

# In Conversation with Raoul Vaneigem

Hans Ulrich Obrist

May 2009

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** I just visited Edouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau, who have written an appeal to Barack Obama. What would your appeal and/or advice be to Obama?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** I refuse to cultivate any relationship whatsoever with people of power. I agree with the Zapatistas from Chiapas who want nothing to do with either the state or its masters, the multinational mafias. I call for civil disobedience so that local communities can form, coordinate, and begin self-producing natural power, a more natural form of farming, and public services that are finally liberated from the scams of government by the Left or the Right. On the other hand, I welcome the appeal by Chamoiseau, Glissant, and their friends for the creation of an existence in which the poetry of a life rediscovered will put an end to the deadly stranglehold of the commodity.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Could we talk about your beginnings? How did your participation in situationism begin, and what was your fundamental contribution? At the outset of your relationship with the SI, there was the figure of Henri Lefebvre. What did he mean to you at the time? Why did you decide to send him poetic essays?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** I would first like to clarify that situationism is an ideology that the situationists were unanimous in rejecting. The term "situationist" was ever only a token of identification. Its particularity kept us from being mistaken for the throngs of ideologues. I have nothing in common with the spectacular recuperation of a project that, in my case, has remained revolutionary throughout. My participation in a group that has now disappeared was an important moment in my personal evolution, an evolution I have personally pressed on with in the spirit of the situationist project at its most revolutionary. My own radicality absolves me from any label. I grew up in an environment in which our fighting spirit was fueled by working class consciousness and a rather festive conception of existence. I found Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* captivating. When *La Somme et le reste* [The Sum and the Remainder] was published, I sent him an essay of sorts on "poetry and revolution" that was an attempt to unify radical concepts, Lettrist language, music, and film imagery by crediting them all with the common virtue of making the people's blood boil. Lefebvre kindly responded by putting me in touch with Guy Debord who immediately invited me to Paris. The two of us had very different temperaments, but we would agree over a period of nearly ten years on

the need to bring consumer society to an end and to found a new society on the principle of self-management, where life supersedes survival and the existential angst that it generates.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Which situationist projects remain unrealized?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** Psychogeography, the construction of situations, the superseding of predatory behavior. The radicality, which, notwithstanding some lapses, never ceased to motivate us, remains a source of inspiration to this day. Its effects are just beginning to manifest themselves in the autonomous groups that are now coming to grips with the collapse of financial capitalism.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** The Situationist International defined the situationist as someone who commits her- or himself to the construction of situations. What were those situations for you, concretely? How would you define the situationist project in 2009?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** By its very style of living and thinking, our group was already sketching out a situation, like a beachhead active within enemy territory. The military metaphor is questionable, but it does convey our will to liberate daily life from the control and stranglehold of an economy based on the profitable exploitation of man. We formed a “group-at-risk” that was conscious of the hostility of the dominant world, of the need for radical rupture, and of the danger of giving in to the paranoia typical of minds under siege. By showing its limits and its weaknesses, the situationist experience can also be seen as a critical meditation on the new type of society sketched out by the Paris Commune, by the Makhnovist movement and the Republic of Councils wiped out by Lenin and Trotsky, by the libertarian communities in Spain later smashed by the Communist Party. The situationist project is not about what happens once consumer society is rejected and a genuinely human society has emerged. Rather, it illuminates now how lifestyle can supersede survival, predatory behavior, power, trade and the death-reflex.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** You and Guy Debord are the main protagonists of the situationist movement. How do you see Debord’s role and your role?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** Not as roles. That is precisely what situationism in its most ridiculous version aims at: reducing us to cardboard cut-outs that it can then set up against one another according to the spectacle’s standard operating procedure. I am simply the spokesman, among others, of a radical consciousness. I just do what I can to see that resistance to market exploitation is transformed into an offensive of life, and that an art of living sweeps away the ruins of oppression.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** What were your reasons for resigning from the group?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** Following the occupation movements of May 1968, we knew that some recuperation was afoot. We were familiar with the mechanisms of alienation that would falsify our ideas and fit them neatly into the cultural puzzle. It became clear to us, during the last conference in Venice, that we had failed to shatter those mechanisms, that in fact they were shattering us from the inside. The group was crumbling, the Venice conference was demonstrating its increasing uselessness, and the only answers put forward were commensurate with the self-parody we had fallen into. Dissension intensified to the point of paranoid denunciation: of betrayals of radicality, of breaches of revolutionary spirit, of dereliction of conscience. Those times of catharsis and anathema are now long past, and it might be useful to examine how it is that we sowed the seeds of failure for which the group ended up paying such a heavy price. The shipwreck, however, did not indiscriminately sweep away to the shores of oblivion all of us who participated in the adventure. The group vanished in such a

way as to allow the individuals to either consolidate their radicality, disown it, or lapse into the imposture of radicalism. I have attempted to analyze our experimental adventure in *Entre le deuil du monde et la joie de vivre* [Between Mourning the World and Exuberant Life].

