

# Report on the Construction of Situations

And on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and  
Action

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July 1957

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## Revolution and Counterrevolution in Modern Culture

First of all, we think the world must be changed. We want the most liberating change of the society and life in which we find ourselves confined. We know that such a change is possible through appropriate actions.

Our specific concern is the use of certain means of action and the discovery of new ones, means which are more easily recognizable in the domain of culture and customs, but which must be applied in interrelation with all revolutionary changes.

A society's "culture" both reflects and prefigures its possible ways of organizing life. Our era is characterized by the lagging of revolutionary political action behind the development of modern possibilities of production which call for a more advanced organization of the world.

We are going through a crucial historical crisis in which each year poses more acutely the global problem of rationally mastering the new productive forces and creating a new civilization. Yet the international working-class movement, on which depends the prerequisite overthrow of the economic infrastructure of exploitation, has registered only a few partial local successes. Capitalism has invented new forms of struggle (state intervention in the economy, expansion of the consumer sector, fascist governments) while camouflaging class oppositions through various reformist tactics and exploiting the degenerations of working-class leaderships. In this way it has succeeded in maintaining the old social relations in the great majority of the highly industrialized countries, thereby depriving a socialist society of its indispensable material base. In contrast, the underdeveloped or colonized countries, which over the last decade have engaged in the most direct and massive battles against imperialism, have begun to win some very significant victories. These victories are aggravating the contradictions of the capitalist economy and (particularly in the case of the Chinese revolution) could be a contributing factor toward a renewal of the whole revolutionary movement. Such a renewal cannot limit itself to reforms within the capitalist or anticapitalist countries, but must develop conflicts posing the question of power everywhere.

The shattering of modern culture is the result, on the plane of ideological struggle, of the chaotic crisis of these antagonisms. The new desires that are taking shape are presented in distorted form: present-day resources could enable them to be fulfilled, but the anachronistic economic structure is incapable of developing these resources to such ends. Ruling-class ideology has meanwhile lost all coherence because of the depreciation of its successive conceptions of the world (a depreciation which leads the ruling class to historical indecision and uncertainty); because of the coexistence of a range of mutually contradictory reactionary ideologies (such as Christianity and social-democracy); and because of the mixing into contemporary Western culture of a number of only recently appreciated features of several foreign civilizations. The main goal of ruling-class ideology is therefore to maintain this confusion.

Within culture (it should be understood that throughout this text we are ignoring the scientific or educational aspects of culture, even if the confusion we have noted is also visibly reflected at the level of general scientific theories and notions of education; we are using the term to refer to a complex of aesthetics, sentiments and customs: the reaction of an era on everyday life) there are two parallel counterrevolutionary confusionist tactics: the partial cooption of new values, and a deliberately anticultural, industrially facilitated production (novels, films), the latter being a natural continuation of the imbecilization of young people begun in their schools and families. The ruling ideology sees to it that subversive discoveries are trivialized and sterilized, after which they can be safely spectacularized. It even manages to make use of subversive individuals — by

falsifying their works after their death, or, while they are still alive, by taking advantage of the general ideological confusion and drugging them with one or another of the many mystiques at their disposal.

One of the contradictions of the bourgeoisie in its period of decline is that while it respects the abstract principle of intellectual and artistic creation, it resists actual creations when they first appear, then eventually exploits them. This is because it needs to maintain a certain degree of criticality and experimental research among a minority, but must take care to channel this activity into narrowly compartmentalized utilitarian disciplines and avert any holistic critique and experimentation. In the domain of culture the bourgeoisie strives to divert the taste for innovation, which is dangerous for it in our era, toward certain confused, degraded and innocuous forms of novelty. Through the commercial mechanisms that control cultural activity, avant-garde tendencies are cut off from the segments of society that could support them, segments already limited because of the general social conditions. The people within these tendencies who become well known are generally accepted as exceptional individuals, on the condition that they accept various renunciations: the essential point is always the renunciation of a comprehensive opposition and the acceptance of fragmentary works susceptible to diverse interpretations. This is what gives the very term “avant-garde,” which in the final analysis is always defined and manipulated by the bourgeoisie, a dubious and ridiculous aspect.

The very notion of a collective avant-garde, with the militant aspect it implies, is a recent product of the historical conditions that are simultaneously giving rise to the necessity for a coherent revolutionary program in culture and to the necessity to struggle against the forces that impede the development of such a program. Such groups are led to transpose into their sphere of activity certain organizational methods originally created by revolutionary politics, and their action is henceforth inconceivable without some connection with a political critique. In this regard there is a notable progression from Futurism through Dadaism and Surrealism to the movements formed after 1945. At each of these stages, however, one discovers the same desire for total change; and the same rapid disintegration when the inability to change the real world profoundly enough leads to a defensive withdrawal to the very doctrinal positions whose inadequacy had just been revealed.

