malesherbes about the Encyclopedists

Editorial Notes: Absence and Its Costumers*

Any creative effort that is not henceforth carried out in view of a new cultural theater of operations, of a direct creation of life's surroundings, is in one way or another a hoax. Within the context of the exhaustion of traditional aesthetic categories, some reach the point of making themselves known simply by signing a blank, which is the perfect result of the Dadaist "readymade." A few years ago, the American composer John Cage obliged his audience to listen to a moment of silence. During the *lettriste* experiment of 1952, a twenty-four-minute dark sequence, with no sound track, was introduced into the film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*. Yves Klein's recent monochrome paintings, inspired by Tinguely's machines, take the form of rapidly revolving blue disks, causing the critic for *Le Monde* (November 21, 1958) to remark:

You might think that all this effort and so many detours do not lead very far. Even the protagonists do not take themselves too seriously. But their enterprise falls symptomatically within the present disarray. "They've run out of ideas" is heard on all sides. Is art, and especially painting, once and for all "at the end of its rope"? This has been said of all periods, but it may after all have devolved on ours to coincide with the final impasse. This time the old surface of the canvas, where Impressionism and Expressionism, Fauvism and Cubism, pointillism and Abstract Expressionism, geometric and lyrical abstraction have all been superimposed, is beginning to show its threads.¹

Actually the artists' seriousness does not pose any sort of problem. The real question opposes an isolated artistic means with the unified use of several of these means. Immediately after the formation of the Situationist International, *Potlatch*, no. 29, warned the Situationists ("The S.I. *in and against* Decomposition"):

* *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958), pp. 6–8.

1. M.-C. L., "Tinguely-Klein ou l'art superlatif," *Le Monde*, November 21, 1958, p. 11.

Just as there is no “situationism” as *doctrine*, one must not let certain former experiments be called Situationist achievements—or everything to which our ideological and practical weakness now limits us. But, on the other hand, we cannot concede even a temporary value to mystification. The abstract empirical fact that constitutes this or that manifestation of today’s decayed culture only takes on concrete meaning by its connection with the overall vision of an end or a beginning of civilization. Which is to say that in the long run our seriousness can integrate and surpass mystification, as well as whatever promotes it as evidence of an actual historical state of decayed thought.

Indeed, these empty exercises seldom escape the temptation to rely on some kind of external justification, thereby to illustrate and serve a reactionary conception of the world. Klein’s purpose, as we are told by the same article in *Le Monde*, “seems to be to transpose this purely plastic theme of color saturation into a sort of incantatory pictorial mystique. It involves being swallowed up in spellbinding blue uniformity like a Buddhist in Buddha.” We know, alas, that John Cage participates in that Californian thought where the mental infirmity of American capitalist culture has enrolled in the school of Zen Buddhism. It is not by chance that Michel Tapié, the secret agent of the Vatican, pretends to believe in the existence of an American school of the Pacific Coast, and in its decisive importance: all kinds of spiritualists are closing ranks these days. Tapié’s slimy procedure also aims, in parallel fashion, at destroying the theoretical vocabulary (in which he plays an artist’s role, unacknowledged as such, but as a true contemporary of Cage and Klein). In a catalogue for the Galerie Stadler, on November 25, he thus decomposes language, using as a pretext a painter, naturally Japanese, named Imai: “In recent months, Imai has reached a new stage in a fruitful three-year



Independence of Algeria

*One day there will be no more parents
In the gardens of youth . . .
Violette dreamed of undoing
And undid
The Frightful know of serpents in the ties
of blood.*

Eluard, “Violettes Nozières”

pictorial development, which had progressed from a 'signifying Pacific' climate to a dramatic totalist graphism."

There is no need to point out how Klein and Tapié are spontaneously in the forefront of a fascist wave that is making headway in France. Others have been so more explicitly, if not perhaps more consciously—first of all, the putrid Hantaï, who proceeded directly from surrealist fanaticism to the royalism of Georges Mathieu. The simplicity of the recipe for Dadaism in reverse, as well as Hantaï's obvious moral rot, have not stopped the worthy imbeciles of the Swiss orthodox neo-Dadaist journal *Panderma* from giving him massive publicity, nor from admitting that they have not been able "to understand the slightest thing" about discussions of the show at the Galerie Kléber, in March 1957, though it was clearly denounced—in the same way—by the Surrealists, and by us in *Potlatch*, no. 28.² It is true that the same journal, speaking for some reason of the S.I., also reveals its perplexity: "What's it all about? No one knows." We would probably be amazed to be a current subject of conversation in Basel. Nevertheless, Laszlo, the editor of *Panderma*, has been seen making several vain attempts to meet Situationists in Paris. It all goes to suggest that even Laszlo has read us. Except that his calling lies elsewhere: he is the mainspring of one of those vast gatherings where people who have no connection with each other put their signatures for a day to a manifesto that in itself has no content. Laszlo's great work, his simple but proud contribution to the sovereign nothingness of his time, is a "manifesto against avant-gardism," which, after some thirty lines of critical remarks, utterly acceptable because unfortunately quite trite, about the tiredness of modern art and the repetitions of what is called avant-gardism, suddenly turns into a profession of faith in a future of interest only to the signers. Since their chosen future is not otherwise defined, and is therefore probably awaited and accepted in its entirety and with enthusiasm—as by Hantaï—one of the signers, Edouard Roditi, has been careful to hold back, reserving for himself "the right to judge the future as uninteresting as the present." Roditi aside, all these thinkers (of whom the best known is the singer and composer Charles Estienne, a former art critic) are probably, for the moment, interested in,

2. In *Potlatch* 28 (May 22, 1957), the following notice appeared under the title "Certificats": "The professional aristocrat Mathieu, with help from one Hantaï . . . has exploited as best he could his exhibition at the Galerie Kléber to force his contemporaries to recognize in him the originality of being the man about town who goes the furthest in retrograde thinking. But once again, he strains his talent, he cheats on his origins. To find the inspirer of the manifestos of Mathieu-Hantaï, there is no need to go back to Thomas Aquinas or the Duke of Brunswick, as they would like you to think, but, much closer, to Marcel Aymé, who, in a short story entitled "En arrière!," not long ago amused himself by depicting the other side of the Dada-Surrealist coin: the scandal of a group of young people who call attention to themselves by a series of reactionary manifestos to the point of frenzy. The joke was funny for four pages: it so happens that someone has taken it seriously and reproduced it in his life.

"And the champions of our poor little world are so lacking in ideas that there is no piece of foolishness that can't be used several times. Baron Hantaï enters the arena, and thus Paris already boasts two professional aristocrats."

Hantaï's mysticism was similarly denounced by the Surrealists (who had hailed his first exhibition in 1953) in the tract "Coup de semonce." Ed.

and perhaps gratified by, the future that has necessarily followed the publication of their manifesto.

One can bet that a good number of these lovers of the future met again at that “rendezvous of the international avant-garde” held in September at the Palais des Expositions in Charleroi, of which nothing is known except the title “Art of the Twenty-first Century” displayed on a modest advertising poster. One can also bet that the formula, which fell flat, will be repeated, and that all those who were so thoroughly incapable of discovering an art of 1958 will subscribe to that of the twenty-first century, nagged only by extremists trying to sell the same repetitions under a twenty-second century label. The flight to the future, in its boastfulness, is thus the consolation of those who turn round and round in front of the wall that separates them from present-day culture.

Guy Debord.



“What often prevents us from giving ourselves over to a single vice is that we have several of them.”

La Rochefoucauld

Editorial Notes: The Sense of Decay in Art*

Bourgeois civilization, now spread all over the planet, and which has yet to be successfully overcome anywhere, is haunted by a shadow: its culture, which appears in the modern dissolution of all its artistic means, is being called into question. This dissolution, first manifested at the starting point for the productive forces of modern society, i.e., Europe and later in America, has long been the prime truth of Western modernism. Everywhere the liberation of artistic forms has signified their reduction to nothing. One can apply to the whole of modern expression what W. Weidlé, in 1947, wrote in the second issue of *Cahiers de la Pléiade* about *Finnegans Wake*: “This enormous *Summa* of the most enticing verbal contortions, this *Ars poetica* in ten thousand lessons, is not an artistic creation: it is the autopsy of its corpse.”

Reactionary critics, to support their stupid dream of a return to the stylistic beauties of the past, never fail to point out that behind the inflationary flowering of novelties that can serve only once, the road of this liberation leads only to the void. For example, Emile Henriot (*Le Monde*, February 11, 1959) notes “The turn, many times signaled, that a certain literature of today has taken in the direction of the ‘language of forms’ for the use of literati specializing in the exercise of a ‘literature for literati,’ an object unto itself, just as there are experiments by painters for experimental painters and a music for musicians.”¹ Or Mauriac (*L'Express*, March 5, 1959): “The very philosophers whose lesson is that the end of a poem should be silence write articles to persuade us of it, and publish novels to prove to us that one shouldn’t tell stories.”²

In the face of these jeers, those critics who have chosen to be modernists extol the beauties of dissolution, while hoping that it doesn’t proceed too quickly.

* *Internationale Situationnist* 3 (December 1959), pp. 3–8.

1. Emile Henriot, “La vie littéraire: Vingt ans de littérature française (1938–1958),” *Le Monde*, February 11, 1959, pp. 8–9. The volume under review was Pierre de Boisdeffre’s *Une histoire vivante de la littérature d’aujourd’hui* (Paris: Le livre contemporaine, 1959). Henriot was a member of the Académie Française. Ed.

2. Françoise Mauriac, “Le bloc-notes de Françoise Mauriac,” *L'Express*, March 5, 1959, p. 36. This was a weekly column by Mauriac. Ed.

They are embarrassed, like Geneviève Bonnefoi taking note under the title "Death or Transfiguration?" of the ill-starred Paris Biennale (*Lettres Nouvelles*, no. 25). She concludes sadly: "Only the future will tell if this 'annihilation' of pictorial language, fairly similar to the one attempted on the literary plane by Beckett, Ionesco, and the best of the current young novelists, foreshadows a renewal of painting or its disappearance as a major art of our time. I have no space here to speak of sculpture, which seems to be in total disintegration." Or else, renouncing any sense of the comical, they loudly take the side of quasi nothingness in formulas worthy to pass into history as the summing-up of the poverty of an era, like Françoise Choay, who *eulogistically* entitles an article on Tapiès: "Tapiès, Mystic of Almost Nothing" (*France-Observateur*, April 30, 1959).³

The embarrassment of modernist critics is completed by the embarrassment of modern artists, on whom the accelerated decomposition in all sectors constantly imposes the need to examine and explain their working hypotheses. They bustle about in the same confusion and often in a comparable imbecility. Everywhere one can see the traces, among modern creators, of a consciousness traumatized by the shipwreck of expression as an autonomous sphere and absolute goal; and by the slow emergence of other dimensions of activity.

The fundamental work of a present avant-garde should be an attempt at general criticism of this moment, and a first attempt to respond to new requirements.

If the artist has passed, by a slow process, from the state of entertainer—pleasantly occupying people's spare time—to the ambition of a prophet, who raises questions and claims to impart the meaning of life, it is because, more and more, the question of how to spend our lives looms at the edge of the expanding freedom we have achieved by our appropriation of nature.

Thus the pretensions of the artist in bourgeois society go hand in hand with the practical reduction of his or her realm of real action to zero, and denial. All modern art is the revolutionary claim to other professions, once the current specialization in one-sided, canned expression has been relinquished.