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** You have written a lot on life, not survival. What is the difference?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** Survival is budgeted life. The system of exploitation of nature and man, starting in the Middle Neolithic with intensive farming, caused an involution in which creativity—a quality specific to humans—was supplanted by work, by the production of a covetous power. Creative life, as had begun to unfold during the Paleolithic, declined and gave way to a brutish struggle for subsistence. From then on, predation, which defines animal behavior, became the generator of all economic mechanisms.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Today, more than forty years after May '68, how do you feel life and society have evolved?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** We are witnessing the collapse of financial capitalism. This was easily predictable. Even among economists, where one finds even more idiots than in the political sphere, a number had been sounding the alarm for a decade or so. Our situation is paradoxical: never in Europe have the forces of repression been so weakened, yet never have the exploited masses been so passive. Still, insurrectional consciousness always sleeps with one eye open. The arrogance, incompetence, and powerlessness of the governing classes will eventually rouse it from its slumber, as will the progression in hearts and minds of what was most radical about May 1968.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Your new book takes us on a trip “between mourning the world and exuberant life.” You revisit May '68. What is left of May '68? Has it all been appropriated?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** Even if we are today seeing recycled ideologies and old religious infirmities being patched up in a hurry and tossed out to feed a general despair, which our ruling wheelers and dealers cash in on, they cannot conceal for long the shift in civilization revealed by May 1968. The break with patriarchal values is final. We are moving toward the end of the exploitation of nature, of work, of trade, of predation, of separation from the self, of sacrifice, of guilt, of the forsaking of happiness, of the fetishizing of money, of power, of hierarchy, of contempt for and fear of women, of the misleading of children, of intellectual dominion, of military and police despotism, of religions, of ideologies, of repression and the deadly resolutions of psychic tensions. This is not a fact I am describing, but an ongoing process that simply requires from us increased vigilance, awareness, and solidarity with life. We have to reground ourselves in order to rebuild—on human foundations—a world that has been ruined by the inhumanity of the cult of the commodity.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** What do you think of the current moment, in 2009? Jean-Pierre Page has just published *Penser l'après crise* [Thinking the After-Crisis]. For him, everything must be reinvented. He says that a new world is emerging now in which the attempt to establish a US-led globalization has been aborted.

**Raoul Vaneigem:** The agrarian economy of the Ancien Regime was a fossilized form that was shattered by the emerging free-trade economy, from the 1789 revolution on. Similarly, the stock-dabbling speculative capitalism whose debacle we now witness is about to give way to a capitalism reenergized by the production of non-polluting natural power, the return to use value, organic farming, a hastily patched-up public sector, and a hypocritical moralization of trade. The future belongs to self-managed communities that produce indispensable goods and services for all (natural power, biodiversity, education, health centers, transport, metal