Futurism, whose influence spread from Italy in the period preceding World War I, adopted an attitude of revolutionizing literature and the arts which introduced a great number of formal innovations, but which was only based on an extremely simplistic application of the notion of mechanical progress. Futurism’s puerile technological optimism vanished with the period of bourgeois euphoria that had sustained it. Italian Futurism collapsed, going from nationalism to fascism without ever attaining a more complete theoretical vision of its time.

Dadaism, initiated in Zurich and New York by refugees and deserters from World War I, expressed the rejection of all the values of a bourgeois society whose bankruptcy had just become so grossly evident. Its violent manifestations in postwar Germany and France aimed mainly at the destruction of art and literature and to a lesser degree at certain forms of behavior (deliberately imbecilic spectacles, speeches and excursions). Its historic role is to have delivered a mortal blow to the traditional conception of culture. The almost immediate dissolution of dadaism was an inevitable result of its purely negative definition. The dadaist spirit has nevertheless influenced all subsequent movements; and any future constructive position must include a dadaist-type negative aspect as long as the social conditions that impose the repetition of rotten superstructures —

conditions that have intellectually already been definitively condemned — have not been wiped out by force.

The creators of surrealism, who had participated in the dadaist movement in France, endeavored to define the terrain of a constructive action on the basis of the spirit of revolt and the extreme depreciation of traditional means of communication expressed by dadaism. Setting out from a poetic application of Freudian psychology, surrealism extended the methods it had discovered to painting, to film, and to some aspects of everyday life; and its influence, in more diffuse forms, spread much further. Now, what is important in an enterprise of this nature is not whether it is completely or relatively right, but whether it succeeds in catalyzing for a certain time the desires of an era. Surrealism's period of progress, marked by the liquidation of idealism and a moment of rallying to dialectical materialism, came to a halt soon after 1930, but its decay only became evident after World War II. Surrealism had by then spread to numerous countries. It had also initiated a discipline whose rigor must not be overestimated and which was often tempered by commercial considerations, but which was nevertheless an effective means of struggle against the confusionist mechanisms of the bourgeoisie.

The surrealist program, asserting the sovereignty of desire and surprise and proposing a new way of life, is much richer in constructive possibilities than is generally realized. The limited scope of surrealism was in large part due to the lack of material means for fulfilling its aims. But the devolution of its original proponents into spiritualism, and above all the mediocrity of its later members, obliges us to search for the failed development of surrealist theory in the very origin of that theory.

The error that is at the root of surrealism is the idea of the infinite richness of the unconscious imagination. The cause of surrealism's ideological failure was its belief that the unconscious was the finally discovered ultimate force of life; and the fact that the surrealists revised the history of ideas in accordance with that simplistic perspective and never went any further. We now know that the unconscious imagination is poor, that automatic writing is monotonous, and that the whole ostentatious genre of would-be "strange" and "shocking" surrealist creations has ceased to be very surprising. The formal fidelity to this style of imagination ultimately leads back to the polar opposite of the modern conditions of imagination: back to traditional occultism. The extent to which surrealism has remained dependent on its hypothesis regarding the unconscious can be seen in the theoretical investigations attempted by the second-generation surrealists: Calas and Mabilie relate everything to the two successive aspects of the surrealist practice of the unconscious — the former to psychoanalysis, the latter to cosmic influences. The discovery of the role of the unconscious was indeed a surprise and an innovation; but it was not a law of future surprises and innovations. Freud had also ended up discovering this when he wrote: "Whatever is conscious wears out. What is unconscious remains unalterable. But once it is freed, it too falls to ruin."

Opposing an apparently irrational society in which the clash between reality and the old but still vigorously proclaimed values was pushed to the point of absurdity, surrealism made use of the irrational to destroy that society's superficially logical values. The very success of surrealism has a lot to do with the fact that the most modern side of this society's ideology has renounced a strict hierarchy of factitious values and openly uses the irrational, including vestiges of surrealism. The bourgeoisie must above all prevent a new beginning of revolutionary thought. It was aware of the danger of surrealism. Now that it has been able to coopt it into ordinary aesthetic commerce, it would like people to believe that surrealism was the most radical and disturbing

movement possible. It thus cultivates a sort of nostalgia for surrealism at the same time that it discredits any new venture by automatically pigeonholing it as a rehash of surrealism, a rerun of a defeat which according to it is definitive and can no longer be brought back into question by anyone. Reacting against the alienation of Christian society has led some people to admire the completely irrational alienation of primitive societies. But we need to go forward, not backward. We need to make the world *more* rational — the necessary first step in making it more exciting.

## **Decomposition: The Ultimate Stage of Bourgeois Thought**

The two main centers of “modern” culture are Paris and Moscow. The styles originating in Paris (the majority of whose elaborators are not French) influence Europe, America and the other developed countries of the capitalist zone such as Japan. The styles imposed administratively by Moscow influence all the workers states and also have a slight effect on Paris and its European zone of influence. The Moscow influence is directly political. The persistence of the traditional influence of Paris stems partly from its long-entrenched position as professional cultural center.