The delays and distortions of the revolutionary project in our time are well known. The regression that has therein manifested itself has nowhere been so obvious as in art. This has been made easier by the fact that classical Marxism had not developed a real body of criticism in this area. In a famous letter to Mehring, written at the end of his life, Engels noted: "we all laid, and *were bound* to lay, the main emphasis, in the first place, on the *derivation* of political, juridical and other ideological notions, and of actions arising through the medium of these notions, from basic economic facts. But in so doing we neglected the formal side—the ways and means by which these notions, etc., come about—for the sake of the content."⁴ Moreover, at the time when Marxist thought was coming into its own,

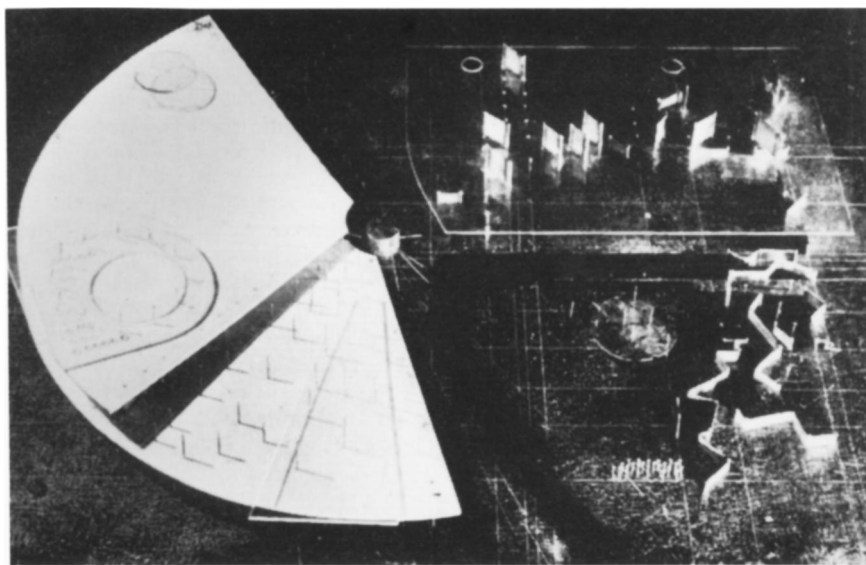
3. Françoise Choay, "Arts plastiques: Tapiès, mystique du presque rien," *France-Observateur*, April 30, 1959, p. 20. Ed.

4. "Engels to F. Mehring (July 14, 1893)," in *Socialist Thought: A Documentary History*, ed. Albert Fried and Ronald Sanders (Toronto: Anchor Books, 1964), p. 325.

the formal movement in the dissolution of art was not yet apparent. Likewise, it can be said that it is solely in the presence of fascism that the workers' movement encountered in practical terms the problem of the formal "mode of appearance" of a political idea. It found itself poorly equipped to deal with it.

Independent revolutionary thinkers themselves show a certain reluctance to become involved in today's cultural problems. When we look at the endeavors, from more than one angle, of such intellectuals as Henri Lefebvre—in recent years—and Lucien Goldmann, we find in them the common trait of having amassed a number of positive contributions, important appeals to progressive truth at a moment when the ideology of the left is lost in a sense of confusion, to whose advantage it is all too clear, while at the same time being absent or insufficient when two kinds of questions come up: the organization of a political force, and the discovery of cultural means of action. These questions are indeed two essential and inseparable elements of the transitory action that would be needed from now on to lead to that enriched praxis usually offered to us as an external image, entirely separate from ourselves, instead of being linked to us by the slow movement of the future.

In an unpublished article of 1947 ("Le matérialisme dialectique, est-il une philosophie?"), included in his book *Recherches dialectiques*, Goldmann gives a good analysis of the future result of the cultural movement that lies before his eyes. "Like law, economics, or religion," he writes, "art as an independent phenomenon separated from other realms of social life will be led to disappear in a classless soci-



Constant. Architectural maquette. 1958.

ety. There will probably no longer be art separated from life because life will itself be a style, a form in which it will find its adequate expression." But Goldmann, who traces this very long-term perspective on the basis of the overall forecasts of dialectical materialism, does not recognize its verification in the expression of his time. He judges the style or art of his time in terms of the classical/romantic alternative, and in romanticism he sees only the expression of reification. Now, it is true that the destruction of language, after a century of poetry, has come about as a consequence of a deep-seated romantic, reified, petit-bourgeois tendency, and also—as Paulhan had shown in *Les Fleurs de Tarbes*—by postulating that the inexpressible thought was worth more than the word. But the progressive aspect of this destruction, in poetry, fiction, or all the plastic arts, is that of being at the same time the testimony of a whole epoch on the insufficiency of artistic expression, of pseudocommunication. It is the practical destruction of the instruments of this pseudocommunication that brings to the fore the question of inventing superior instruments.

Henri Lefebvre (*La Somme et le Reste*) wonders "if the crisis of philosophy does not mean its decline and end, as philosophy," while forgetting that this has been the basis of revolutionary thought since the eleventh of the *Theses on Feuerbach*. He has offered a more radical criticism in *Arguments*, no. 15, considering human history as the successive traversal and abandoning of various spheres: the cosmic, the maternal, the divine, as well as philosophy, economics, and politics, and finally "art, which defines man by dazzling flashes and the human by exceptional moments, thus still external, alienating in the attempt at deliverance."⁵ But here we are back with the science fiction of revolutionary thought that is preached in *Arguments*, as daring in engaging thousands of years of history as it is incapable of proposing a single new element from now to the end of the century, and naturally bewitched in the present by the worst fumes of neo-reformism. Lefebvre is well aware that each realm collapses in explicating itself, when it has reached the end of its possibilities and its imperialism, "when it has proclaimed itself a totality on the human scale (thus complete). In the course of this development, and only after this illusory and extreme proclamation, the negativity already long contained in this world asserts itself, disowns it, corrodes it, dismantles it, casts it down. Only a finished totality can reveal that it is not totality." This scheme, which applies rather to philosophy after Hegel, perfectly defines the crisis of modern art, as can be easily verified by examining an extreme trend: for example, poetry from Mallarmé to Surrealism. These conditions, already dominant beginning with Baudelaire, constitute what Paulhan calls the Terror, which he takes to be an accidental crisis of language, without considering the fact that they apply equally to all the other artistic means of expression. But the breadth of Lefebvre's views is

5. Henri Lefebvre, "Justice et vérité," *Arguments*, no. 15 (1959), pp. 13–19. The passage quoted appeared on page 16. This article was from a section labeled "Nietzsche et la crise de monde moderne," which also included articles by Heidegger and Deleuze. Ed.

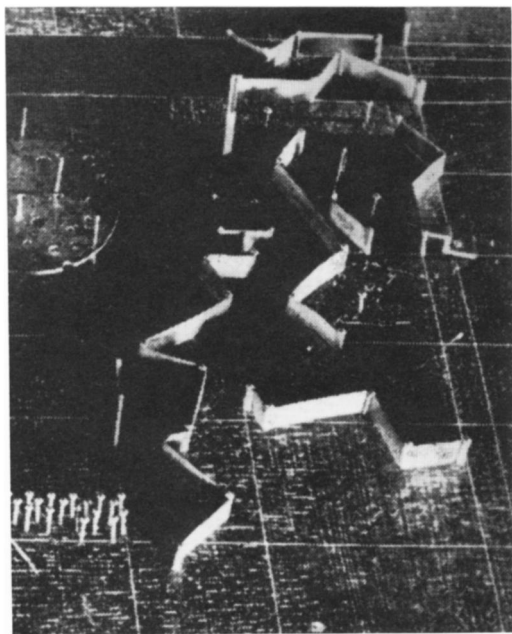
of no avail to him when he writes about poems that are, as far as their date is concerned, on the historical model of 1925, and as for the effective level attained by this formula, at the lowest. And when he proposes a conception of modern art (revolutionary-romantic), he advises artists to come back to this style of expression—or to others still older—to express the profound feeling of life, and the contradictions of men ahead of their time, i.e., both of their public and of themselves. Lefebvre would prefer not to see that this feeling and these contradictions have already been expressed by all modern art, and indeed *up to and including the destruction of the expression itself*.

For revolutionaries, there can be no turning back. The world of artistic expression, whatever its content, has already lapsed. It repeats itself scandalously in order to keep going as long as the dominant society succeeds in preserving the privation and scarcity that are the anachronistic conditions of its reign. But the preservation or subversion of this society is not a utopian question: it is the most burning question of today, the one governing all others. Lefebvre should pursue the thought on the basis of a question he raised in the same article: "Has not every great period of art been a funeral rite in honor of a vanished moment?" This is also true on the individual scale, where every work is a funeral and memorial celebration of a vanished moment in one's life. The creations of the future should shape life directly, creating "exceptional moments" and making them ordinary. Goldmann weighs the difficulty of this leap when he remarks (in a note in *Recherches dialectiques*, page 144): "We have no means of *direct* action on affects." It will be the task of the creators of a new culture to invent such means.

We need to find operative instruments midway between that global praxis in which every aspect of the total life of a classless society will one day dissolve and the present individual practice of "private" life with its poor artistic and other resources. What we mean by *situations* to be constructed is the search for a dialectical organization of partial and transitory realities, what André Frankin, in his *Critique du Non-Avenir*, has called a "planification of existence" on the individual level, not excluding chance but, on the contrary, "rediscovering" it.⁶

Situations are conceived as the opposite of works of art, which are attempts at absolute valorization and preservation of the present moment. That is the fancy aesthetic grocery store of a Malraux, of whom it might be remarked that the same "intellectuals of the left" who are indignant today at seeing him at the head of the most contemptible and imbecile political swindle once *took him seriously*—an admission that countersigns their bankruptcy. Every situation, as consciously constructed as can be, contains its own negation and moves inevitably toward its own reversal. In the conduct of an individual life, a situationist action is not based on the abstract idea of rationalist progress (which, according to Descartes, "makes us masters and possessors of nature"), but on the

6. Published as André Franklin, "Esquisses programmatiques," *Internationale situationniste* 4 (June 1960), pp. 16–18. Ed.



Constant. Architectural maquette. 1958.

practice of arranging the environment that conditions us. Whoever constructs situations, to apply a statement by Marx, “by bringing his movements to bear on external nature and transforming it . . . transforms his own nature at the same time.”

In conversations that led to the formation of the S.I., Asger Jorn put forth a plan for ending the separation that had arisen around 1930 between avant-garde artists and the revolutionary left, who had once been allies. The root of the problem is that, since 1930, there has been neither a revolutionary movement nor an artistic avant-garde to respond to the possibilities of the time. A new departure, on both sides, will certainly have to be made to bring together problems and responses.

The obvious obstacles of the present have produced a certain ambiguity in the Situationist movement as a magnet for artists ready to embark on a new course. Like the proletarians, theoretically, before the nation, the Situationists are encamped at the gates of culture. They do not want to establish themselves inside, they *decline* to inscribe themselves in modern art, they are the organizers of the absence of that aesthetic avant-garde that bourgeois critics are waiting for and which, forever disappointed, they are prepared to greet on the first occasion. This does not go without the risk of various retrograde interpretations, even within the S.I. Decadent artists, for example at the last fair held in Venice, are already talking about “situations.” Those who understand everything in terms of old-hat artistic ideas, as tame verbal formulas destined to assure the sale of still tamer little

paintings, may see the S.I. as having already achieved a certain success, a certain recognition: that is because they have not understood that we have gathered at a great turning point *still to be taken*.

Of course, the decay of artistic forms, while indicated by the impossibility of their creative renewal, does not immediately involve their actual disappearance in practice. They can go on repeating themselves with various nuances. But everything shows “the upheaval of this world,” as Hegel says in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Mind*: “The frivolity and boredom that are invading what still exists, and the vague presentiment of something unknown, are the preliminary signs of something else that is on its way.”

We must keep moving ahead, without attaching ourselves to anything either in modern culture or its negation. We do not want to work toward the spectacle of the end of the world, but toward the end of the world of spectacle.

A Different City for a Different Life*

CONSTANT

The crisis of urbanism is worsening. The construction of neighborhoods, old and new, is obviously at variance with established modes of behavior, and all the more so with the new ways of life we seek. As a result, we are surrounded by a dull and sterile environment.

In old neighborhoods, the streets have degenerated into highways, and leisure is commercialized and adulterated by tourism. Social relations there become impossible. Newly built neighborhoods have only two themes, which govern everything: traffic circulation and household comfort. They are the meager expressions of bourgeois happiness and lack any concern for play.