and textile production...). The idea is to produce for us, for our own use—that is to say, no longer in order to sell them—goods that we are currently forced to buy at market prices even though they were conceived and manufactured by workers. It is time to break with the laws of a political racketeering that is designing, together with its own bankruptcy, that of our existence.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Is this a war of a new kind, as Page claims? An economic Third World War?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** We are at war, yes, but this is not an economic war. It is a world war against the economy. Against the economy that for thousands of years has been based on the exploitation of nature and man. And against a patched-up capitalism that will try to save its skin by investing in natural power and making us pay the high price for that which—once the new means of production are created—will be free as the wind, the sun, and the energy of plants and soil. If we do not exit economic reality and create a human reality in its place, we will once again allow market barbarism to live on.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** In his book *Making Globalization Work*, Joseph Stiglitz argues for a reorganization of globalization along the lines of greater justice, in order to shrink global imbalances. What do you think of globalization? How does one get rid of profit as motive and pursue well-being instead? How does one escape from the growth imperative?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** The moralization of profit is an illusion and a fraud. There must be a decisive break with an economic system that has consistently spread ruin and destruction while pretending, amidst constant destitution, to deliver a most hypothetical well-being. Human relations must supersede and cancel out commercial relations. Civil disobedience means disregarding the decisions of a government that embezzles from its citizens to support the embezzlements of financial capitalism. Why pay taxes to the bankster-state, taxes vainly used to try to plug the sinkhole of corruption, when we could allocate them instead to the self-management of free power networks in every local community? The direct democracy of self-managed councils has every right to ignore the decrees of corrupt parliamentary democracy. Civil disobedience towards a state that is plundering us is a right. It is up to us to capitalize on this epochal shift to create communities where desire for life overwhelms the tyranny of money and power. We need concern ourselves neither with government debt, which covers up a massive defrauding of the public interest, nor with that contrivance of profit they call “growth.” From now on, the aim of local communities should be to produce for themselves and by themselves all goods of social value, meeting the needs of all—authentic needs, that is, not needs prefabricated by consumerist propaganda.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Edouard Glissant distinguishes between globality and globalization. Globalization eradicates differences and homogenizes, while globality is a global dialogue that produces differences. What do you think of his notion of globality?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** For me, it should mean acting locally and globally through a federation of communities in which our pork-barreling, corrupt parliamentary democracy is made obsolete by direct democracy. Local councils will be set up to take measures in favor of the environment and the daily lives of everyone. The situationists have called this “creating situations that rule out any backtracking.”

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Might the current miscarriages of globalization have the same dangerous effects as the miscarriages of the previous globalization from the ‘30s? You have written that what was already intolerable in ‘68 when the economy was booming is even more intolerable today. Do you think the current economic despair might push the new generations to rebel?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** The crisis of the '30s was an economic crisis. What we are facing today is an implosion of the economy as a management system. It is the collapse of market civilization and the emergence of human civilization. The current turmoil signals a deep shift: the reference points of the old patriarchal world are vanishing. Percolating instead, still just barely and confusedly, are the early markers of a lifestyle that is genuinely human, an alliance with nature that puts an end to its exploitation, rape, and plundering. The worst would be the unawareness of life, the absence of sentient intelligence, violence without conscience. Nothing is more profitable to the racketeering mafias than chaos, despair, suicidal rebellion, and the nihilism that is spread by mercenary greed, in which money, even devalued in a panic, remains the only value.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** In his book *Utopistics*, Immanuel Wallerstein claims that our world system is undergoing a structural crisis. He predicts it will take another twenty to fifty years for a more democratic and egalitarian system to replace it. He believes that the future belongs to “demarketized,” free-of-charge institutions (on the model, say, of public libraries). So we must oppose the marketization of water and air.<sup>1</sup> What is your view?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** I do not know how long the current transformation will take (hopefully not too long, as I would like to witness it). But I have no doubt that this new alliance with the forces of life and nature will disseminate equality and freeness. We must go beyond our natural indignation at profit's appropriation of our water, air, soil, environment, plants, animals. We must establish collectives that are capable of managing natural resources for the benefit of human interests, not market interests. This process of reappropriation that I foresee has a name: self-management, an experience attempted many times in hostile historical contexts. At this point, given the implosion of consumer society, it appears to be the only solution from both an individual and social point of view.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** In your writing you have described the work imperative as an inhuman, almost animal condition. Do you consider market society to be a regression?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** As I mentioned above, evolution in the Paleolithic age meant the development of creativity—the distinctive trait of the human species as it breaks free from its original animality. But during the Neolithic, the osmotic relationship to nature loosened progressively, as intensive agriculture became based on looting and the exploitation of natural resources. It was also then that religion surfaced as an institution, society stratified, the reign of patriarchy began, of contempt for women, and of priests and kings with their stream of wars, destitution, and violence. Creation gave way to work, life to survival, jouissance to the animal predation that the appropriation economy confiscates, transcends, and spiritualizes. In this sense market civilization is indeed a regression in which technical progress supersedes human progress.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** For you, what is a life in progress?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** Advancing from survival, the struggle for subsistence and predation to a new art of living, by recreating the world for the benefit of all.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** My interviews often focus on the connections between art and architecture/urbanism, or literature and architecture/urbanism. Could you tell me about the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism?

---

<sup>1</sup> See Immanuel Wallerstein, *Utopistics: Or, Historical Choices of the Twenty-first Century* (New York: The New Press, 1998).