Because bourgeois thought is lost in systematic confusion and Marxist thought has been profoundly distorted in the workers states, conservatism reigns both East and West, especially in the domain of culture and customs. This conservatism is overt in Moscow, which has revived the typically petty-bourgeois attitudes of the nineteenth century. In Paris it is hidden, disguised as anarchism, cynicism or humor. Although both of these ruling cultures are fundamentally incapable of dealing with the real problems of our time, relevant experimentation has been carried further in the West. In the context of this sort of cultural production, the Moscow zone functions as a region of underdevelopment.

In the bourgeois zone, where an appearance of intellectual freedom has generally been tolerated, the knowledge of the movement of ideas and the confused vision of the multiple transformations of the social environment tend to make people aware of an ongoing upheaval whose motivating forces are out of control. The reigning sensibility tries to adapt itself to this situation while resisting new changes that present new dangers. The solutions offered by the retrograde currents ultimately come down to three main attitudes: prolonging the fashions produced by the dada-surrealism crisis (which crisis is simply the sophisticated cultural expression of a state of mind that spontaneously manifests itself wherever previously accepted meanings of life crumble along with previous lifestyles); settling into mental ruins; or returning to the distant past.

In the first case, a diluted form of surrealism can be found everywhere. It has all the tastes of the surrealist era and none of its ideas. Its aesthetic is based on repetition. The remnants of orthodox surrealism have arrived at the stage of occultist senility, and are as incapable of articulating an ideological position as they are of inventing anything whatsoever. They lend credence to increasingly crude charlatanisms and engender others.

Setting up shop in nullity is the cultural solution that has been most visible in the years following World War II. This solution includes two possibilities, each of which has been abundantly illustrated: dissimulating nothingness by means of an appropriate vocabulary, or openly flaunting it.

The first of these options has become particularly famous since the advent of existentialist literature, which has reproduced, under the cover of a borrowed philosophy, the most mediocre aspects of the cultural evolution of the preceding three decades and augmented its mass-media-

based notoriety by doses of fake Marxism and psychoanalysis and by successive announcements of more or less arbitrary political engagements and resignations. These tactics have generated a very large number of followers, avowed or unacknowledged. The continuing proliferation of abstract painting and its associated theories is another example of the same nature and scope.

The complacent affirmation of total mental nullity is exemplified by the recent neoliterary phenomenon of “cynical young right-wing novelists,” but is by no means limited to right-wingers, novelists, or semi-youth.

Among the tendencies calling for a return to the past, the doctrine of Socialist Realism has proven to be the most durable, because its indefensible position in the domain of cultural creation seems to be supported by its appeal to the conclusions of a revolutionary movement. At the 1948 conference of Soviet musicians, Andrei Zhdanov<sup>1</sup> revealed the stake of theoretical repression: “Haven’t we done well to preserve the treasures of classic painting and to suppress the liquidators of painting? Wouldn’t the survival of such ‘schools’ have amounted to the liquidation of painting?” Faced with this liquidation of painting and with many other liquidations, and recognizing the crumbling of all its systems of values, the advanced Western bourgeoisie is banking on total ideological decomposition, whether out of desperate reaction or out of political opportunism. In contrast, Zhdanov – with the taste characteristic of the parvenu – recognizes himself in the petty-bourgeoisie that opposes the decomposition of nineteenth-century cultural values, and can see nothing else to do than to undertake an authoritarian restoration of those values. He is unrealistic enough to believe that short-lived local political circumstances will give him the power to evade the general problems of this era, if only he can force people to return to the study of superseded problems after having repressed all the conclusions that history has previously drawn from those problems.

The form (and even some aspects of the content) of this Socialist Realism is not very different from the traditional propaganda of religious organizations, particularly of Catholicism. By means of an invariable propaganda, Catholicism defends a unitary ideological structure that it alone, among all the forces of the past, still possesses. But at the same time, in a parallel operation designed to recapture the increasingly numerous sectors that are escaping its influence, the Catholic Church is attempting to take over modern cultural forms, particularly those representing complicated theoretical nullity (“spontaneous” painting, for example). The Catholic reactionaries have the advantage over other bourgeois tendencies of being able to rely on a permanent hierarchy of values; this inalterable foundation enables them all the more freely to push decomposition to the extreme in whatever discipline they engage in.

The crisis of modern culture has led to total ideological decomposition. Nothing new can be built on these ruins. Critical thought itself becomes impossible as each judgment clashes with others and each individual invokes fragments of outmoded systems or follows merely personal inclinations.