In response to the need to construct whole towns rapidly, cemeteries in reinforced concrete are being built where great masses of the population are condemned to die of boredom. For what is the use of the most astonishing technical inventions that the world now finds at its disposal if the conditions for deriving benefit from them are lacking, they contribute nothing to leisure, and the imagination defaults?

We require adventure. Not finding it any longer on earth, there are those who want to look for it on the moon. We opt first and foremost for a change on earth. We propose to create situations here, new situations. We intend to break the laws that prevent the development of meaningful activities in life and culture. We find ourselves at the dawn of a new era, and we are already trying to outline the image of a happier life and a unitary urbanism—urbanism made to please.

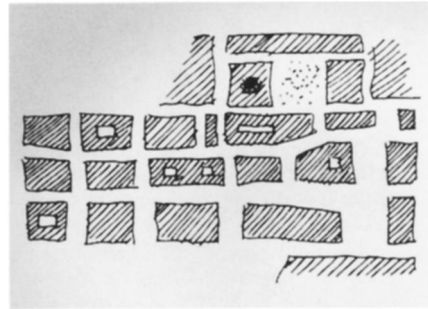
Our domain is thus the urban network, the natural expression of a collective creativity, capable of understanding the creative forces being released with the decline of a culture based on individualism. To our way of thinking, the traditional arts will no longer be able to play a role in the creation of the new environment in which we want to live.

We are in the process of inventing new techniques; we are examining the possibilities offered by existing cities, and making models and plans for future ones. We are aware of the need to take advantage of all the new technologies, and

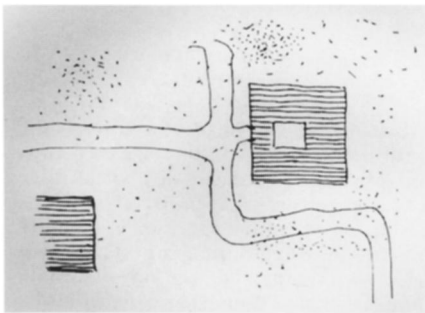
* *Internationale situationniste* 3 (December 1959), pp. 37–40.

we know that the future constructions we envisage will have to be flexible enough to respond to a dynamic conception of life, creating our surroundings in direct relation to constantly changing modes of behavior.

Our concept of urbanism is thus a social one. We are opposed to the concept of a garden city, where spaced and isolated skyscrapers must necessarily reduce direct relations among people and their common action. For close relations between surroundings and behavior to be produced, the agglomeration is indispensable. Those who think that the rapidity with which we move around and the possibility of telecommunications are going to dissolve the common life of agglomerations have little idea of humanity's true needs. Instead of the idea of a garden city, which most modern architects have adopted, we set up the image of the covered city, where the layout of thoroughfares and isolated buildings has given way to a continuous spatial construction, elevated above the ground, and which will include groups of dwellings as well as public spaces (permitting modifications of purpose depending on the needs of the moment). Since all traffic, in the functional sense, will



Quarter in a traditional city. Quasi-social space: the street. The streets, laid out logically for circulation, are incidentally used as a meeting place.



Garden city. Isolated dwelling units. Minimum social space: people meet only by chance and individually, in walkways or the park. Traffic circulation governs everything.

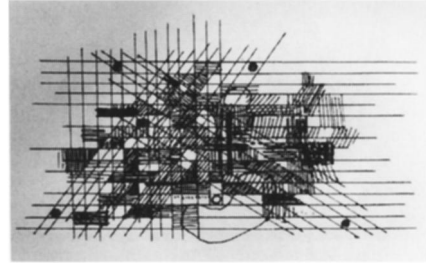
pass underneath or on overhead terraces, streets can be done away with. The great number of different traversable spaces of which the city is composed form a vast and complex social space. Far from a return to nature—the notion of living in a park, as solitary aristocrats once did—we see in such immense constructions the possibility of overcoming nature and regulating at will the atmosphere, lighting, and sounds in these various spaces.

Do we mean by this a new functionalism that will put increased emphasis on the idealized utilitarian life? Let us not forget that once the functions are estab-

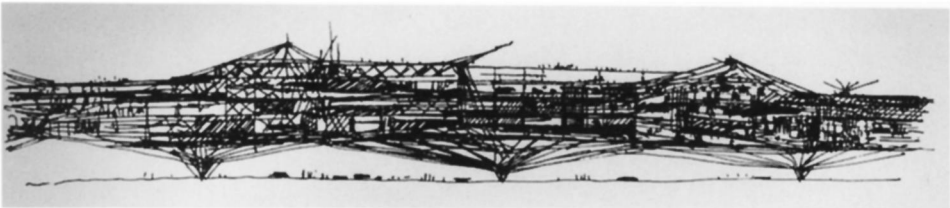
lished, they are followed by play. For some time now architecture has become a game of space and environment. The garden city lacks environments. We, on the contrary, want to take advantage of them more consciously; we want them to correspond to all our needs.

The future cities we envisage will offer an unusual variety of sensations in this realm, and unforeseen games will become possible through the inventive use of material conditions, such as air-conditioning and the control of sound and lighting. Urban planners are already studying how to harmonize the cacophony that reigns in present-day cities. Before long they should find there a new area for creation, as with many other problems that will emerge. Space travel, which has been predicted, may influence this development, since bases established on other planets will immediately raise the problem of sheltered cities, which may provide the model for our study of future urbanism.

Above all, however, the decreased amount of work necessary for production due to extensive automation will create a need for leisure, different behavior and a change in its nature, which will necessarily lead to a new conception of the collective habitat having the maximum of social space, contrary to the concept of a garden city, where social space is reduced to the minimum. The city of the future must be conceived as a continuous construction on pillars, or else as an extended system of different constructions, in which premises for living, pleasure, etc., are suspended, as well as those designed for production and distribution, leaving the ground free for circulation and public meetings. The use of ultra-light and insulating materials, now being tried experimentally, will allow for light construction and broadly spaced supports. In this way it will be possible to build a multilayered city: underground, ground level, stories, terraces, of an expanse that may vary from a neighborhood to a metropolis. Note that in such a city the built surface will be 100 percent and the free surface 200 percent (parterre and terraces), while in traditional cities the figures are approximately 80 percent and 20 percent; in the garden city this ratio can at most be reversed. The terraces form an outdoor terrain that extends over the whole



Principle of a covered city. Spatial "plan." Suspended collective dwellings are spread over the whole city and separated from traffic, which passes above or below.



Section view of a covered city.

surface of the city, and which can be used for sports, as landing pads for planes and helicopters, and for vegetation. They will be accessible everywhere by stairways and elevators. The different levels will be divided into neighboring and communicating spaces, artificially conditioned, which will make it possible to create an infinite variety of environments, facilitating the casual movement of the inhabitants and their frequent encounters. The environments will be regularly and consciously changed, with the help of all technological means, by teams of specialized creators, who will thus be professional Situationists.

A study in depth of the means of creating environments and their psychological influence is one of the tasks we are presently undertaking. Studies involving the technical achievement of supporting structures and their aesthetics are the specific task of artist-architects and engineers. The contribution of the latter above all is an urgent necessity if we are to make progress in the preparatory work we are undertaking.

If the project we have just set forth in a few broad outlines risks being considered a fanciful dream, we insist on the fact that it is feasible from the technical standpoint, desirable from the human standpoint, and that from the social standpoint it will be indispensable. The growing dissatisfaction that grips all of humanity will reach a point where we will all be driven to carry out projects for which we possess the means, and that will contribute to the realization of a richer and more rewarding life.

Editorial Notes: Critique of Urbanism*

The Situationists have always said that “unitary urbanism is not a doctrine of urbanism but a critique of urbanism” (*Internationale situationniste* 3). The project of a more modern, more progressive urbanism, conceived as a corrective to the present urbanist specialization, is as false as, for example, in the revolutionary project, the overestimation of the moment for seizing power, which is a specialist’s idea that immediately involves forgetting, indeed repressing, all the revolutionary tasks posed, at each and every moment, by the whole inseparable combination of human activities. Until it merges with a general revolutionary praxis, urbanism is necessarily the first enemy of all possibilities for urban life in our time. It is one of those fragments of social power that claim to represent a coherent whole, and which tend to impose themselves as a total explanation and organization, while doing nothing except to mask the real social totality that has produced them and which they preserve.

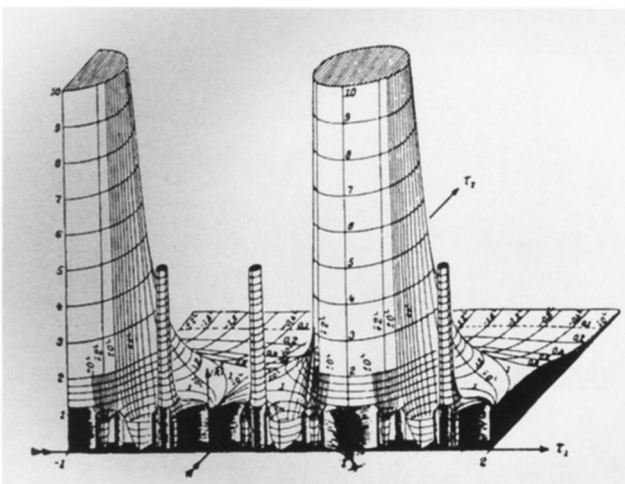
By accepting this specialization of urbanism, one puts oneself at the service of the prevailing social and urbanist lie of the State, in order to carry out one of the many possible “practical” urbanisms. But the only practical urbanism *for us*, the one we call unitary urbanism, is thereby abandoned, since it requires the creation of quite different conditions of life.

Over the past six or eight months, we have seen a number of moves, chiefly among West German architects and capitalists, to launch a “unitary urbanism” immediately, at least in the Ruhr. Some poorly informed entrepreneurs, carried away by thoughts of success, saw fit to announce, in February, the imminent opening of a Unitary Urbanism laboratory in Essen (as a conversion of the Van de Loo art gallery). They published a disgruntled denial only when faced with our threat to reveal publicly the watered-down nature of the plan. The former Situationist Constant, whose Dutch collaborators had been excluded from the S.I. for having agreed to build a church, now himself shows *factory models* in his catalogue published in March by the Municipal Museum in Bochum. This shrewd operator frankly offers himself, along with two or three plagiarized and

* *Internationale situationniste* 6 (August 1961), pp. 3–11.

misconstrued Situationist ideas, as public relations for the integration of the masses into capitalist technological civilization, and reproaches the S.I. for having abandoned his whole program for overturning the urban milieu, he himself being the only one still concerned with it. Under such conditions, yes! Moreover, one might do well to recall that in April 1959 this same group of former members of the Dutch section of the S.I. was firmly opposed to the S.I. adopting an "Appeal to Revolutionary Artists and Intellectuals," and stated: "For us, these perspectives do not depend on a revolutionary overthrow of present-day society, for which the conditions are lacking" (for this debate, see *Internationale situationniste* 3, pp. 23 and 24). They have thus continued logically on their path. What is more curious is that there should be people who still try to seduce a few Situationists in order to involve them in this kind of enterprise. Are they betting on the taste for glory or the lure of gain? On April 15, Attila Kotányi replied to a letter from the director of the Bochum museum proposing a collaboration with the Bureau d'Urbanisme Unitaire in Brussels: "If you have a certain knowledge of the original, we do not think you can confuse our critical view with the apologetic view hidden behind a copy with the same label." And he cut off any further discussion.

It is not easy to know the Situationist theses on unitary urbanism in their original version. In June, our German comrades published a special issue of their journal (*Spur*, no. 5), bringing together texts devoted to unitary urbanism over several years in the S.I. or the trends leading to its formation. Many of these texts were unpublished or had appeared in now inaccessible publications, and none of them had ever been published in German. The measures taken in Germany against the Situationists to prevent the appearance of these texts, or at least to



Representation in relief of the elliptical modular function.

have them altered, were immediately apparent: from a forced delay of three weeks for the whole edition at the printers to loud threats of prosecution for immorality, pornography, blasphemy, and incitement to riot. The German Situationists have obviously weathered these various attempts at intimidation, and today the managers of respectable unitary urbanism in the Ruhr should begin to wonder if this label is a profitable way to launch their operation.

