

Notes on “The Situationist International: The Art of Historical Intervention”

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We say “art” instead of “theory” when referring to intervention in History because we believe that the latter is more a trade or acquired knowledge, and a skill involving the rational and subversive application of ideas, rather than a conceptual system with which one interprets reality in order to present it to consciousness. In Greek, “*theoros*” is the spectator and the situationists always refused to define their critical labors as theory. For Debord, it had more to do with a particular form of art, the art of war. How does one learn this art? First of all, by visiting the places where it is practiced. Michelle Bernstein answered this question in a humorous way. In her novel, *All the King’s Men*, the following dialogue takes place:

“To what do you devote yourself?”

“To reification.”

“Now I see, very serious work, with big books and a table full of papers.”

“No. I wander. For the most part, I wander.”

It has been said of the S.I. that it was “the most political artistic vanguard and the most artistic political vanguard”. Our presentation will consist of an attempt to provide a comprehensive explanation of the meaning of this statement. It was indeed a vanguard, a small group of people, mostly artists, people who transformed their lives into art, keeping abreast of reality, but one step ahead. In pace with their time, and the times. At least since the era of the romantic movement we have been able to confirm that cultural crises precede social crises and are the best indicators of the advent of the latter. In this connection we are not only referring to Dadaism, the cultural prelude to the Russian Revolution, but also to the “Beat” generation of Kerouac, Burroughs and Trocchi, which heralded the beginning of the American revolt of the sixties. And of course, to the S.I., which was intimately related to May ’68 and the modern revolution. The vanguard was the best instrument for intervention in the crisis, and culture—which includes art—was its most appropriate field of action. It was the organizational form that expressed the fight against bourgeois culture in decomposition. The principle task of the vanguard consisted in making a clean slate of the past by constituting the destructive moment of the present. The critique of not just

the dominant ethical and social values but also artistic values first assumed the form of a cultural revolution, which in its first stage was devalorizing and negative. The intentions of the vanguards were expressed more in manifestos than in works. Their works only made sense as manifestos and the way that they were publicized was indissolubly linked with their manifestos. The S.I. went further, since it denied the existence of a situationist art, authorizing only a situationist use of art. Literary or artistic deviation was the most serious crime, and was punished by expulsion. Any traffic with official culture was in flagrant contradiction with the message of the vanguard, nullifying its exemplary nature and undermining its very reason for existence. Exclusion was a mandate of coherence; a demand that was first put into practice by the Surrealist Movement. All the actions of the vanguard—including expulsions—were only conceived as radical and public acts of rupture, or in other words, as scandals. Scandal effectively broke with the circle of silence with which the dominant order protected itself, occupying as a counter-publicity measure the center of subversive knowledge which is the topic of our presentation. By way of scandal the overwhelming disparity of forces was compensated for, so that a tiny group could, thanks to this practice, successfully counteract the cultural mainstream.

It was with a scandal that Isidore Isou, founder of the Lettrist Movement, presented himself at the Cannes Film Festival in 1951, with his “Treatise on Slobber and Eternity” under his arm. This film was made by boldly combining cinematographic scraps, deliberately scratched and accompanied by a provocative soundtrack. The Lettrist shows sought conflict. What was concealed behind their experimental orthography, their collages, their splatterings, their poems composed of letters instead of words, their films like “The Anti-Concept” of Gil J. Wolman, or Debord’s “Howlings in Favor of Sade”, without images, with totally white and totally black screens, was not the appearance of a new art, but the demolition of the old one. They remind us of the previous works by the Dadaists such as the urinal that Duchamp called “Fountain”, the phonetic poetry of Schwitters, or Picabia’s film ironically entitled, “Intermission”. According to the Lettrist vanguard the entire period of crisis has a destructive, declining stage that devalues artistic production, and a constructive, ascending stage, that is creative of new values. The destructive stage was effected by means of a methodical inflation of the production of artworks. Hence the frantic experimentalism that characterized the era—we are thinking not only of the Lettrists, but also of Asger Jorn, Cage, Saura, Pollock, Resnais, Rexroth, the COBRA group, and so many others—in opposition to the recuperation of which, which proceeded by way of the erection of a new dogmatism, the Lettrist left arose. The latter having constituted an International, its members thought that the “ascendant” moment had not yet arrived because the social revolution had not yet taken place, and they openly advocated the abolition of art; they sought to continue to pursue the task of the subversion of values, constructing, via the “detoured” use of aesthetic elements, situations that would dissolve bourgeois conduct, new environments that were conducive to playfulness and wandering that would prevent a regression towards conformist behaviors. Hence the adjective “situationist”: a situationist is someone who constructs situations.