**Raoul Vaneigem:** That was an idea more than a project. It was about the urgency of rebuilding our social fabric, so damaged by the stranglehold of the market. Such a rebuilding effort goes hand in hand with the rebuilding by individuals of their own daily existence. That is what psychogeography is really about: a passionate and critical deciphering of what in our environment needs to be destroyed, subjected to detournement, rebuilt.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** In your view there is no such thing as urbanism?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** Urbanism is the ideological gridding and control of individuals and society by an economic system that exploits man and Earth and transforms life into a commodity. The danger in the self-built housing movement that is growing today would be to pay more attention to saving money than to the poetry of a new style of life.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** How do you see cities in the year 2009? What kind of unitary urbanism for the third millennium? How do you envision the future of cities? What is your favorite city? You call Oarystis the city of desire. Oarystis takes its inspiration from the world of childhood and femininity. Nothing is static in Oarystis. John Cage once said that, like nature, “one never reaches a point of shapedness or finishedness. The situation is in constant unpredictable change.”<sup>2</sup>

Do you agree with Cage?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** I love wandering through Venice and Prague. I appreciate Mantua, Rome, Bologna, Barcelona, and certain districts of Paris. I care less about architecture than about how much human warmth its beauty has been capable of sustaining. Even Brussels, so devastated by real estate developers and disgraceful architects (remember that in the dialect of Brussels, “architect” is an insult), has held on to some wonderful bistros. Strolling from one to the next gives Brussels a charm that urbanism has deprived it of altogether. The Oarystis I describe is not an ideal city or a model space (all models are totalitarian). It is a clumsy and naive rough draft for an experiment I still hope might one day be undertaken—so I agree with John Cage. This is not a diagram, but an experimental proposition that the creation of an environment is one and the same as the creation by individuals of their own future.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Is Oarystis based on natural power, like the Metabolist cities? Rem Koolhaas and I are working on a book on the Japanese Metabolists. When I read your wonderful text on Oarystis, I was reminded of that movement from the 1960s, especially the floating cities, Kikutake’s water cities. Is Oarystis a Metabolist city?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** When Oarystis was published, the architect Philippe Rothier and Diane Hennebert, who ran Brussels’ Architecture Museum at the time, rightly criticized me for ignoring the imaginative projects of a new generation of builders. Now that the old world is collapsing, the fusion of free natural power, self-built housing techniques, and the reinvention of sensual form is going to be decisive. So it is useful to remember that technical inventiveness must stem from the reinvention of individual and collective life. That is to say, what allows for genuine rupture and ecstatic inventiveness is self-management: the management by individuals and councils of their own lives and environment through direct democracy. Let us entrust the boundless freedoms of the imaginary to childhood and the child within us.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Several years ago I interviewed Constant on New Babylon. What were your dialogues with Constant and how do you see New Babylon today?

---

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Richard Kostelanetz, *Conversing with Cage*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 34.

**Raoul Vaneigem:** I never met Constant, who if I am not mistaken had been expelled before my own association with the SI. New Babylon's flaw is that it privileges technology over the formation of an individual and collective way of life—the necessary basis of any architectural concept. An architectural project only interests me if it is about the construction of daily life.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** How can the city of the future contribute to biodiversity?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** By drawing inspiration from Alphonse Allais, by encouraging the countryside to infiltrate the city. By creating zones of organic farming, gardens, vegetable plots, and farms inside urban space. After all, there are so many bureaucratic and parasitical buildings that can't wait to give way to fertile, pleasant land that is useful to all. Architects and squatters, build us some hanging gardens where we can go for walks, eat, and live!

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Oarystis is in the form of a maze, but it is also influenced by Venice and its public piazzas. Could you tell us about the form of Oarystis?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** Our internal space-time is maze-like. In it, each of us is at once Theseus, Ariadne, and Minotaur. Our derives would gain in awareness, alertness, harmony, and happiness if only external space-time could offer meanders that could conjure up the possible courses of our futures, as an analogy or echo of sorts—one that favors games of life, and prevents their inversion into games of death.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Will museums be abolished? Could you discuss the amphitheater of memory? A protestation against oblivion?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** The museum suffers from being a closed space in which works waste away. Painting, sculpture, music belong to the street, like the facades that contemplate us and come back to life when we greet them. Like life and love, learning is a continuous flow that enjoys the privilege of irrigating and fertilizing our sentient intelligence. Nothing is more contagious than creation. But the past also carries with it all the dross of our inhumanity. What should we do with it? A museum of horrors, of the barbarism of the past? I attempted to answer the question of the "duty of memory" in *Ni pardon, ni talion* [Neither Forgiveness Nor Retribution]:

Most of the great men we were brought up to worship were nothing more than cynical or sly murderers. History as taught in schools and peddled by an overflowing and hagiographic literature is a model of falsehood; to borrow a fashionable term, it is negationist. It might not deny the reality of gas chambers, it might no longer erect monuments to the glory of Stalin, Mao or Hitler, but it persists in celebrating the brutish conqueror: Alexander, called the Great—whose mentor was Aristotle, it is proudly intoned—Julius Caesar, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, Napoleon, the throngs of generals, slaughterers of peoples, petty tyrants of the city or the state, torturer—judges, Javerts of every ilk, conniving diplomats, rapists and killers contracted by religions and ideologies; so much high renown carved from baseness, wickedness, and abjection. I am not suggesting we should unpave the avenues of official history and pave the side alleys instead. We are not in need of a purged history, but of a knowledge that scoops out into broad daylight facts that have been obscured, generation after generation, by the unceasing stratification of prejudice. I am not calling for a tribunal of the mind to begin condemning a bunch of undesirables who have been bizarrely put up on pedestals and celebrated in the motley pantheons of official memory. I just want to see the list of their crimes, the mention of their victims, the

recollection of those who confronted them added to the inventory of their unsavory eulogies. I am not suggesting that the name of Francisco Ferrer wipe out that of his murderer, Alfonso XIII, but that at the very least everything be known of both. How dare textbooks still cultivate any respect for Bonaparte, responsible for the death of millions, for Louis XIV, slaughterer of peasants and persecutor of Protestants and freethinkers? For Calvin, murderer of Jacques Gruet and Michel Servet and dictator of Geneva, whose citizens, in tribute to Sebastien Castellion, would one day resolve to destroy the emblems and signs of such an unworthy worship? While Spain has now toppled the effigies of Francoism and rescinded the street names imposed by fascism, we somehow tolerate, towering in the sky of Paris, that Sacre-Coeur whose execrable architecture glorifies the crushing of the Commune. In Belgium there are still avenues and monuments honoring King Leopold II, one of the most cynical criminals of the nineteenth century, whose “red rubber” policy—denounced by Mark Twain, by Roger Casement (who paid for this with his life), by Edward Dene Morel, and more recently by Adam Hochschild—has so far bothered nary a conscience. This is not a call to blow up his statues or to chisel away the inscriptions that celebrate him. This is a call to Belgian and Congolese citizens to cleanse and disinfect public places of this stain, the stain of one of the worst sponsors of colonial savagery. Paradoxically, I do tend to believe that forgetting can be productive, when it comes to the perpetrators of inhumanity. A forgetting that does not eradicate remembering, that does not blue-pencil memory, that is not an enforceable judgment, but that proceeds rather from a spontaneous feeling of revulsion, like a last-minute pivot to avoid dog droppings on the sidewalk. Once they have been exposed for their inhumanity, I wish for the instigators of past brutalities to be buried in the shroud of their wrongs. Let the memory of the crime obliterate the memory of the criminal.<sup>3</sup>

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Learning is deserting schools and going to the streets. Are streets becoming Thinkbelts? Cedric Price’s Potteries Thinkbelt used abandoned railroads for pop-up schools. What and where is learning today?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** Learning is permanent for all of us regardless of age. Curiosity feeds the desire to know. The call to teach stems from the pleasure of transmitting life: neither an imposition nor a power relation, it is pure gift, like life, from which it flows. Economic totalitarianism has ripped learning away from life, whose creative conscience it ought to be. We want to disseminate everywhere this poetry of knowledge that gives itself. Against school as a closed-off space (a barrack in the past, a slave market nowadays), we must invent nomadic learning.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** How do you foresee the twenty-first-century university?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** The demise of the university: it will be liquidated by the quest for and daily practice of a universal learning of which it has always been but a pale travesty.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Could you tell me about the freeness principle (I am extremely interested in this; as a curator I have always believed museums should be free—Art for All, as Gilbert and George put it).

---

<sup>3</sup> Raoul Vaneigem, *Ni pardon, ni talion: La question de l’impunité dans les crimes contre l’humanité* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2009).