Confrontation with the whole of present-day society is the sole criterion for a genuine liberation in the field of urban architecture, and the same goes for any other aspect of human activity. Otherwise, "improvement" or "progress" will always be designed to lubricate the system and perfect the conditioning that we must overturn, in urbanism and everywhere else. Henri Lefebvre, in the *Revue française de sociologie* (no. 3, July–September 1961),¹ criticizes a number of inadequacies in the plan that a team of architects and sociologists have just published in Zurich, *Die neue Stadt, eine Studie für das Fürttal*. But it seems to us that this criticism does not go far enough, precisely because it does not clearly challenge the actual role of this team of specialists in a social framework whose absurd imperatives it accepts without discussion. This means that Lefebvre's article still valorizes too many works that certainly have their utility and their merits, but in a perspective radically inimical to ours. The title of this article, "Experimental Utopia: For a New Urbanism," already contains the whole ambiguity. For the method of experimental utopia, if it is truly to correspond to its project, must obviously

1. Henri Lefebvre, "Utopie expérimentale: Pour un nouvel urbanisme," *Revue française de sociologie*, vol. 2, no. 3 (July–September 1961), pp. 191–98. Ed.



The town of Mourenx. Its 12,000 inhabitants live in the horizontal blocks if they are married, in the towers if they are single. To the right of the picture lies the small middle-income quarter, consisting of identical houses, symmetrically divided between two families. Beyond, in the upper-income quarter, the houses are of another type, each entirely awarded to its occupant. Lacq CEO's live in Pau, Toulouse, and Paris.

embrace the whole, and carrying it out would lead not to a "new urbanism" but to a new way of life, a new revolutionary praxis. It is also the lack of a connection between the project for an ardent overthrow of architecture and other forms of conditioning, and its rejection in terms of the whole society, that constitutes the weakness of Feuerstein's theses,² published in the same issue of the journal of the German section of the S.I., despite the interest of several points, in particular his notion of erratic block, "representing chance and also the smallest organization of objects comprised by an event." Feuerstein's ideas, which follow the S.I. line on "accidental architecture," can only be understood in all their consequences, and carried out precisely by overcoming the separate problem of architecture and the solutions that would be reserved for it in the abstract.

Henceforth the crisis of urbanism is all the more concretely a social and political one, even though today no force born of traditional politics is any longer capable of dealing with it. Medico-sociological banalities on the "pathology of housing projects," the emotional isolation of people who must live in them, or the development of certain extreme reactions of denial, chiefly in young people, simply betray the fact that modern capitalism, the bureaucratic consumer society, *is here and there beginning to shape its own environment*. This society, with its new towns, is building the sites that accurately represent it, combining the conditions most suitable for its proper functioning, while at the same time translating into

spatial terms, in the clear language of the organization of everyday life, its fundamental principle of alienation and constraint. It is likewise here that the new aspects of its crisis will be manifested with the greatest clarity.

In April, a Paris exhibition of urbanism entitled "Tomorrow Paris" offered in reality a defense of large housing complexes, those already built or planned for the far outskirts of the city. The future of Paris would all lie outside Paris. The first part of this didactic presentation sought to convince the public (mainly working people) that decisive statistics had shown Paris to be more unhealthy and unlivable than any other known capital. They would thus do

DEJEUNER	LUNDI Salade de cervelas Côtelettes de porc Pommes boulangère Salade, fromage Abricots	MARDI Tomates en salade Steak grillé Haricots verts Salade, yogourt Fraises au sucre
DINER	Crêpes fourrées au fromage Petits pois au lard Œufs à la neige	Potage à l'oseille Gratin de macaroni Salade Fromage Tarte aux cerises
DEJEUNER	MERCREDI Artichauts vinaigrette Ragoût de mouton Flageolets Salade, fromage Pêches	JEUDI Celeri rémoulade Paupiettes de veau braisées Pommes de terre frites Salade, fromage Prunes
DINER	Sardines grillées Concombres à la crème Salade Charlotte aux fraises	Omelette aux tomates Gratin dauphinois Salade Mousse aux framboises
DEJEUNER	VENDREDI Salade niçoise Collinet froid sauce fines herbes Salade de pommes de terre Groselles au sucre	SAMEDI Courgettes cuites en salade Pot-au-feu Fromage Glace à l'orange
DINER	Croquettes de poisson sauce tomate Carottes Vichy Fromage Compote panachée	Consommé froid aux œufs pochés Poirons farcis au riz Salade, fromage Tarte aux pêches
DEJEUNER	DIMANCHE Salade d'été composée Curry de poulet Riz creole, fromage Framboises à la crème	DINER Tarte au bœuf de bonif à la grèce Salade de haricots verts Fromage Profiteroles glacées

2. A reference to German architect Gunter Feuerstein. Ed.

It is this mystic image of ownership, in the old-fashioned sense, that led Renault workers, for example, to buy the small houses that dropped in their laps in June, in a whole quarter of Clamart. It is not by returning to the archaic ideology of a discarded stage of capitalism that the living conditions of a society now becoming totalitarian can ever be truly replaced, but rather by freeing an instinct for construction presently repressed in everyone: a liberation that cannot go forward without the other elements in the conquest of an authentic life.

Debates in progressive inquiries today, on politics as well as art or urbanism, lag considerably behind the reality taking shape in all industrialized countries, namely, the concentration-camp organization of life.

The degree of conditioning imposed on working people in a suburb like Sarcelles, or still more clearly in a place like Mourenx (a company town in the petrochemical complex of Lacq), prefigures the conditions with which the revolutionary movement will everywhere have to struggle if it is to re-establish itself on a level with the real crises, the real demands of our time. In Brasilia, functional architecture reveals itself to be, when fully developed, the architecture of functionaries, the instrument and microcosm of the bureaucratic *Weltanschauung*. One can already see that wherever bureaucratic capitalism has already planned and built its environment, the conditioning has been so perfected, the individual's margin of choice reduced to so little, that a practice as essential for it as advertising, which corresponded to a more anarchic stage of competition, tends to disappear in most of its forms and props. You might think that urbanism is capable of merging all former forms of advertising into a single advertisement



Decor and its uses. Four historians and several hundred million francs are said to have been provided this year to reconstruct part of the city of Alexandria on a heath in England, so that Elizabeth Taylor could play Cleopatra there. When the actress fell ill, the film could not be shot, nor could anything else be done with the set. In the end, Alexandria was burned down.

for itself. The rest will be gotten for nothing. It is also likely that, under these conditions, the political propaganda that has been so strong in the first half of the twentieth century will almost totally disappear, to be replaced by an instinctive aversion for all political issues. Just as the revolutionary movement will have to shift the problem far away from the old field of politics scorned by everyone, the powers-that-be will rely more on the simple organization of the spectacle of objects of consumption, which will only have consumable value illusorily *to the extent to which they will first of all have been objects of spectacle*. In Sarcelles or Mournex, the showrooms of this new world are already being put to the test—atomized to the limit around each television screen, but at the same time extended to cover the whole town.

If unitary urbanism designates, as we would like it to, a useful hypothesis that would allow present humanity to construct life freely, beginning with its urban environment, it is absolutely pointless to enter into discussion with those who would ask us to what extent it is feasible, concrete, practical, or carved in stone, for the simple reason that nowhere does there exist any theory or practice concerning the creation of cities, or the kind of behavior that relates to it. No one “does urbanism,” in the sense of constructing the milieu required by this doctrine. Nothing exists but a collection of techniques for integrating people (techniques that effectively resolve conflicts while creating others, at present less known but more serious). These techniques are wielded innocently by imbeciles or deliberately by the police. And all the discourses on urbanism are lies, just as obviously as the space organized by urbanism is the very space of the social lie and of fortified exploitation. Those who discourse on the powers of urbanism seek to make people forget that all they are doing is the urbanism of power. Urbanists, who present themselves as the educators of the population, have had to be educated themselves—by this world of alienation that they reproduce and perfect as best they can.

The notion of a center of attraction in the chatter of urbanists is quite the opposite of the reality, exactly as the sociological notion of participation turns out to be. The fact is that there are disciplines that come to terms with a society where participation can only be oriented toward “something in which it is impossible to participate” (point 2 of the *Programme Élémentaire*)—a society that must impose the need for unappealing objects, and would be unable to tolerate any form of genuine attraction. To understand what sociology *never* understands, one need only envisage in terms of aggressivity what for sociology is neutral.

The “foundations” in preparation for an experimental life, of which the S.I. program of unitary urbanism speaks, are at the same time the places, the permanent elements of a new kind of revolutionary organization that we believe to be inscribed in the order of the day for the historical period we are entering. These foundations, when they come to exist, cannot be anything but subversive. And the future revolutionary organization will not be able to rely on instruments less complete.

Editorial Notes: Once Again, on Decomposition*

How goes cultural production? All our calculations are confirmed when one compares the phenomena of the last twelve months with the analysis of decomposition published a few years ago by the S.I. (cf. "Absence and Its Costumers," in *Internationale situationniste* 2, December 1958).¹ In Mexico, last year, Max Aub writes a thick book on the life of an imaginary cubist painter, Campalans, while demonstrating how well-founded his praises are with the help of paintings whose importance is immediately established. In Munich, in January, a group of painters inspired by Max Strack arranges simultaneously for the biography, as sentimental as could be wished, and the exhibition of the complete oeuvre of Bolus Krim, a young Abstract Expressionist painter prematurely deceased—and just as imaginary. Television and the press, including almost all the German weeklies, express their enthusiasm for so representative a genius, until the hoax is proclaimed, leading some to call for legal proceedings against the tricksters. "I thought I had seen everything," the dance critic for *Paris-Presse* writes in November 1960, concerning *Bout de la Nuit* by the German Harry Kramer, "ballets without subject and ballets without costumes, others without sets, finally others without music, and even ballets simultaneously devoid of all these elements. Well, I was wrong. Last night I saw the unheard-of, the unexpected, the unimaginable: a ballet without choreography. I mean it: without the slightest attempt at choreography, a motionless ballet." And the *Evening Standard*, of September 28 of the same year, reveals to the world one Jerry Brown, painter from Toronto, who means to demonstrate in both theory and practice "that in reality there is no difference between art and excrement." In Paris, this spring, a new gallery, founded on this Torontological aesthetic, exhibits the rubbish assembled by nine "new realist" artists, determined to redo Dada, but at "40° above," and who have nevertheless made the mistake of being too legibly introduced and justified by a sententious critic several degrees below, since he has found nothing

* *Internationale situationniste* 6 (August 1961), pp. 12–13.

1. "Notes éditoriales: L'absence et ses habilleurs," *Internationale situationniste* 2 (December 1958), pp. 6–8. Ed.

better than to have them “consider the World as a Painting,” calling even upon sociology “to aid consciousness and chance,” in order stupidly to rediscover “emotion, sentiment, and finally, once more, poetry.”² Indeed. Niki de Saint-Phalle fortunately goes further, with her target-paintings painted with a carbine.³ In the courtyard of the Louvre, a Russian disciple of Gallizio executes, last January, a roll of painting seventy meters long, capable of being sold by the piece. But he spices things up by taking lessons from Mathieu, since he does it in only twenty-five minutes and with his feet.

Antonioni, whose recent mode has been confirmed, explains in October 1960 to the journal *Cinéma 60*: “In recent years, we have examined and studied the emotions as much as possible, to the point of exhaustion. That is all we’ve been able to do. . . . But we have not been able to find anything new, nor even glimpse a solution to this problem. . . . First of all, I’d say that one starts with a negative fact: the exhaustion of current techniques and means.”