This decomposition can be seen everywhere. It is no longer a matter of noting the increasingly massive use of commercial publicity to influence judgments about cultural creation. We have arrived at a stage of ideological absence in which advertising has become the only active factor, overriding any preexisting critical judgment or transforming such judgment into a mere conditioned reflex. The complex operation of sales techniques has reached the point of surprising

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<sup>1</sup> *Andrei Zhdanov*: one of Stalin’s most powerful officials, responsible for purging the arts and imposing the doctrine of “Socialist Realism.”

even the ad professionals by automatically creating pseudosubjects of cultural debate. This is the sociological significance of the Françoise Sagan phenomenon<sup>2</sup> in France over the last three years, an experience whose repercussions have even penetrated beyond the cultural zone centered on Paris by provoking some interest in the workers states. The professional judges of culture, seeing such a phenomenon as an unpredictable effect of mechanisms with which they are unfamiliar, tend to attribute it to mere crude mass-media publicity. But their profession nevertheless obliges them to come up with bogus critiques of these bogus works. (Moreover, a work whose interest is inexplicable constitutes the richest subject for bourgeois confusionist criticism.) They naturally remain unaware of the fact that the intellectual mechanisms of criticism had already escaped them long before the external mechanisms arrived to exploit this void. They avoid facing the fact that Sagan is simply the ridiculous flip side of the change of means of expression into means of action on everyday life. This process of supersession has caused the life of the author to become increasingly more important than her work. As the period of important expressions arrives at its ultimate reduction, nothing of any possible importance remains except the personality of the author, who in turn is no longer capable of possessing any notable quality beyond her age, or some fashionable vice, or some picturesque old craft.

The opposition that must now be united against this ideological decomposition must not get caught up in criticizing the buffooneries appearing in outmoded forms such as poems or novels. We have to criticize activities that are important for the future, activities that we need to make use of. One of the most serious signs of the present ideological decomposition is the fact that the functionalist theory of architecture is now based on the most reactionary conceptions of society and morality. That is, the temporarily and partially valid contributions of the original Bauhaus or of the school of Le Corbusier have been distorted so as to reinforce an excessively backward notion of life and of the framework of life.

Everything indicates, however, that since 1956 we have been entering a new phase of the struggle, and that an upheaval of revolutionary forces, attacking the most appalling obstacles on all fronts, is beginning to change the conditions of the preceding period. Socialist Realism is beginning to decline in the countries of the anticapitalist camp, along with the reactionary Stalinism that produced it, while in the West the Sagan culture is marking a depth of bourgeois decadence beyond which it is probably impossible to go, and there seems to be an increasing awareness of the exhaustion of the cultural expedients that have served since the end of World War II. In this context, the avant-garde minority may be able to rediscover a positive value.

## The Role of Minority Tendencies in the Ebbing Period

The ebbing of the international revolutionary movement, which became apparent within a few years after 1920 and increasingly obvious over the next three decades, was followed, with a time-lag of five or six years, by an ebbing of the movements that had tried to promote liberatory innovations in culture and everyday life. The ideological and material importance of such

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<sup>2</sup> "*Françoise Sagan phenomon*": the way that this teenage writer became a supercelebrity, every detail of her life being considered newsworthy despite the relatively mediocre quality of her work. Spectacularization of vacuous and talentless personalities is of course commonplace now, but in the 1950s it was seen as astonishing and the conventional culture critics were at a loss as to how to account for it.



movements has continually diminished, to the point that they have become totally isolated. Their action, which under more favorable conditions was able to lead to a sudden renewal of the climate of feeling, has weakened to the point that conservative tendencies have been able to exclude them from any direct penetration into the rigged arena of official culture. Once these movements have been deprived of their role in the production of new values, they end up serving as a reserve pool of intellectual labor from which the bourgeoisie can draw individuals capable of adding innovative nuances to its propaganda.

At this point of dissolution, the social importance of the experimental avant-garde is apparently less than that of the pseudomodernist tendencies which don't even bother to pretend to seek change, but which represent the modern, media-reinforced face of accepted culture. But those who have a role in the actual production of modern culture, and who are discovering their interests as producers of this culture (all the more acutely as they are reduced to a purely negative position), are developing a consciousness that is inevitably lacking among the modernist representatives of the declining society. The poverty of the accepted culture and its monopoly on the means of cultural production lead to a corresponding impoverishment of the theory and manifestations of the avant-garde. But it is only within this avant-garde that a new revolutionary conception of culture is imperceptibly taking shape. Now that the dominant culture and the beginnings of oppositional culture are arriving at the extreme point of their separation and impotence, this new conception should assert itself.

The history of modern culture during the period of revolutionary ebbing is thus also the history of the theoretical and practical defeat of the movement of renewal, to the point that the minority tendencies became completely isolated and decomposition reigned everywhere.

Between 1930 and World War II surrealism continually declined as a revolutionary force at the same time that its influence was being extended beyond its control. The postwar period led to the rapid destruction of surrealism by the two factors that had already blocked its development around 1930: the lack of possibilities for theoretical renewal and the ebbing of revolution, developments which were reflected in the political and cultural reaction within the workers movement. The latter factor is directly determinant, for example, in the disappearance of the surrealist group of Rumania. On the other hand, it is above all the first of these factors that condemned the Revolutionary Surrealism movement in France and Belgium to a rapid collapse. Except in Belgium, where a fraction issuing from surrealism has maintained a valid experimental position [the *Lèvres Nues* group], all the surrealist tendencies scattered around the world have joined the camp of mystical idealism.