In 1957 the L.I. held a congress in the small Italian town of Coscio d’Arroscia that was attended by other vanguardists, almost all of whom were members of the Imaginist Bauhaus, a kind of center that advocated a unitary use of the arts and fought against the instrumentalist rationalization of life that was implied by functionalism and “cutting edge” industrial design. Those who attended the congress decided to found a new International, the S.I. Debord drafted a pamphlet that would serve as a basis for membership, “Report on the Construction of Situations”, and the S.I. took pains to distinguish itself from the rival vanguard, the surrealist movement, criticizing

above all the latter's incursions into the irrational and its faith in the work of art. Debord would later summarize this critique in a lapidary phrase: "surrealism wanted to realize art without abolishing it." The situationists as a matter of principle believed in art conceived integrally and as a collective game, but not in the work of art. Their concept of the constructed situation coincided with that of the "moment" expressed by Lefebvre—"an attempt to attain the total realization of a possibility"—and their views had much in common with his critique of everyday life. Everyday life, once it was subjected to that modern form of capitalism that they called the "spectacle", marked the completion of the process of proletarianization of the wage workers that had begun in the workshops and factories. It would be the point of departure for a more authentic class struggle, one that was less limited by economic constraints because it was inscribed in the rejection of work. The material framework within which it unfolded was conditioned by a repressive urbanism, which was being deliberately designed to isolate individuals, mechanize them and transform them into worker-consumers. The space that the new rationalist urbanism conceived nullified any possibility of play and encounter, which is why the situationists attempted to formulate a critique of spatial alienation in the theory of Unitary Urbanism, which contained Fourierist elements. The group's self-defense against the temptation of the work of art led to the first expulsions. Contact with the group led by Castoriadis, "Socialisme ou Barbarie", initiated by Frankin and Debord, put the unification of social critique and the critique of everyday life on the agenda, further isolating those who, by maintaining the separation of these domains, reproduced artistic inclinations. The will to realize art without abolishing it had led many pseudo-vanguardists to an indefinite complacent acceptance of the process of dissolution, attacking each element separately, whether form, or color, or material, or packaging. This process, by virtue of mere repetition, ended up securing a place in the catalogs of the critics, and thus became a profitable business. The S.I., like Hegel, thought that art had died as a means by which one could communicate the truth of this world, which was "now insufficient in the long historical journey towards self-consciousness", which was now the mission of a higher social-critical consciousness. The search for a unitary critique of class society made the definitive liquidation of the artistic phase imperative, leaving only those artists who had survived the splits.

Between 1962 and 1967 the S.I., reinforced by new members—Vaneigem, Kotanyi, Viénet, Khayati—elaborated the most complete and coherent critique of its time, the only subversive thought capable of grasping and precipitating the unfolding of events; the revolutionary thought of a new era of social struggle. Its pillars had to be sought in the method of Hegel and Marx, the abolition of art, the critique of the spectacle and the theory of the Workers Councils. Everything that was worthwhile in the previous ideologies that were critical of the existing state of affairs—the rejection of the state and the radical demand for subjectivity of the anarchists, the councilist democracy of the left communists, the turn towards the game and what was marvelous in everyday life of the surrealists, etc.—found a place in the situationist critique, and was articulated in that critique in a coherent way. The organizational form adopted, however—which was set forth in the "Minimum Definition of a Revolutionary Organization"—that of the separate revolutionary vanguard, the result of the insufficient political and cultural development of the proletariat, posed the urgent problem of the communication of this critique. The S.I. proved to be tremendously efficacious with the paltry resources at its disposal and with the rare allies that it found along the way. In 1966 and 1967 it produced a rare abundance of publications that completed its task and, contrary to all expectations, whether of those in power or the man in the street, comprised the most appropriate preface for the revolt of May '68. It was during that period that

a handful of essential works were published that shocked the world, such as “The Decline and Fall of the Spectacular-Commodity Society”, “The Explosion Point of Ideology in China”, and “On the Poverty of Student Life”; issues No. 10 and 11 of the S.I. journal; and the books, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* and *The Society of the Spectacle*. The proletariat—“those who have no power over their lives, and know it”—did not express itself through the students or the trade unions, but in wildcat strikes and the protests of young people who had exchanged the guarantee of not dying of hunger for the certainty of dying of boredom; in struggles like those led by the British anti-nuclear movement or by the Dutch Provos; in the conflicts of the Asturian miners and the self-management of the Algerian workers; in the insurrections of the black ghettos in the U.S. or in the riots of the Japanese Zengakuren....