**Raoul Vaneigem:** Freeness is the only absolute weapon capable of shattering the mighty self-destruction machine set in motion by consumer society, whose implosion is still releasing, like a deadly gas, bottom-line mentality, cupidity, financial gain, profit, and predation. Museums and culture should be free, for sure, but so should public services, currently prey to the scamming multinationals and states. Free trains, buses, subways, free healthcare, free schools, free water, air, electricity, free power, all through alternative networks to be set up. As freeness spreads, new solidarity networks will eradicate the stranglehold of the commodity. This is because life is a free gift, a continuous creation that the market's vile profiteering alone deprives us of.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Where is love in Oarystis?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** Everywhere. The love affair, as complex as it is simple, will serve as the building block for the new solidarity relations that sooner or later will supersede selfish calculation, competition, competitiveness, and predation, causes of our societies' dehumanization.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Where is the city of the dead? In a forest rather than a cemetery?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** Yes, a forest, an auditorium in which the voices of the dead will speak amidst the lushness of nature, where life continuously creates itself anew.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Have you dreamt up other utopian cities apart from Oarystis? Or a concrete utopia in relation to the city?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** No, but I have not given up hope that such projects might mushroom and be realized one day, as we begin reconstructing a world devastated by the racketeering mafias.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** In 1991 I founded a Robert Walser museum, a strollological museum, in Switzerland. I have always been fascinated by your notion of the stroll. Could you say something about your urban strolls with and without Debord? What about Walser's? Have other strollologists inspired you?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** I hold Robert Walser in high regard, as many do. His lucidity and sense of derive enchanted Kafka. I have always been fascinated by the long journey Holderlin undertook following his break-up with Diotima. I admire Chatwin's Songlines, in which he somehow manages to turn the most innocuous of walks into an intonation of the paths of fate, as though we were in the heart of the Australian bush. And I appreciate the strolls of Leon-Paul Fargue and the learning of Heron de Villefosse. My psychogeographic derives with Guy Debord in Paris, Barcelona, Brussels, Beersel, and Antwerp were exceptional moments, combining theoretical speculation, sentient intelligence, the critical analysis of beings and places, and the pleasure of cheerful drinking. Our homeports were pleasant bistros with a warm atmosphere, havens where one was oneself because one felt in the air something of the authentic life, however fragile and short-lived. It was an identical mood that guided our wanderings through the streets, the lanes and the alleys, through the meanderings of a pleasure that our every step helped us gauge in terms of what it might take to expand and refine it just a little further. I have a feeling that the neighborhoods destroyed by the likes of Haussmann, Pompidou, and the real estate barbarians will one day be rebuilt by their inhabitants in the spirit of the joy and the life they once harbored.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** What possibilities do you see for disalienation and detournement in 2009?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** This is a time of unprecedented chaos in material and moral conditions. Human values are going to have to compensate for the effects of the only value that has prevailed so far: money. But the implosion of financial totalitarianism means that this currency, which has so tripped us up, is now doomed to devaluation and a loss of all meaning. The absurdity

of money is becoming concrete. It will gradually give way to new forms of exchange that will hasten its disappearance and lead to a gift economy.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** What are the conditions for dialogue in 2009? Is there a way out of this system of isolation?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** Dialogue with power is neither possible nor desirable. Power has always acted unilaterally, by organizing chaos, by spreading fear, by forcing individuals and communities into selfish and blind withdrawal. As a matter of course, we will invent new solidarity networks and new intervention councils for the well-being of all of us and each of us, overriding the fiat of the state and its mafioso-political hierarchies. The voice of lived poetry will sweep away the last remaining echoes of a discourse in which words are in profit's pay.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** In your recent books you discuss your existence and temporality. The homogenizing forces of globalization homogenize time, and vice versa. How does one break with this? Could you discuss the temporality of happiness, as a notion?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** The productivity- and profit-based economy has implanted into lived human reality a separate reality structured by its ruling mechanisms: predation, competition and competitiveness, acquisitiveness and the struggle for power and subsistence. For thousands of years such denatured human behaviors have been deemed natural. The temporality of draining, erosion, tiredness, and decay is determined by labor, an activity that dominates and corrupts all others. The temporality of desire, love, and creation has a density that fractures the temporality of survival cadenced by work. Replacing the temporality of money will be a temporality of desire, a beyond-the-mirror, an opening to uncharted territories.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Is life ageless?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** I don't claim that life is ageless. But since survival is nothing but permanent agony relieved by premature death, a renatured life that cultivates its full potential for passion and creation would surely achieve enough vitality to delay its endpoint considerably.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** The *Revolution of Everyday Life* was a trigger for May '68, and you have stated in other interviews that it is your key book that you are continually rewriting. Was the book an epiphany? How did it change the course of your work? What had you been doing previously?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** The book was prompted by an urgent need I was feeling at the time for a new perspective on the world and on myself, to pull me out of my state of survival, by means other than through suicide. This critical take on a consumer society that was corrupting and destroying life so relentlessly made me aware and conscious of my own life drive. And it became clear to me very quickly that this wasn't a purely solipsistic project, that many readers were finding their own major concerns echoed there.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** The *Revolution of Everyday Life* ends on an optimistic note: "We have a world of pleasures to win, and nothing to lose but boredom."<sup>4</sup> Are you still an optimist today?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** "Pessimists, what is it you were hoping for?" Scutenaire wrote. I am neither a pessimist nor an optimist. I try to remain faithful to a principle: desire everything, expect nothing.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** What is the most recent version of the book?