Some of the Revolutionary Surrealists were among those who formed the "Experimental Artists' International" (1949-1951), which included participants from Denmark, Belgium, Holland, and eventually also Germany, and which published the journal *Cobra* (Copenhagen-Brussels-Amsterdam).<sup>3</sup> The merit of these groups was to have understood that such an organization is necessitated by the complexity and extent of present-day problems. But their lack of ideological rigor, the limitation of their pursuits to mainly plastic experimentation, and above all the absence of a comprehensive theory of the conditions and perspectives of their experience led to their breakup.

Lettrism, in France, had started off by totally opposing the entire known aesthetic movement, whose continual decaying it correctly analyzed. Striving for the uninterrupted creation of new

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<sup>3</sup> Cobra participants included future SI members Constant and Asger Jorn.

forms in all domains, the Lettrist group carried on a salutary agitation between 1946 and 1952. But the group generally took it for granted that aesthetic disciplines should take a new departure within a general framework similar to the former one, and this idealist error limited its productions to a few paltry experiments. In 1952 the Lettrist left wing organized itself into a “Lettrist International” and expelled the backward fraction.<sup>4</sup> In the Lettrist International the quest for new methods of intervention in everyday life was pursued amidst sharp struggles among different tendencies.

In Italy — with the exception of the antifunctionalist experimental group that in 1955 formed the most solid section of the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus — the efforts toward avant-garde formations have remained attached to the old artistic perspectives and have not even succeeded in expressing themselves theoretically.

During the same period the most innocuous and massified aspects of Western culture have been massively imitated all over the world, from the United States to Japan. (The US avant-garde, which tends to congregate in the American colony in Paris, lives there in the most tame, insipidly conformist manner, isolated ideologically, socially and even ecologically from everything else going on.) As for the productions of peoples who are still subject to cultural colonialism (often caused by political oppression), even though they may be progressive in their own countries, they play a reactionary role in the advanced cultural centers. Critics who have based their entire career on outdated systems of creation pretend to discover engaging new developments in Greek films or Guatemalan novels — an exoticism of the antiexotic, the revival of old forms long since exploited and exhausted in other countries; an exoticism which does, however, serve the primary purpose of exoticism: escape from the real conditions of life and creation.

In the workers states only the experimentation carried out by Brecht in Berlin, insofar as it puts into question the classic spectacle notion, is close to the constructions that matter for us today. Only Brecht has succeeded in resisting the stupidity of Socialist Realism in power.

Now that Socialist Realism is falling apart, we can expect much from a revolutionary confrontation of the intellectuals in the workers states with the real problems of modern culture. If Zhdanovism has been the purest expression not only of the cultural degeneration of the workers movement but also of the conservative cultural position in the bourgeois world, those in the Eastern Bloc who are presently revolting against Zhdanovism cannot do so — whatever their subjective intentions — merely in the name of a greater creative freedom à la Cocteau, for example. A negation of Zhdanovism objectively means the negation of the Zhdanovist negation of “liquidation.” Zhdanovism can be superseded only through the real exercise of freedom, which is consciousness of present necessity.

Here, too, the recent years have at most been a period of confused resistance to the confused reign of reactionary imbecility. There weren’t many of us really working against it. But we should not linger over the tastes or trivial findings of this period. The problems of cultural creation can be resolved only in relation with a new advance of world revolution.

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<sup>4</sup> The final break was provoked when the radical tendency (including Debord and Wolman) disrupted a Charlie Chaplin press conference in October 1952. The aesthete lettrists, including the founder of lettrism, Isidore Isou, disavowed this action. The disrupters responded with an open letter: “We believe that the most imperative expression of freedom is the destruction of idols, especially when those idols present themselves in the name of freedom. The provocative tone of our leaflet was an attack against a unanimous servile adoration. The disavowal by certain lettrists, including Isou himself, only reveals the constantly reengendered communication gap between extremists

## Platform for a Provisional Opposition

A revolutionary action within culture must aim to enlarge life, not merely to express or explain it. It must attack misery on every front. Revolution is not limited to determining the level of industrial production, or even to determining who is to be the master of such production. It must abolish not only the exploitation of humanity, but also the passions, compensations and habits which that exploitation has engendered. We have to define new desires in relation to present possibilities. In the thick of the battle between the present society and the forces that are going to destroy it, we have to find the first elements of a more advanced construction of the environment and new conditions of behavior — both as experiences in themselves and as material for propaganda. Everything else belongs to the past, and serves it.

We now have to undertake an organized collective work aimed at a unitary use of all the means of revolutionizing everyday life. That is, we must first of all recognize the interdependence of these means in the perspective of increased freedom and an increased control of nature. We need to construct new ambiances that will be both the products and the instruments of new forms of behavior. To do this, we must from the beginning make practical use of the everyday processes and cultural forms that now exist, while refusing to acknowledge any inherent value they may claim to have. The very criterion of formal invention or innovation has lost its sense within the traditional framework of the arts — insufficient, fragmentary forms whose partial renovations are inevitably outdated and therefore impossible.