The situationist critique did not make much headway in the working class milieu, but the workers struggle became more situationist with each passing day. If historical consciousness did not advance with sufficient speed towards the proletariat, it seemed instead that the proletariat was advancing towards historical consciousness. May '68 signified the confluence of the two movements. The student conflict in which the S.I. sought the springboard for its historical intervention was the spark that set ten million workers in motion. The biggest wildcat strike in history paralyzed political power, and for more than a week the opportunity existed for its overthrow, but the working class did not dare to take this step and transform the occupations of the factories into workers councils. The Grenelle Accords between the French government and the trade unions allowed the old world to stage a counterattack. What ensued was a phenomenon that is typical of mass society: revolutionary ideas underwent an extraordinary rise in popularity, not as a subversive weapon but as an object of contemplation and consumption. Most of those who brandished such ideas did so not in order to change the world but to be part of the trend: the revolution had become fashionable! The practical-theoretical critique of a particular period of class struggle was transmuted into a static ideology, into situationism. The situationists, despite their best efforts, had a multitude of followers whom they called “pro-situs”; not among the sincere revolutionaries, who were always few in number, but among the déclassé masses that economic growth was constantly producing, and which supplied power with its subordinate personnel. Situationist books were sold by the truckload and their content was received as a revelation. The “situ” critique provided a better explanation of its time than any other critique, but it had not foreseen that the social forces of capital would also use it to understand the times, in order to reinforce its order that was undergoing a process of transformation: it had not been predicted that the established order, in the heat of the struggle, would also become situationist!

In 1970 the S.I. entered into a period of paralysis and decline that an “orientation debate” was incapable of exorcising. In 1972 Debord and Sanguinetti officially proclaimed its dissolution. All kinds of explanations have been given for this: the falling out between Debord and Vaneigem, the S.I.’s two leading theoreticians; the inadequacy of the new members; that the time of the vanguards had come to an end; that the social question during times of class war could no longer be approached as a theory of revolution but must be considered in terms of a strategy of war.... Debord seemed to support the latter view when, regarding the Portuguese Revolution of the Carnations, he said that we should read Clausewitz before Marx. He was not that far off the mark, but he was not completely correct, either. Perhaps the time of the S.I. was over, but not that of the situationists. The proletariat engaged in various upsurges in different countries—Portugal, Italy, Spain, Poland—but it remained at a standstill. The anti-nuclear movement rose to prominence, introducing new questions concerning the degradation of life on the planet that

were already intuited in the “Theses on the S.I. and Its Time”. And capitalist society, after decades of economic expansion, began to undergo restructuring in order to prepare for the qualitative leap forward that its historic enemy, the proletariat, had not chosen to make.

The ruling class knew how to utilize the cultural legacy that the working class had not taken advantage of, changing its language, its values, its traditions and its moral criteria in favor of a new era of domination. In an unprecedented process of recuperation, its intellectual mercenaries plunged deep into the contributions of the situationists. The recuperators had something in common with the S.I., and that is that they, too, were fighting against the outdated aesthetic and Calvinist morality of the traditional bourgeoisie, obviously not in favor of a revolution, but in favor of a renovated and postmodern capitalism. This recuperation broke with the past and liquidated the cultural tradition of national capitalism because they had become obstacles to economic growth. It cut the umbilical cord that united the ruling class with repressed sexuality and bourgeois statism because the accumulation of capital required their supersession. The deregulation of national markets also affected the terrain of ideas and, unfortunately, the “French theory” of the seventies—Foucault, Guattari, Lyotard, Deleuze, Derrida, Baudrillard, Negri, Lipovetsky—appeared at just the right time, as a reactionary counterweight to the situationist critique and as a neutralizing element of amalgamation of the first order. May ’68 was reinterpreted as a transformation of the cultural paradigm, an ideological renewal, a “revolution” in customs, and even as the end of Modernity and of History. The achievements registered in the domain of personal freedom were nothing but the pale reflection of the freedom of the market. The words of Debord and his Italian colleague—“let the age recoil from itself while admiring itself for what it is”—were fully confirmed ten years after they were written.

For the revolutionaries a great deal was left unsaid after May, and what could be interpreted at the time as the perfection of theory, was instead nothing but a setback for the historical subject. The counterrevolution follows the same roads as the revolution, but as an enemy. For a long time, recuperation was its main weapon. So much garbage has accumulated and so much confusion has been sown, that an objective approach to the revolts of the sixties and seventies is no easy matter; and it is even harder to accurately restore them. Only a new revolutionary movement will be capable of doing so. The legacy of the S.I., however, is still dangerous, because so many people continue to decontextualize, neutralize, fragment and transplant it for the use of the new generations of leaders. They were ideas of war, with an explosive charge that must always be defused if they are to be used as a factor for innovation of power. Their use as an ideological reserve of class rule requires that precautions should be taken: something that was born on the barricades cannot easily be reconciled to resting on the shelves of a museum, nor does it allow itself so easily to be disemboweled on the dissection table. There is always the risk that, like a lost child, its real descendants will find it. Situationist ideas are a dangerous weapon in the wrong hands: then the devil wields them.

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