Do they look for other cultural means, new forms of participation? Since March, special posters have been put up along the platforms of the New York subway for the sole purpose of being spray-painted by vandals. Moreover, the electronic gang, at least after this summer, will offer us, for the “Forme et Lumière” spectacle in Liège, a spatio-dynamic tower fifty-two meters high by the usual Nicolas Schoeffer, who this time will have at his disposal seventy “light brewers” to project abstract frescoes in color on a giant screen 1,500 square meters in size, with musical accompaniment. Will this splendid effort be integrated, as he hopes, “with the life of the city”? To find out, we will have to wait for the next strike movement in Belgium, since the last time the workers had a chance to express themselves in Liège, on January 6, this Schoeffer Tower did not yet exist, and they had to vent their fury on the headquarters of the newspaper *La Meuse*.

Tonguely, more inspired, has unveiled, in full operation in the Museum of Modern Art in New York, a machine skillfully programmed to destroy itself.⁴ But it has been left to an American, Richard Grosser, to perfect, already several years ago, the prototype of a “useless machine,” rigorously designed to serve no purpose whatsoever. “Built of aluminum, small in size, it includes neon lighting that goes on and off by chance.” Grosser has sold more than five hundred of them, including one, it is said, to John Foster Dulles.

The truth is that even when they exhibit a certain sense of humor, all these inventors get quite excited, with an air of discovering the destruction of art, the reduction of a whole culture to onomatopoeia and silence like an unknown phenomenon, a new idea, and which was only waiting for them to come along.

2. From Pierre Restany’s preface for the exhibition “A 40° au-dessus de dada,” Galerie J, Paris, May 17 to June 10, 1961. Ed.

3. A reference to Saint-Phalle’s exhibition “Feu à volonté,” Galerie J, Paris, June 30 to July 12, 1961. Ed.

4. “Hommage à New York,” this auto-destructive machine-happening, was presented on March 17, 1960, in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art. Ed.

They all dig up corpses to kill them again, in a cultural no-man's-land beyond which they can imagine nothing. Yet they are precisely the artists of today, though without seeing how. They truly express our time of obsolete ideas solemnly proclaimed to be new, this time of planned incoherence, of isolation and deafness assured by the means of mass communication, of higher forms of illiteracy taught in the university, of scientifically guaranteed lies, and of overwhelming technical power at the disposal of ruling mental incompetence. The incomprehensible history that they incomprehensibly translate is indeed this planetary spectacle, as ludicrous as it is bloody, and whose program, in a crowded six months, has included: Kennedy hurling his cops into Cuba to find out whether the armed populace would spontaneously take their side; French shock troops embarking on a putsch and collapsing under the blow of a televised speech; de Gaulle resorting to gunboat diplomacy to reopen an African port to European influence; and Khrushchev coolly announcing that in another nineteen years communism will have essentially been achieved.

All this old stuff is of a piece, and all these mockeries cannot be overcome by a return to this or that form of "seriousness" or noble harmony of the past. This society is on its way to becoming, at all levels, more and more painfully ridiculous, until the time comes for its complete revolutionary reconstruction.

Comments Against Urbanism*

RAOUL VANEIGEM

In the opinion of an expert—Chombart de Lauwe—and after some precise experiments, the programs proposed by planners create in certain cases uneasiness and indignation, which might have been partly avoided had we had a deeper knowledge of real behavior, and especially of the motivations for such behavior.

Splendor and misery of urbanism. Once one has sniffed the urban planner with suspicious insistence, one turns away as one ought to before such a lack of respect, a similar breach of manners. Here it is not a question of impeaching the popular verdict. The people have long since pronounced themselves with the same incongruity: “*espèce d’architecte!*” has always been an explicit insult in Belgium. But when today such an expert sides with the opinion of the herd and also starts sniffing the planner, we are saved! Thus the urbanist is officially convicted of arousing uneasiness and indignation, arousing them “almost” like a primary instigator. One can only hope that the public authorities will react promptly; it is unthinkable that such centers of revolt should be openly maintained by the very people whose job it is to smother them. Here is a crime against social tranquillity that only a council of war can put a stop to. Will we see justice prevail among its own ranks? Unless the expert is, after all, merely a cunning urbanist.

If the planner is less able to understand the behavioral motivations of those he wants to house to the best of their nervous equilibrium than to incorporate urbanism without delay into the criminal investigation unit (to hunt down instigators—see above—and allow each to remain quietly in the hierarchy)—if he can really do it, then the science of crime fighting loses its *raison d’être* and changes its social purpose: urbanism is all that will be needed to preserve the status quo without recourse to the indelicacy of machine guns. Man assimilated to reinforced concrete—what a dream or happy nightmare for technocrats, wherein to lose whatever Higher Nervous Activity they have left, while trusting in the power and durability of reinforced concrete.

If the Nazis had known contemporary urbanists, they would have transformed their concentration camps into low-income housing. But this solution seems too

* *Internationale situationniste* 6 (August 1961), pp. 33–37.

brutal to M. Chombart de Lauwe. Ideal urbanism should urge everyone, without uneasiness or indignation, toward the final solution of the problem of humanity.

Urbanism is the most concrete and perfect fulfillment of a nightmare. A nightmare, according to the Littré dictionary, is "a state that ends when one awakens with a start after extreme anxiety." But a start against whom? Who has stuffed us to the point of somnolence? It would be as stupid to execute Eichmann as to hang the urbanists. It would be like getting mad at the targets when you're on a rifle range!

Planning is a big word, some say a dirty word. Specialists speak of economic planning and planned urbanism, then they wink with a knowing air, and everyone applauds so as to play the game. The chief attraction of the spectacle is the planning of happiness. The pollster is already conducting his inquiry; precise surveys establish the number of television viewers; it is a question of developing real estate around them, of building for them, without distracting them from the concerns that are being fed to them through their eyes and ears. It is a question of assuring equilibrium and a peaceful life to all, with that shrewd foresight expressed by comic-strip pirates in their maxim: "Dead men tell no tales." Urbanism and information are complementary in capitalist and "anticapitalist" societies—they organize the silence.

To inhabit is the "drink Coca-Cola" of urbanism. You replace the necessity of drinking with that of drinking Coca-Cola. To inhabit means to be at home everywhere, says Kiesler, but such a prophetic truth grabs nobody by the neck; it's a scarf against the encroaching cold, even if it evokes a flowing knot. We are inhabited, this is the necessary starting point.

As public relations, the ideal urbanism is the projection in space of a social hierarchy without conflict. Roads, lawns, natural flowers, and artificial forests lubricate the machinery of subjection, and make it enjoyable. In a novel by Yves Touraine, the State even offers retired workers an electronic vibrator; happiness and the economy find it an advantage.

	FEMME Taille 1 ^m 59 Poids 54 k.	HOMME Taille 1 ^m 68 Poids 68 k.
A	0 ^m 200	0 ^m 240
B	0,550	0,600
C	0,660	0,720
D	1,100	1,350
E	1,370	1,550
F	0,200	0,240
G	0,300	0,335
H	0,480	0,550

A certain urbanism of illusion is necessary, Chombart de Lauwe claims. The spectacle he offers us makes folklore out of Haussmann, who could arrange no illusion apart from a shooting gallery. This time, it is a matter of scenically organizing the spectacle across everyday life, letting each person live in the framework corresponding to the role that capitalist society imposes on him, and in the process further isolating him like a blind man trained to recognize himself illusorily in the materialization of his own alienation.

The capitalist training of space is nothing but training in a space where you lose your shadow, and end up losing yourself by dint of seeking yourself in what is not yourself. An excellent example of tenacity for all professors and other licensed organizers of ignorance.

The layout of a city, its streets, walls, and neighborhoods form so many signs of a strange conditioning. What sign should we recognize as our own? A few graffiti, words of rejection or forbidden gestures, hastily scrawled, in which cultured people only take an interest when they appear on the walls of some fossil city like Pompeii. But our cities are even more fossilized. We would like to live in lands of knowledge, amid living signs like familiar friends. The revolution will also be the perpetual creation of signs that belong to everyone.

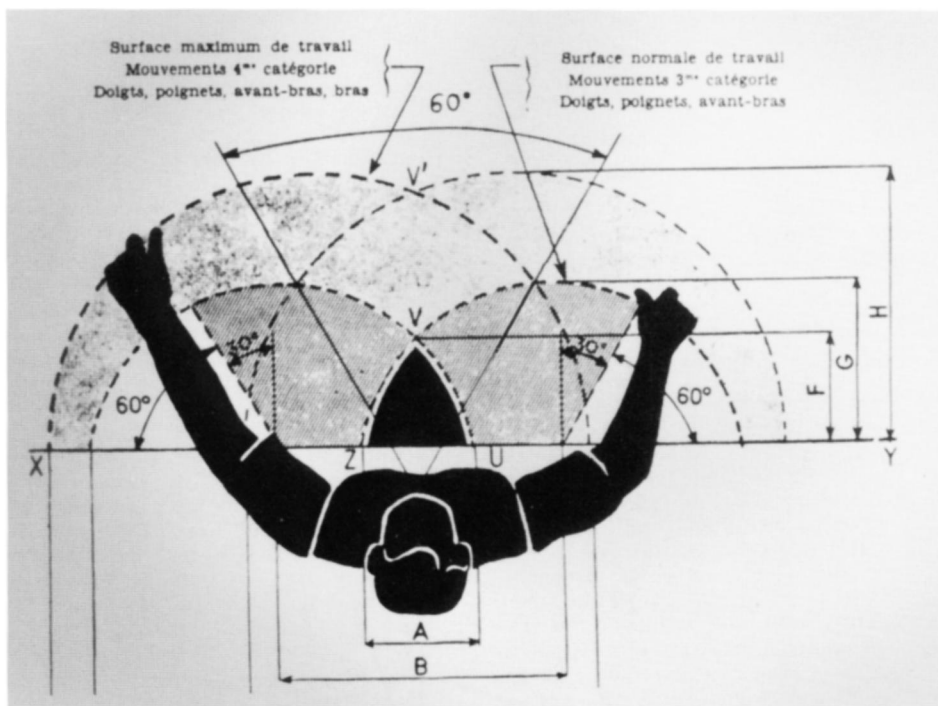
There is an incredible dullness in everything having to do with urbanism. The word “build” sticks straight up out of the water where other possible words float on the surface. Wherever bureaucratic civilization has spread, the anarchy of individual construction has been officially sanctioned, and taken over by the authorized organisms of power, with the result that the building instinct has been extirpated like a vice and only barely survives in children and primitives (those not held accountable, in administrative parlance). And among all those who, unable to change their lives, spend them demolishing and rebuilding their shacks.

The art of reassurance—urbanism knows how to exercise it in its purest form: the ultimate civility of a power on the verge of asserting total mind control.

God and the City: No abstract and nonexistent force would be better able than urbanism to take over from God the post of doorkeeper left vacant by that death we’ve heard about. With its ubiquity, its immense goodness, perhaps someday its sovereign power, urbanism (or its project) would certainly have something to frighten the Church, were there the slightest doubt about the orthodoxy of power. But there is none, since the Church was “urbanism” long before power; what could it have to fear from a lay Saint Augustine?

There is something admirable in causing thousands of human beings whom one deprives of even the hope of a last judgment to coexist in the word “inhabit.” In this sense, the admirable crowns the inhuman.

Industrializing private life: “Make your life a business”—such will be the new slogan. To propose to each that he organize his vital milieu like a little factory to be managed like a miniature enterprise, with its substitute machinery, its illusory production, its fixed assets such as walls and furniture—isn’t this the best way to



Maximum and normal work surfaces in the horizontal plane.

make the concerns of those gentlemen who own a factory, a big and real one that must also produce, perfectly comprehensible?

Level the horizon: Walls and unnatural patches of greenery set new limits to thought and dreaming, for it means poeticizing the desert rather than knowing where it ends.