---

<sup>4</sup> Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Welcombe, UK: Rebel Press, 2001), 279.

**Raoul Vaneigem:** Entre le deuil du monde et la joie de vivre [Between Mourning the World and Exuberant Life].

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** What book are you working on at the moment?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** I would love to have the resources to complete a Dictionary of Heresies, so as to clarify and correct the historical elements included in The Movement of the Free Spirit and Resistance to Christianity.

*Proust Questionnaire, answered by Raoul Vaneigem*

**What is your main personality trait?**

Laziness.

**What quality do you appreciate most in a man?**

Generosity coupled with human awareness of life.

**What quality do you appreciate most in a woman?**

Love and love of life.

**What is your favorite virtue?**

Creativity.

**What is your main shortcoming?**

My lack of self-confidence.

**What is your favorite activity?**

Opening myself to life so life can open in me.

**What is your dream for happiness?**

Realizing my desires by fulfilling those of my loved ones.

**What would your greatest misfortune be?**

Failing to contribute to the happiness of all.

**Who would you have wished to be?**

Myself, more and more alive.

**Where would you like to live?**

Everywhere genuine humanity prevails.

**What is your favorite flower?**

All of them, with a soft spot for the rose ancienne.

**What is your favorite bird?**

All of them, with a special fondness for the blackbird that sings in the evening.

**Who are your favorite writers of prose?**

Montaigne, La Boetie, Shakespeare, Diderot, Kafka, Artaud, Benjamin, Orwell, Zweig.

**Who are your favorite poets?**

Villon, Blake, Holderlin, Nerval, Fourier.

**Who are your male heroes in literature?**

Hyperion.

**Who are your female heroes in literature?**

Little Kaethchen of Heilbronn.

**Who are your favorite composers?**

Mozart, Boccherini.

**Who are your favorite painters?**

Giorgione, Turner, Goya, Van Gogh.

**Who are your male heroes in history?**

Eloi Pruystinck, Sebastian Castellio, Edouard Carouy and Andre Soudy, Albert Libertad, Flores Magon, Alexandre Marius Jacob, Jan Valtin.

**Who are your female heroes in history?**

Olympe de Gouges, Claire Demar, Louise Michel, Qurratulain.

**What are your favorite names?**

Ariane, Chiara, Ariel, Tristan.

**What do you hate above all else?**

Voluntary servitude.

**Which historical figures do you despise the most?**

All tyrants, slaughterers of the people, perpetrators of human suffering and those who honor them.

**Which military feat do you admire the most?**

None.

**Which reform do you hold in highest regard?**

Those that humanize man.

**Which natural talent would you have wished to have?**

The ability to better disseminate the human awareness of life.

**How would you like to die?**

Peacefully, at the hour I choose.

**What is your present state of mind?**

A precarious balance between what I am and what I wish to be.

**Which wrongs do you tolerate the best?**

There are no wrongs, just mistakes to rectify.

**What is your motto?**

Desire everything, expect nothing.