We should not simply refuse modern culture; we must seize it in order to negate it. No one can claim to be a revolutionary intellectual who does not recognize the cultural revolution we are now facing. An intellectual creator cannot be revolutionary by merely supporting some party line, not even if he does so with original methods, but only by working alongside the parties toward the necessary transformation of all the cultural superstructures. What ultimately determines whether or not someone is a bourgeois intellectual is neither his social origin nor his knowledge of a culture (such knowledge may be the basis for a critique of that culture or for some creative work within it), but his role in the production of the historically bourgeois forms of culture. Authors of revolutionary political opinions who find themselves praised by bourgeois literary critics should ask themselves what they've done wrong.

The union of several experimental tendencies for a revolutionary front in culture, begun at the congress held at Alba, Italy, at the end of 1956, presupposes that we not neglect three important factors.

First of all, we must insist on a complete accord among the persons and groups that participate in this united action; and this accord must not be facilitated by allowing certain of its consequences to be dissimulated. Jokers or careerists who are stupid enough to think they can advance their careers in this way must be rebuffed.

Next, we must recall that while any genuinely experimental attitude is usable, that word has very often been misused in the attempt to justify artistic actions within an already-existing structure. The only valid experimental proceeding is based on the accurate critique of existing con-

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and ex-extremists." Lettrist International participants included Henry de Béarn, Serge Berna, *Michèle Bernstein*, Jean-Louis Brau, Ivan Chtcheglov, *Mohamed Dahou*, *Guy Debord*, *Abdelhafid Khatib*, Jean-Michel Mension, Patrick Straram, *Alexander Trocchi* and Gil J Wolman. Those italicized were later among the original members of the SI. (Chtcheglov was never an SI member, though he is listed in Raspaud and Voyer's book as a "membre de loin" — a fellow traveler — and was perhaps considered a sort of honorary member due to his important early contributions.)

ditions and the deliberate supersession of them. It must be understood once and for all that something that is only a personal expression within a framework created by others cannot be termed a creation. Creation is not the arrangement of objects and forms, it is the invention of new laws on such arrangement.

Finally, we have to eliminate the sectarianism among us that opposes unity of action with possible allies for specific goals and prevents our infiltration of parallel organizations.<sup>5</sup> From 1952 to 1955 the Lettrist International, after some necessary purges, continually moved toward a sort of absolutist rigor leading to an equally absolute isolation and ineffectuality, and ultimately to a certain immobility, a degeneration of the spirit of critique and discovery. We must definitively supersede this sectarian conduct in favor of real actions. This should be the sole criterion on which we join with or separate from comrades. Naturally this does not mean that we should renounce breaks, as everyone urges us to do. On the contrary, we think that it is necessary to go still further in breaking with habits and persons.

We should collectively define our program and realize it in a disciplined manner, using any means, even artistic ones.

## Toward a Situationist International

Our central idea is the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality. We must develop a systematic intervention based on the complex factors of two components in perpetual interaction: the material environment of life and the behaviors which that environment gives rise to and which radically transform it.

Our perspectives of action on the environment ultimately lead us to the notion of unitary urbanism. Unitary urbanism is defined first of all as the use of all arts and techniques as means contributing to the composition of a unified milieu. Such an interrelated ensemble must be envisaged as incomparably more far-reaching than the old domination of architecture over the traditional arts, or than the present sporadic application to anarchic urbanism of specialized technology or of scientific investigations such as ecology. Unitary urbanism must, for example, determine the acoustic environment as well as the distribution of different varieties of food and drink. It must include both the creation of new forms and the *détournement* of previous forms of architecture, urbanism, poetry and cinema. Integral art, which has been talked about so much, can be realized only at the level of urbanism. But it can no longer correspond to any of the traditional aesthetic categories. In each of its experimental cities unitary urbanism will act by way of a certain number of force fields, which we can temporarily designate by the classic term "district." Each district will tend toward a specific harmony distinct from neighboring harmonies; or else will play on a maximum breaking up of internal harmony.

Secondly, unitary urbanism is dynamic, in that it is directly related to styles of behavior. The most elementary unit of unitary urbanism is not the house, but the architectural complex, which combines all the factors conditioning an ambiance, or a series of clashing ambiances, on the scale of the constructed situation. Spatial development must take into account the emotional effects

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<sup>5</sup> The SI subsequently renounced any such "infiltration" of other groups, considering that simultaneous membership in two organizations tends to lead to manipulation.

that the experimental city is intended to produce. One of our comrades has advanced a theory of “states-of-mind” districts, according to which each district of a city would be designed to provoke a specific basic sentiment to which people would knowingly expose themselves. It seems that such a project draws appropriate conclusions from the current tendency to depreciate randomly encountered primary sentiments, and that its realization could contribute to accelerating that depreciation. The comrades who call for a new, free architecture must understand that this new architecture will primarily be based not on free, poetic lines and forms — in the sense that today’s “lyrical abstract” painting uses those terms — but rather on the atmospheric effects of rooms, hallways, streets — atmospheres linked to the activities they contain. Architecture must advance by taking emotionally moving situations, rather than emotionally moving forms, as the material it works with. And the experiments conducted with this material will lead to new, as yet unknown forms.