New cities will wipe out the traces of the battles between traditional cities and the people they sought to oppress. To root out of everyone's memory the truth that each daily life has its history and, in the myth of participation, to contest the irreducible character of experience—these are the terms in which urbanists would express the goals they pursue if they deigned to suspend for a moment the air of seriousness that obstructs their thinking. Once the air of seriousness disappears, the sky lightens, everything becomes clearer, or almost; thus, as humorists well know, to destroy one's adversary with H-bombs is to condemn oneself to die in more protracted sufferings. How much longer will one have to go on mocking the urbanists before they grasp the fact that they're preparing the way for their own suicide?

Cemeteries are the most natural areas for greenery that exist, the only ones to be harmoniously integrated within the framework of future cities, like the last lost paradises.

Costs must cease to be an obstacle to the wish to build—so says the leftist builder. May he sleep in peace, for this will soon be the case, once the wish to build will have disappeared.

Procedures have been developed in France that turn construction into an erector set (J.-E. Havel).¹ While making the best of things, a cafeteria is never anything but a place where you serve, in the sense that a fork serves for eating.

As it combines Machiavellianism with reinforced concrete, urbanism's conscience is clear. We are entering upon the reign of police refinement. Dignified enslavement.

To build in trust: even the reality of bay windows does not hide the fictive communication, even public settings show the despair and isolation of private consciences, even the frantic filling up of space is measured in intervals.

Project for a realistic urbanism: replace Piranesi's staircases with elevators, transform tombs into office buildings, line the sewers with plane trees, put trash cans in living rooms, stack up the hovels, and build all cities in the form of museums; make a profit out of everything, even out of nothing.

Alienation within easy reach: urbanism makes alienation tangible. The starving proletariat experienced alienation in the suffering of beasts. We will experience it in the blind suffering of things. To feel only by groping.

Honest and farsighted urbanists have the courage of stylites. Must we make our lives a desert so as to legitimize their aspirations?

It has taken the guardians of philosophic faith some twenty years to discover the existence of a working class. At a time when sociologists have come together to decree that the working class no longer exists, the urbanists themselves have invented the inhabitant without waiting for either philosophers or sociologists. One must give them credit for being among the first to discern the new dimensions of the proletariat. By a definition all the more precise and much less abstract they have been able, using the most flexible training methods, to guide almost all of society toward a less brutal but radical proletarianization.

Advice to the builders of ruins: the urbanists will be succeeded by the last troglodytes of hovels and shantytowns. They will know how to build. The privileged residents of dormitory towns will only be able to destroy. We must wait a while for this encounter: it defines the revolution.

By being devalued, the sacred has become a mystery: urbanism is the final decadence of the Great Architect.



"Sure we know what guns are for . . . Where can you house us?" "Come with me!"

1. See Jean-Eugène Havel, *Habitat et Logement* (Coll. "Que Sais-Je?") (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1957). In his conclusion, Havel calls for a technological solution to the housing problem, favorably citing the rationalized labor processes utilized in the construction of American Levittowns. Ed.

Behind the infatuation with technology a revealed truth lies hidden, and as such is unquestionable: we must “inhabit.” Concerning the nature of such a truth, the homeless know very well what to cling to. Probably better than anyone else, they are able to measure, amid the garbage cans where they are forced to live, how there is no difference between building their lives and building their dwellings on the only level of truth that exists—practice. But the exile to which our well-policed world consigns them makes their experience so laughable and difficult that the licensed builder could find there an excuse for self-justification—assuming, ridiculous idea, that the powers-that-be were to cease to guarantee his existence.

It looks like the working class no longer exists. Considerable quantities of former proletarians can today have access to the comfort formerly reserved for a minority—so goes the song. But isn’t it rather that a growing quantity of comfort has access to their needs and gives them the itch to ask for it? It seems that a certain organization of comfort proletarianizes in epidemic fashion all those it contaminates by the force of things. Now, the force of things is exercised through the intervention of responsible authorities, priests of an abstract order whose sole prerogatives will sooner or later come together to reign over an administrative center surrounded by ghettos. The last man will die of boredom as a spider dies of inanition in the middle of its web.

We must build in haste, there are so many people to be lodged, say the humanists of reinforced concrete. We must dig trenches without delay, say the generals, if we are to save the whole fatherland. Isn’t there some injustice in lauding the humanists and deriding the generals? In the era of missiles and conditioning, it is still in good taste to make jokes about generals. But to raise trenches in the air with the same pretext!

Editorial Notes: The Avant-Garde of Presence*

In *Médiations*, no. 4, Lucien Goldmann, recently turned critic specializing in the cultural avant-garde, speaks of an “avant-garde of absence,” one that expresses in art and style a certain rejection of the reification of modern society, but which, in his opinion, expresses nothing else. He recognizes this negative role of avant-garde culture in our century about forty-five years after the event but, oddly enough, among his friends and contemporaries. Thus we find, disguised as resuscitated Dadaists, none other than Ionesco, Beckett, Sarraute, Adamov, and Duras, not to mention the Robbe-Grillet of *Marienbad* fame. This merry little crew, all present and accounted for, thereupon re-enacts as farce the tragedy of the murder of artistic forms. Sarraute!—can you imagine? Adamov!—who would have believed it? Goldmann, an attentive audience, comments solemnly on what he sees: “Most of the great avant-garde writers express above all, not actual or possible values, but their *absence*, the impossibility of formulating or perceiving acceptable values in whose name they might criticize society.” Here is precisely what is false, as is immediately apparent when one abandons the actors of Goldmann’s comic novel to examine the historical reality of German Dadaism, or of Surrealism between the two wars. Goldmann seems literally unaware of them—which is curious: would he think that one is justified in rejecting the historical interpretation of his *Dieu Caché*, while hinting that one has never read Pascal or Racine since the seventeenth century is complex and it’s all one can do to get through Cotin’s complete works? It is hard to see how he could have even a cursory knowledge of the original, and still find such freshness in the copy. Even his vocabulary is unsuited to the subject. He talks about “great writers” of the avant-garde, a notion that the avant-garde has long since rightly cast into ridicule once and for all. Later, mentioning the tasteful diversions agreeably mounted by Planchon with the bits and pieces of a dying theatrical tradition, Goldmann, still sniffing some avant-gardism there, says that all the same he does not find in it “a literary creation of equal importance, centered on the presence of humanist values and historical development.” The notable quantity of insignificance that

* *Internationale situationniste* 8 (January 1963), pp. 14–22.



Situationists between two sessions of the Antwerp Conference.

"Marxism being an error, one can see at what level to put the tenth-rate plagiarists of an ideology that they garble even more, and from which they extract a concept of cultural breakdown that even low-grade Marxists find completely insane.

"Situationist critics, who hope to take over all the means of communication, having created none of them, at any level, and replace the whole, namely the various creations and trivialities that result from it, by their unique and enormous triviality, these morons, we say, represent excretions of the Hitlerite or Stalinist kind, in their extreme manifestations of present impotence, of which the most obvious and frenzied examples are the Nazi gangs in England and America."

Les Cahiers du Lettrisme 1 (December 1962)

indelibly marks Goldmann's avant-garde nevertheless makes Planchon look good. But lastly Goldmann talks about literary creation. Doesn't he know that the rejection of literature, the very destruction of style, has been the prime tendency of twenty or thirty years of avant-garde experiments in Europe, that his circus clowns have looked only through the wrong end of the telescope, and cultivate with the parsimony of small stockholders? The avant-garde of the true self-destruction of art had expressed inseparably the absence and possible presence of quite another life. And does one have to plunge into the mystification of humanism so as not to follow Adamov into that absence that suits him so well that he stands a good chance of becoming its owner?

Let us be more serious than Goldmann. In the same article, he wonders whether there exist in present society, in this modern capitalism that is consolidating itself and developing in the regrettable ways we know, "social forces strong enough to overcome it or at least pointing in that direction." This is indeed a very

important question. We will try to answer yes. A properly demystified study of *real* artistic or political avant-garde movements can in any case provide elements worth appreciating that are just as rare in Ionesco's work as in Garaudy's. What is socially *visible* in the world of the theater is more remote than ever from social reality. Even its avant-garde art and its challenging thought are henceforth cosmetically disguised in the illumination of this visual element. Those who refrain from entering this *Son et lumière of the present* that so bedazzles Goldmann are precisely the ones, like the Situationists for the moment, who are in the avant-garde of presence. What Goldmann calls the avant-garde of absence is nothing more than the *absence of the avant-garde*. We are confident that nothing of all this pretense and agitation will remain in the history and real problematics of this period. On this point as on others, *a hundred years will tell whether we were wrong*.

Moreover, Goldmann's avant-garde and its absenteeism are already behind the times (except for Robbe-Grillet, who bets on all the numbers in the roulette of avant-gardist theater). The most recent tendency is to be integrated, to integrate several arts among themselves, and at all costs to integrate the spectator. First of all, ever since *Marienbad*, which for journalists is the obligatory reference point, there have been countless works that cannot exist without "the individual participation of the spectator, each of whom is destined to experience it differently" (Jacques Siclier in *Le Monde*, November 28, 1962, in connection with some televised ballet or other).¹ Marc Saporta has just published a card-game novel; one is supposed to shuffle the cards before reading in order to participate. Next to be integrated: experimental music with ceramics, which the visitor will be able to listen to at the Starczewski exhibition in Paris. Music by Stockhausen, but whose score becomes "mobile" at the whim of the performer, with an abstract film by the German Kirchgässer (Institute of Contemporary Music in Darmstadt). Nicolas Schoeffer has been integrated with the house of Philips in an audiovisual climate (the "creation-wall"). Finally, countless integrations throughout Europe, which themselves get inter-integrated in biennales, which everywhere become Himalayas of integration. In the same journal, *Médiations*, one might point out the integration of a new profession: the criticism in "abstract" prose of the abstract work. It was common fifteen years ago in painting catalogues, where Michel Tapié performed wonders, and it makes its appearance in literature with Jean Ricardou, who simply transposes the sensible and childish forms of textual explication, but with the improvement that he paints black on black by commenting on the scarcely readable pages, deliberately poor in content, of the pure *nouveau roman*, in an abstract critical language worthy of its model for content and readability. You can also integrate whatever you like—thirty teaspoons, a hundred thousand bottles, a million Swiss—in "nouveau réalisme," such is its strength. The new figuration would like

1. Jacques Siclier, "La télévision: 'La nuit du temps'," *Le Monde*, November 28, 1962, p. 15. The *spectacle de télévision* in question, by Marcel Delannoy, combined ballet, oratorio, and drama; the libretto was written by Philippe Soupault.

to integrate the past, present, and future of painting in anything that will pay off—no-fault insurance for lovers of the abstract and lovers of the figurative as well.

Our culture being what it is, all that gets integrated are dissolutions of one with another. And no one cares to point out that these dissolutions are themselves almost always repetitions of something older (Saporta's card-game novel is an echo of Paul Nougé's card-game poem, *Le jeu des mots et du hasard*, dating back to before 1930 and reissued a few years ago. One could multiply such examples). As for the integration of the spectator into these wonderful things, it is a poor little image of his integration into the new cities, into the banks of television monitors in the office or factory where he works. It pursues the same plan, but with infinitely less force, and even infinitely fewer guinea pigs. The old forms of the art of neo-decadence are now, in themselves, far from the center of struggle for the control of modern culture. The change in the cultural terrain is not only the thesis of the revolutionary avant-garde in our culture, it is also unfortunately the opposite project, already widely achieved by the present rulers. One ought not, however, to overlook the specialists of the "kinetic" movement. All they want is to integrate time into art. They've had no luck, since the program of our period is rather to dissolve art in the experience of time.