Desire everything, expect nothing.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** The question of temporality also brings us to Proust and his questionnaire (see inset). What might your definition of happiness be in 2009?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** Living ever more intensely and passionately in an ever more intense world. To those who sneer at my ecstatic candor, I reply with a phrase that brings me great comfort: “The desire for an other life is that life already.”<sup>5</sup>

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Do you have unrealized projects? Unrealized books, unrealized projects in fields other than writing, unrealized architectural projects?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** My priority is to live better and better in a world that is more and more human. I would love to build the “urban countryside” of Oarystis, but I’m not just waiting patiently, like Fourier at the Palais Royal, for some billionaire to decide to finance the project only to lose everything to the financial crash a minute later.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** What about your collaborations with other artists, painters, sculptors, designers, filmmakers?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** I don’t collaborate with anyone. At times I have offered a few texts to artist friends, not as a commentary on their work but as a counterpoint to it. Art moves me when, in it, I can sense its own overcoming, something that goes beyond it; when it nurtures a trace of life that blossoms as a true aspiration, the intuition of a new art of living.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Could you tell me about Brussels? What does Brussels mean to you? Where do you write?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** I live in the country, facing a garden and woods where the rhythm of the seasons has retained its beauty. Brussels as a city has been destroyed by urbanists and architects who are paid by real estate developers. There are still a few districts suitable for nice walks. I am fond of a good dozen wonderful cafes where one can enjoy excellent artisanal beers.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Do you agree with Geremek’s view that Europe is the big concern of the twenty-first century?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** I am not interested in this Europe ruled by racketeering bureaucracies and corrupt democracies. And regions only interest me once they are stripped of their regionalist ideology and are experiencing self-management and direct democracy. I feel neither Belgian nor European. The only homeland is a humanity that is at long last sovereign.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** You have used a lot of pseudonyms. *Je est un autre* [I is an other]? How do you find or choose pseudonyms? How many pseudonyms have you used? Is there a complete list?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** I don’t keep any kind of score. I leave it up to the inspiration of the moment. There is nothing secret about using a pseudonym. Rather, it is about creating a distance, most often in commissioned work. This allows me to have some fun while alleviating my enduring financial difficulties, which I have always refused to resolve by compromising with the world of the spectacle.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** A book that has been used by many artists and architects has been your *Dictionnaire de citations pour servir au divertissement et a l’intelligence du temps* [Dictionary of Quotations for the Entertainment and Intelligence of Our Time]. Where did that idea come from?

---

<sup>5</sup> See Raoul Vaneigem, “Le désir d’une vie autre est déjà cette vie-là,” *Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme* 119–121 (2008): 193–194.

**Raoul Vaneigem:** It was a suggestion from my friend Pierre Drachline, who works for the Cherche Midi publishing house.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** You have often criticized environmental movements who try to replace existing capitalism with capitalism of a different type. What do you think of Joseph Beuys? What non-capitalist project or movement do you support?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** We are being “offered” biofuels on the condition we agree to transgenic rape-seed farming. Eco-tourism will accelerate the plundering of our biosphere. Windmill farms are being built without any advantage to the consumers. Those are the areas where intervention is possible. Natural resources belong to us, they are free, they must be made to serve the freedom of life. It will be up to the communities to secure their own energy and food independence so as to free themselves from the control of the multinationals and their state vassals everywhere. Claiming natural power for our use means reclaiming our own existence first. Only creativity will rid us of work.

**Hans Ulrich Obrist:** Last but not least, Rilke wrote that wonderful little book of advice to a young poet. What would your advice be to a young philosopher-writer in 2009?

**Raoul Vaneigem:** To apply to his own life the creativity he displays in his work. To follow the path of the heart, of what is most alive in him.

---

Translated from the French by Eric Angles

Hans Ulrich Obrist is a Swiss curator and art critic. In 1993, he founded the Museum Robert Walser and began to run the Migrateurs program at the Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris where he served as a curator for contemporary art. In 1996 he co-curated Manifesta 1, the first edition of the roving European biennial of contemporary art. He presently serves as the Co-Director, Exhibitions and Programmes and Director of International Projects at the Serpentine Gallery in London.

Raoul Vaneigem is a Belgian writer and philosopher. After studying romance philology at the Free University of Brussels (now split into the Université Libre de Bruxelles and the Vrije Universiteit Brussel) from 1952 to 1956, he participated in the Situationist International from 1961 to 1970. His most well-known book, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, was published in 1967, the same year as fellow situationist Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Hans Ulrich Obrist  
In Conversation with Raoul Vaneigem  
May 2009

e-flux Journal #6, May 2009, Retrieved February 15, 2013 from  
<http://www.e-flux.com/journal/in-conversation-with-raoul-vaneigem/>  
Translated from the French by Eric Angles

**[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)**