Psychogeographical research, “the study of the exact laws and specific effects of geographical environments, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals,” thus takes on a double meaning: active observation of present-day urban agglomerations and development of hypotheses on the structure of a situationist city. The progress of psychogeography depends to a great extent on the statistical extension of its methods of observation, but above all on experimentation by means of concrete interventions in urbanism. Before this stage is attained we cannot be certain of the objective truth of our initial psychogeographical findings. But even if those findings should turn out to be false, they would still be false solutions to what is nevertheless a real problem.

Our action on behavior, linked with other desirable aspects of a revolution in mores, can be briefly defined as the invention of games of an essentially new type. The most general goal must be to expand the nonmediocre part of life, to reduce the empty moments of life as much as possible. One could thus speak of our enterprise as a project of quantitatively increasing human life, an enterprise more serious than the biological methods currently being investigated, and one that automatically implies a qualitative increase whose developments are unpredictable. The situationist game is distinguished from the classic notion of games by its radical negation of the element of competition and of separation from everyday life. On the other hand, it is not distinct from a moral choice, since it implies taking a stand in favor of what will bring about the future reign of freedom and play.

This perspective is obviously linked to the continual and rapid increase of leisure time resulting from the level of productive forces our era has attained. It is also linked to the recognition of the fact that a battle of leisure is taking place before our eyes, a battle whose importance in the class struggle has not been sufficiently analyzed. So far, the ruling class has succeeded in using the leisure the revolutionary proletariat wrested from it by developing a vast industrial sector of leisure activities that is an incomparable instrument for stupefying the proletariat with by-products of mystifying ideology and bourgeois tastes. The abundance of televised imbecilities is probably one of the reasons for the American working class’s inability to develop any political consciousness. By obtaining through collective pressure a slight rise in the price of its labor above the minimum necessary for the production of that labor, the proletariat not only extends its power of struggle, it also extends the terrain of the struggle. New forms of this struggle then arise alongside directly economic and political conflicts. It can be said that up till now revolutionary propaganda has been constantly overcome within these new forms of struggle in all the countries where advanced industrial development has introduced them. That the necessary changing of

the infrastructure can be delayed by errors and weaknesses at the level of superstructures has unfortunately been demonstrated by several experiences of the twentieth century. It is necessary to throw new forces into the battle of leisure. We will take our position there.

A rough experimentation toward a new mode of behavior has already been made with what we have termed the *dérive*: the practice of a passional journey out of the ordinary through a rapid changing of ambiances, as well as a means of psychogeographical study and of situationist psychology. But the application of this striving for playful creativity must be extended to all known forms of human relationships, so as to influence, for example, the historical evolution of sentiments like friendship and love. Everything leads us to believe that the essential elements of our research lie in our hypothesis of the construction of situations.

A person's life is a succession of fortuitous situations, and even if none of them is exactly the same as another the immense majority of them are so undifferentiated and so dull that they give a definite impression of sameness. As a result, the rare intensely engaging situations found in life only serve to strictly confine and limit that life. We must try to construct situations, that is to say, collective ambiances, ensembles of impressions determining the quality of a moment. If we take the simple example of a gathering of a group of individuals for a given time, it would be desirable, while taking into account the knowledge and material means we have at our disposal, to study what organization of the place, what selection of participants and what provocation of events are suitable for producing the desired ambiance. The powers of a situation will certainly expand considerably in both time and space with the realizations of unitary urbanism or the education of a situationist generation.

The construction of situations begins beyond the ruins of the modern spectacle. It is easy to see how much the very principle of the spectacle — nonintervention — is linked to the alienation of the old world. Conversely, the most pertinent revolutionary experiments in culture have sought to break the spectators' psychological identification with the hero so as to draw them into activity by provoking their capacities to revolutionize their own lives. The situation is thus designed to be lived by its constructors. The role played by a passive or merely bit-part playing "public" must constantly diminish, while that played by those who cannot be called actors, but rather, in a new sense of the term, "livers," must steadily increase.

We have to multiply poetic subjects and objects — which are now unfortunately so rare that the slightest ones take on an exaggerated emotional importance — and we have to organize games for these poetic subjects to play with these poetic objects. This is our entire program, which is essentially transitory. Our situations will be ephemeral, without a future. Passageways. Our only concern is real life; we care nothing about the permanence of art or of anything else. Eternity is the grossest idea a person can conceive of in connection with his acts.