Already some researchers, to ensure themselves a less crowded specialty, have at several points ventured beyond these hasty integrations and their flimsy justifications. Some technicians would like to reform the spectacle. Le Parc, in a tract published in September 1962 by the "Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel," thinks it possible for the passive spectator to evolve into a "stimulated spectator" or even an "interpreter-spectator," but still within the framework of specialized old-hat ideas that would provide "some kinds of sculptures to be grappled with, dances to be painted, swordplay paintings." At most, Le Parc reaches the point of using a few para-Situationist formulas: "In frankly admitting the reversal of the traditional situation of the passive spectator, one distorts the idea of the spectacle. . . ." This is an idea, however, that it is better not to distort, but properly to gauge its place in society. The futility of Le Parc's hopes for his spectator who will gratify him by achieving "real participation (the manipulation of elements)"—oh yes! and visual artists will certainly have their elements all ready—takes on more solidity when, at the end of his text, he extends a hand toward "the notion of programming," i.e., to the cyberneticians of power. There are those who go much further (cf. *France-Observateur*, December 27, 1962), like the "Service de la Recherche de la R.T.F.," which wanted nothing less than to "create a situation" last December 21 by organizing a conference at UNESCO, with the participation of the well-known extraterrestrials who edit the journal *Planète*.²

The dialectic of history is such that the victory of the Situationist International

2. Marc Pierret, "Ils' se portent bien," *France-Observateur*, December 27, 1962, p. 19. The conference in question was an evening for science-fiction fans.

in matters of theory already obliges its adversaries to *disguise themselves* as Situationists. From now on there are two tendencies in the approaching struggle against us: those who proclaim themselves Situationists without having any idea of what it's all about (the several varieties of Nashism), and those who, on the contrary,



Marilyn Monroe, August 5, 1962: The specialization of the mass spectacle constitutes, in the society of the spectacle, the epicenter of separation and noncommunication.

decide to adopt a few ideas without the Situationists, and without mentioning the S.I. The growing probability that some of the simplest and least recent of our theses will be confirmed leads a number of people to adopt portions of one or the other *without saying so*. This is certainly not a matter of acknowledging antecedents or personal merits, etc. If there is any reason to point out this tendency, it is to denounce it on a single crucial point: in doing so, these people can speak of a new problem, so as to popularize it themselves after having rejected it as long as they could, and now extirpating only its violence, its connection with general subversion, thereby watering it down to an academic statement, or worse. With such intentions, it is necessary to conceal the S.I.

Thus the journal *Architecture d'aujourd'hui* (no. 102, June–July 1962) has finally got around to an account of “fantastic architecture,” including certain former and present attempts that could be

very interesting. But it so happens that only the S.I. holds the key to their interesting application. For the scribblers of *Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, they only serve to decorate the walls of passivity. The editor of this journal, for example, in his personal activity as an artist, if one may say so, has tried almost all the styles of fashionable sculptors, imitating them to the letter, which seems to have made him an expert on the subject of artistic conditioning. When such people take it into their heads that the surroundings ought to be improved, they act like all reformers, countering a stronger pressure by slowing it down. These authorities of today are quite prepared to reform the environment, but without touching the life that goes on within it. And they coolly give the name of “system” to investigations in these matters, so as to be shielded from any conclusions. It is not for nothing that in this issue they criticize the underdeveloped “technician” of unitary urbanism who had to leave the S.I. in 1960. Even this extremely meager subtheory is too troubling for the eclecticism of converts from the old functionalism. We, however, rightly defend no system, and we see better than anyone, at all levels, the system

that they themselves defend, and which defends them while maiming them so much. We want to destroy such a system.

We must make the same objection to those people who for six or ten months in some journals have been starting to rethink the problem of leisure time, or that of the new human relations that will be necessary within the future revolutionary organization. What is missing here? Actual experience, the oxygen of ruthless criticism of what exists, the total picture. The Situationist point of view now seems as indispensable as yeast, without which the dough of the best themes raised by the S.I. falls again in a few years. Those who are entirely shaped by the *boredom* of current life and thought can only rejoice in the leisure of boredom. Those who have never accurately perceived either the present or the potential of the revolutionary movement can only search for a psychotechnical philosophers' stone. One that would retransmute modern depoliticized workers into devoted militants of leftist organizations, reproducing so well the model of established society that, like a factory, they could hire a few psychosociologists to apply a little oil to their microgroups. The methods of sociometry and psychodrama will not lead anyone very far ahead in the construction of situations.

To the degree that participation becomes more impossible, the second-class engineers of modernist art demand everyone's participation as their due. They distribute this invoice with the instruction booklet as the now explicit rule of the game, as if this participation had not always been the implicit rule of an art where it actually existed (within the limits of class and depth which have framed all art). They urge us insolently to "take part" in a spectacle, in an art that *so little* concerns us. Behind the comic aspect of this glorious beggary, one comes upon the sinister spheres of the cultural gendarmes who organize "participation in things where it is impossible to participate"—work or the leisure of private life—(cf. *Internationale situationniste* 6, page 16).³ In this light, one ought probably to take another look at the seeming naïveté of Le Parc's text, its peculiar unreality in relation to the public he would like to "stimulate." "In this concern for the spectators' violent participation," he writes, "one could even arrive at non-realization, non-contemplation, non-action. One might then be able to imagine, for example, a dozen non-action spectators sitting motionless in the most complete darkness and saying nothing." It so happens that when people are placed in such a position, they cry out, as all those who participated in the real action of the negative avant-garde have fortunately been able to notice. Nowhere has there been, as Goldmann believes, an avant-garde of pure absence, but only the *staging of the scandal of absence* to appeal to a desired presence, "provocation to that game that is the human presence" (Manifesto in *Internationale situationniste* 4).⁴ The pupils of the "Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel" have such a metaphysical idea of an abstract public that they

3. Attila Kotanyi and Raoul Vaneigem, "Programme élémentaire de bureau d'urbanisme unitaire," *Internationale situationniste* 6 (August 1961), p. 16. Translated by Ken Knabb in *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley, Calif.: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981), p. 66. Ed.

4. "Manifeste (17 Mai 1960)," *Internationale situationniste* 4 (June 1960), pp. 36–38. Ed.

certainly won't find it on the terrain of art—all these tendencies postulate with incredible impudence a totally besotted public, capable of the same weighty seriousness as these specialists for their little contrivances. But on the other hand, such a public shows signs of being created *at the level of global society*. It is the “lonely crowd” of the world of theater, and here Le Parc is no longer so far ahead of reality as he thinks; in the organization of this alienation, there surely is no spectator free to remain purely passive. Even their passivity is organized, and Le Parc's “stimulated spectators” are already everywhere.

Furthermore, we note that the idea of constructing situations is a central one of our time. Its mirror image, its slavish symmetry, appears in all conditioning. The first psychosociologists—Max Pagès claims that only about fifty of them have emerged in the last twenty years—are about to multiply quickly; they are learning how to manipulate certain *given* but still crude situations, which would include the permanent collective situation that has been devised for the inhabitants of Sarcelles. The artists who align themselves in this camp to rescue a specialty of scene painters from cybernetic machination do not hide the fact that they've made their debut in the manipulation of integration. But with respect to the artistic negation that rebels against this integration, it appears that no one, unless he sticks to a position, can approach this minefield of situations without bumping into another dispute, coherent on all levels. And first of all the political level, where no future revolutionary organization can seriously be conceived any longer without several “Situationist” qualities.

We speak of recovering free play, when it is isolated on the sole terrain of familiar artistic dissolution. In the spring of 1962, the press began to take note of the practice of the *happening* among the artistic avant-garde of New York. This is a kind of spectacle dissolved to the extreme, an improvisation of gestures, of a Dadaist bent, by people thrown together in an enclosed space. Drugs, alcohol, and sex all play a role. The gestures of the “actors” attempt a mixture of poetry, painting, dance, and jazz. One can regard this form of social encounter as a borderline case of the old artistic spectacle whose remnants



“Critic of Separation”

“Don’t be so idiotic, she says, as to want to save the world—you can’t do anything. This conspiracy is not on the earthly scale, nor even on that of the solar system. We are pawns in a game being played by star people.”

A. E. Van Vogt, *Le monde des Non-A*

get thrown into a common grave, or as an attempt at renewal—in that case, too overloaded with aesthetics—of an ordinary surprise party or classical orgy. One might even think that, by its naive wish for “something to happen,” the absence of outside spectators, and the wish to make some small innovations on the meager scale of human relations, the happening is an isolated attempt to construct a situation *on the basis of poverty* (material poverty, poverty of human contact, poverty inherited from the artistic spectacle, poverty of the specific philosophy driven to “ideologize” the reality of these moments). The situations that the S.I. has defined, on the other hand, can only be constructed on the basis of material and spiritual richness. Which is another way of saying that an outline for the construction of situations must be the game, the serious game, of the revolutionary avant-garde, and cannot exist for those who resign themselves on certain points to political passivity, metaphysical despair, or even the pure and experienced absence of artistic creativity. The construction of situations is the supreme goal and first model of a society where free and experimental modes of conduct will prevail. But the happening did not have to wait long to be imported into Europe (December at the Galerie Raymond Cordier in Paris) and turned completely upside-down by its French imitators. The result was a mob of spectators frozen in the atmosphere of an Ecole des Beaux-Arts ball, as pure and simple publicity for an opening of little Surrealist-type things.

Whatever is constructed on the basis of poverty will always be reclaimed by the surrounding poverty, and will serve its perpetuators. Early in 1960 (cf. “Die Welt als Labyrinth,” in *Internationale situationniste* 4),⁵ the S.I. avoided the trap that the Stedelijk Museum’s proposal had become, a proposal that called for the construction of a setting that would serve as a pretext for a series of urban *dérives* in Amsterdam and thus for some unitary urbanist projects. It turned out that the plan for a labyrinth submitted by the S.I. would be subjected to thirty-six kinds of restrictions and controls, thereby reducing it to something scarcely different from a product of traditional avant-garde art. We accordingly broke the agreement. This avant-gardist museum seems to have remained inconsolable for quite a while, since only in 1962 did it finally come forth with “its” labyrinth, more simply entrusted to the “nouveau réalisme” gang, which assembled something very photogenic with “Dada in its heart,” as Tzara used to say in the good old days.⁶

We see that when we comply with the requests of those who urge us to exhibit usable and convincing detailed plans—why should we have to convince them?—they either turn them against us at once as proof of our utopianism, or else favor a watered-down version for the moment. The truth is that you can ask for detailed plans from almost all the others—you’re the one who decides what number might be satisfactory—but certainly *not from us*; it is our thesis that there

5. “Notes éditoriales: De welt als labyrint,” *Internationale situationniste* 4 (June 1960), pp. 5–7. Ed.

6. “Dylaby,” or the “Labyrinthe dynamique,” Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, August 30 to September 30, 1962. The exhibition was designed by Tinguely, Daniel Spoerri, and Pontus Hulten; it was the last project realized under William Sandberg’s tenure at the museum. Ed.

can be no fundamental cultural renewal in details, but only *in toto*. We are obviously well situated to discover, some years before others, all the possible tricks of the extreme cultural decay of our time. Since they can only be used in the spectacle of our enemies, we keep some notes about them in a drawer. After a while, someone really rediscovers a lot of them spontaneously and broadcasts them with great fanfare. Most of the ones we possess, however, have not yet been “overtaken by history.” Several may never be. It is not even a game; it is one more experimental confirmation.

We think that modern art, wherever it has really found innovators and critics through the very conditions of its appearance, has well performed its role, which was a great one; and that it remains, despite speculation on its products, hated by the enemies of freedom. One needs only to look at the fear inspired at this moment in the leaders of homeopathic de-Stalinization by the slightest sign of its return to their homeland, where it had been caused to be forgotten. They denounce it as a leak in their ideology and confess that it is vital to their power to hold a monopoly in manipulating this ideology at every level. All the same, those who now make money in the West on the respectful extensions and artificial revivals of the stymied old cultural game are in reality the enemies of modern art. As for ourselves, we are its residuary legatees.

We are against the conventional form of culture, even in its most modern state, while obviously not preferring ignorance, the petit-bourgeois common sense of the local butcher, or neo-primitivism. There is an anticultural attitude that flows toward an impossible return to the old myths. We place ourselves on the other side of culture. Not before it, but *after*. We say that one must *attain* it, while going beyond it as a separate sphere, not only as a domain reserved for specialists, but above all as the domain of a specialized production that does not directly affect the construction of life—including the very lives of its own specialists.