Situationist techniques have yet to be invented. But we know that a task presents itself only when the material conditions necessary to its realization already exist, or at least are in the process of formation. We have to begin with a phase of small-scale experimentation. It will probably be necessary to prepare plans or scenarios for the creation of situations, despite their inevitable inadequacy at the beginning. To this end we must develop a system of notations, which will become more precise as we learn more from the experiences of construction. We will also need to discover or verify certain laws, such as that according to which situationist emotions depend on extreme concentration or extreme dispersal of actions (classical tragedy giving a rough idea of the former, *dérives* of the latter). In addition to the direct means that will be used for specific ends, the positive phase of the construction of situations will require a new application of reproductive

technologies. One can envisage, for example, televised images of certain aspects of one situation being communicated live to people taking part in another situation somewhere else, thereby producing various modifications and interferences between the two. More simply, a new style of documentary film could be devoted to “current events” that really are current and eventful by preserving (in situationist archives) the most significant moments of a situation before the evolution of its elements has led to a different situation. Since the systematic construction of situations will give rise to previously unknown sentiments, film will find its greatest educational role in the dissemination of these new passions.

Situationist theory resolutely supports a noncontinuous conception of life. The notion of unity must cease to be seen as applying to the whole of one’s life (where it serves as a reactionary mystification based on the belief in an immortal soul and, in the final analysis, on the division of labor); instead, it should apply to the construction of each particular moment of life through the unitary use of situationist methods. In a classless society there will no longer be “painters,” but only situationists who, among other things, sometimes paint.

The main emotional drama of life, aside from the perpetual conflict between desire and reality hostile to desire, seems to be the sensation of the passage of time. In contrast to the aesthetic modes that strive to fix and eternalize some emotion, the situationist attitude consists in going with the flow of time. In so doing, in pushing ever further the game of creating new, emotionally provocative situations, the situationists are gambling that change will usually be for the better. In the short term the odds are obviously against that bet. But even if we have to lose it a thousand times, we see no other choice for a progressive attitude.

The situationist minority first emerged as a tendency in the Lettrist left wing, then in the Lettrist International which it ended up controlling. The same objective movement has led several recent avant-garde groups to similar conclusions. Together we must eliminate all the relics of the recent past. We now believe that an accord for a united action of the revolutionary avant-garde in culture must be carried out on the basis of such a program. We have neither guaranteed recipes nor definitive results. We only propose an experimental research to be collectively led in a few directions that we are presently defining and toward others that have yet to be defined. The very difficulty of succeeding in the first situationist projects is a proof of the newness of the domain we are penetrating. Something that changes our way of seeing the streets is more important than something that changes our way of seeing paintings. Our working hypotheses will be reexamined at each future upheaval, wherever it comes from.

Various people (particularly among the revolutionary artists and intellectuals who have resigned themselves to a certain impotence) will respond that this “situationism” seems rather disagreeable; that we have not created any beautiful works; that we would do better to talk about André Gide; and that no one will see any clear reasons to be interested in us. They will evade facing the issues we have raised by reproaching us for using scandalous tactics in order to call attention to ourselves, and will express their indignation at the procedures we have sometimes felt obliged to adopt in order to dissociate ourselves from certain people. We answer: It’s not a matter of knowing whether this interests you, but whether you yourselves are capable of doing anything interesting in the context of the new conditions of cultural creation. Your role, revolutionary artists and intellectuals, is not to complain that freedom is insulted when we refuse to march alongside the enemies of freedom. Your role is not to imitate the bourgeois aesthetes who try to restrict people to what has already been done because what has already been done doesn’t bother them. You know that creation is never pure. Your role is to find out what the international

avant-garde is doing, to take part in the critical development of its program, and to call for its support.

## **Our Immediate Tasks**

We must call attention, among the workers parties or the extremist tendencies within those parties, to the need to undertake an effective ideological action in order to combat the emotional influence of advanced capitalist methods of propaganda. On every occasion, by every hyper-political means, we must publicize desirable alternatives to the spectacle of the capitalist way of life, so as to destroy the bourgeois idea of happiness. At the same time, taking into account the existence, within the various ruling classes, of elements that have always tended (out of boredom and thirst for novelty) toward things that lead to the disappearance of their societies, we should incite the persons who control some of the vast resources that we lack to provide us with the means to carry out our experiments, out of the same motives of potential profit as they do with scientific research.

We must everywhere present a revolutionary alternative to the ruling culture; coordinate all the researches which are currently taking place but which lack a comprehensive perspective; and incite, through critiques and propaganda, the most advanced artists and intellectuals of all countries to contact us in view of a collective action.

We should declare ourselves ready to renew discussion, on the basis of this program, with those who, having taken part in an earlier phase of our action, are still capable of rejoining with us.

We must put forward the slogans of unitary urbanism, experimental behavior, hyper-political propaganda, and the construction of ambiances. The passions have been sufficiently interpreted; the point now is to discover new ones.

## **Translator's Notes**



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Guy Debord  
Report on the Construction of Situations  
And on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action  
July 1957

<http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/report.htm>

“Rapport sur la construction des situations” was one of the preparatory texts for the July 1957 conference at Cosio d’Arroscia, Italy, at which the Situationist International was founded. This translation by Ken Knabb is from the Situationist International Anthology (Revised and Expanded Edition, 2006).

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