We are not wholly lacking in a sense of humor; but this very humor is of a somewhat different kind. If it is a matter of choosing quickly what attitude to adopt toward our ideas, without getting into the fine points or some more subtle understanding of nuances, the simplest and most correct one is to take us literally and with utter seriousness.

How are we going to bankrupt the prevailing culture? In two ways, at first gradually and then abruptly. We propose to use some concepts artistic in origin in a nonartistic way. We have begun with an artistic exigency, which did not resemble any former aestheticism since it was indeed the exigency of revolutionary modern art at its highest moments. We have thus brought this exigency into life, toward revolutionary politics, meaning its absence and the search for explanations of its absence. The total revolutionary politics that flows from it, and that is confirmed by the highest moments of the true revolutionary struggle of the last hundred years, then comes back to the beginning of this project (a wish for direct life), but now without there being any art or politics as independent forms, nor the recognition of any other separate domain. The objection to the world, and its

reconstruction, live only in the undivided nature of such a project, in which the cultural struggle, in the conventional sense, is merely the pretext and cover for a deeper task.

It is easy to draw up an endless list of problems and difficulties in order of priority, as well as some short-term impossibilities that are saddening. It is probable that the excitement, for example, aroused among Situationists by the project of a massive demonstration at the Paris headquarters of UNESCO testifies first of all to the taste, latent in the S.I., to find a concrete *field of intervention*, where Situationist activity would appear openly and positively as such, a kind of construction of the event here combined with the taking of a resounding position against the world center of bureaucratized culture. Complementary to this aspect of things, the views upheld by Alexander Trocchi, previously and at this moment, on the clandestine nature of a portion of Situationist actions may lead us to augment our freedom of intervention. To the degree to which, as Vaneigem writes, "we cannot avoid making ourselves known up to a certain point in a spectacular way," these new forms of clandestinity would doubtless be useful in combatting our own spectacular image, which our enemies and disgraced followers are already forging. Like every source of attraction that can be constituted in the world (and though our "attraction" is really quite particular), we have begun to unleash the adverse forces of submission *to ourselves*. If we are not to yield to these forces, we will have to invent for ourselves adequate defenses, which in the past have been very little studied. Another worrisome subject for Situationists is surely the kind of specialization required, in a society of highly specialized thought and practice, by the task of holding the fort of nonspecialization, besieged and breached on all sides, while raising the flag of totality. Still another is the obligation to judge people in terms of our actions and theirs, and to break off relations with several whom it would be pleasant to know in private life—an unacceptable frame of reference. Nevertheless, the quarrel with what exists, if it also involves daily life, is naturally translated into struggles *within* daily life. The list of these difficulties, we say, is a long one, but the arguments that flow from it are still extremely weak, since we are perfectly well aware of the alternative way of thinking at this crossroads of our time: namely, unconditional surrender on all points. We have founded our cause on *almost nothing*: irreducible dissatisfaction and desire with regard to life.

The S.I. is still far from having created situations, but it has already created Situationists, and that is something. This power of liberated dispute, in addition to its first direct applications, shows that such liberation is not impossible. This is how from now on, in different areas, the task will be glimpsed.

Perspectives for a Generation*

THÉO FREY

An insane society proposes to manage its future by spreading the use of technically improved individual and collective straitjackets (houses, cities, real-estate developments), which it imposes on us as a remedy for its ills. We are *invited* to accept and to recognize this prefabricated “non-organic body” as our own; the Establishment intends to enclose the individual in another, radically different self. In order to accomplish this task, a vital one for itself as well as its flunkies (urbanists, real-estate developers), it can count on the *misguided* souls currently working overtime in the so-called social sciences. Servants, in particular, of an “anthropology” that is no longer speculative but structural and operational, they busy themselves in extricating one more “human nature,” but this time a directly usable one, like the police register, for various conditioning techniques. The final result of the process thus undertaken (assuming that the rising strength of the new opposition that everywhere accompanies it gives it enough *leisure*) henceforth appears as the modernized version of a solution that has proven itself, the concentration camp, here deconcentrated all over the planet. People in it will be absolutely free, especially to come and go, to *circulate*, while being total prisoners of that futile freedom to come and go in the byways of the Establishment.

The dominant society, which has nowhere been mastered (eliminated) by us, can only master itself by dominating us. The convergence of present forms of development for living space little by little makes this domination concrete. A room, an apartment, a house, a neighborhood, a town, a whole territory can and must be developed step by step or simultaneously: with no transition from “how to live happily in a large housing project” (*Elle*) to how “to make this society agreeable for everyone” (*Le Monde*). Present-day society, in its proclaimed desire, as sick as it is ingenuous, to *survive*, falls back entirely on a *growth* that can do nothing but develop in a dull way the ridiculous potentialities that are the only ones permitted by its own rationale, the *logic of the market*. Which means that political economy, as the “logical conclusion of the denial of humanity,” pursues its destructive work. Everywhere there is a spectacular clash between divergent

* *Internationale situationniste* 10 (March 1966), pp. 33–35.

economic theories and policies, but nowhere are the absurd imperatives of political economy itself challenged and bourgeois economic categories abolished in practice for the benefit of a free (post-economic) construction of situations, and therefore of all life, on the basis of the *currently* concentrated and squandered powers in “advanced” societies. This colonization of the future in the name of a past that deserves to be so utterly abandoned that the memory of it be lost presupposes the systematic reduction of any *possible radical alternative*, though such are quite *present* in all manifestations of our oppressive society, so much so that things seem to persist in “going off the tracks,” *when they are forced to*.

This miserable feat of prestidigitation reveals its trademark from the start: ideology, albeit an upside-down, mutilated reflection of the real world and Praxis, but an ideology the practice of which makes what appears to be upside-down and distorted, and not just in the heads of intellectuals and other ideologues, enter into reality: *the world upside-down in earnest*. This modern process of reducing the gap between life and its representation for the benefit of a *representation* that turns back on its assumptions is merely an artificial, caricatured, spectacular resolution of real problems posed by the widespread revolutionary crisis of the modern world, a “simulacrum” of resolution that will fall at the same time as the greater number of illusions that continue to foster it.

The Establishment lives by our incapacity to live, it maintains splits and *separations* infinitely multiplied, while at the same time planning occasions that are allowed to happen *almost* the way it likes. Its masterstroke is still its successful dissociation of everyday life as space-time, individual and social, from the presently possible indissoluble reconstruction of ourselves and the world, for the purpose of separately and jointly controlling time and space and ultimately reducing both one and the other, the one by the other. The progress of these operations *visibly* betrays the seriousness of an effort in which the sinister vies with the burlesque. The aim is the constitution of a “homogenous,” perfectly “integrated” space, formed by the addition of “homologous” functional blocks, structured hierarchically (the famous “hierarchical network of towns, innervating and coordinating a region of a given size, and common to industrial societies”), so that in the agglomerate thus achieved the gaps, segregations, and multiple conflicts born of separation and the division of labor will be buried in concrete: the conflict between classes, the conflict between city and countryside, the conflict between society and the State, classical ones since Marx, and to which one might add the many interregional “disparities” of which the current conflict between developed and underdeveloped countries is only the pathological exaggeration. The “ruse of history” is nevertheless such that the apparent early successes of this policing arrangement, an attenuation of the class struggle (in the former sense) and of the antagonism between city and countryside, disguise less and less the radical and hopeless proletarianization of the huge majority of the population, condemned to “live” in the uniform conditions that constitute the bastardized and spectacular “urban” milieu born of the break-up of the city, one that, combined with the antagonism between State and

society, thereby reinforced and so alarming to the sociologists (“We must establish new channels of communication between the authorities and the population”—Chombart de Lauwe, *Le Monde*, July 13, 1965),¹ betrays the literally “unreasonable” nature of the process of “rationalizing” the reification in progress, while assuring it all sorts of problems, perfectly “irrational” ones from its bureaucratic and alienated point of view, but no less well-founded from the standpoint of the dialectical reasoning inherent in all living reality, all Praxis. As Hegel clearly saw, if only to congratulate himself on it, in the rule of modern States, the State allows the pseudofreedom of the individual to develop, while maintaining the coherence of the whole, and it *draws from this antagonism an infinite strength*, which normally turns out to be its Achilles’ heel when a new coherence, radically antagonistic to such an order of things, is established and strengthened. Moreover, any coherent and “successful” arrangement must be imposed all over the planet in a *widespread urbanism* that means reducing the phenomenon of underdevelopment, as potentially disturbing to the impossible equilibrium being pursued. But, as though inadvertently, and in a fatal fidelity to itself, capitalism finds itself making war on underdeveloped countries instead of its touted war on underdevelopment, caught as it is in the trap of contradictory, but for it equally vital, demands, and thereby destroying its own claims to survival: all its technocratic-cybernetic “programmings.” Such a dialectic promises a rude awakening to the rulers of the present prehistoric world who dreamed of putting themselves beyond reach while burying us under a wall of cement that *will surely end* by being their own tomb.

The arrangement, in this perspective, should also be seen as the death throes of *communication* in the old limited, but real, sense, the residue of which is everywhere hunted down by the Establishment for the benefit of *information*. Henceforth a “universal communications network” radically suppresses the distance between things while indefinitely increasing the distance between people. Circulation in such a network ends by neutralizing itself, in such a way that the future solution will consist in making people circulate less and information circulate more. People will stay home, transformed into mere audiovisual “receivers” of information: an attempt to perpetuate *in practice* the current—i.e., bourgeois—economic categories, in order to create the conditions for a permanent and automatic functioning of the present alienated society, “a more smoothly running machine” (*Le Monde*, 4 June 1964).² The economists’ “perfect market” is impossible, especially from the fact of distance: a perfectly rational economy would have to be concentrated *at a single point* (instantaneous Production and Consumption); if the market is not perfect, that would be due to the imperfection of the world itself, causing the developers to work hard to make the world perfect. Real-estate

1. Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe, Director of Studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études, quoted in Jean Couvreur, “A la semaine sociale de Brest: L’organisation de la cité nouvelle,” *Le Monde*, July 13, 1965, p. 8. Ed.

2. Pierre Drouin, “La croissance économique, pour quoi faire?” *Le Monde*, June 4, 1964, p. 18. Ed.

development is a metaphysical enterprise in search of a neo-feudal space. The planners' *Grand Oeuvre*, their search for the philosophers' stone, means the constitution of a space without surprises, where the map would be everything and the territory nothing, because it has been completely effaced and is no longer important, justifying too late all the "architecture" of those imbecile semanticists who claim to deliver you from the tyranny of Aristotle, from "A is not Not-A," as though it had not been established for centuries that "A *becomes* Not-A."

This is so true that today one no longer "consumes" space, which tends to become uniform, but time. The American who goes around the world from one Hilton hotel to another without ever seeing any variation in the setting, except superficially as imitation local color, thus integrated and reduced to a gimmick, clearly prefigures the itineraries of the multitude. The conquest of space, as an "adventure" reserved for an "elite" and resounding spectacularly all over the planet, will be the organized and foreseeable compensation. But, through the expedient of the colonization of space, the Establishment intends to "draw on the future," to "take a long-term view," which means emptying time of its substance (our achievements in the course of a History) in order to cut it up into perfectly inoffensive slices, devoid of any unforeseeable "future" not programmed by its machines. The aim is the constitution of a gigantic contrivance designed to "recycle" linear time for the benefit of an expurgated and "shrunk" time, the mechanical time of machines, without history, and which would combine the pseudocyclical time of the quotidian with a *universalized neo-cyclical time*, the time of passive acceptance and forced resignation to the permanence of the present order of things.

It must be said: "alienation and oppression in society cannot be arranged, according to any of their variations, but only rejected totally along with that society itself" (*I.S.* 4, p. 36). The task of reunifying time and space in a free construction of individual and social time-space belongs to the *coming revolution*: the overthrow of the "developers" will coincide with a decisive transformation of everyday life, and it will be that transformation.