

# Note on the Situationist International<sup>1</sup>

By Michèle Bernstein

The Situationist International was founded in 1957 at a conference in Italy of several artists from many different European countries. Some of these artists came from avant-garde movements that defined themselves around 1950 – and still exist in almost complete obscurity at this moment – COBRA in Northern Europe and Lettrism in Paris. These artists came from contestations of the failures and critiques of the insufficiency of the programs of those movements and, even more, from the insufficiency and regression of all modern thought since the 1920s.

The first thing the situationists have proposed is the surpassing of artistic specializations, art as a separate activity, by searching beyond the entire movement in which language is decomposing and beyond the formal dissolution that modern art has been [enacting] in its most authentic line. The situationists have designated as the primary terrains of creativity in the future experiments in behavior and the construction of complete settings, moments of life freely created.

Since the definition of experimentation of this type is only the other side of a critique of the entirety of current social life and all hierarchical models of society, the situationists have also rejected the impotence and lies of “specialized politics” as a means of transforming the world. They claim that the creative praxis in the totality of everyday life that they herald will be the only route to a new definition of the revolutionary project in our times.

Having engaged themselves in a project of this scale, the situationists have, since the beginnings of the movement, formed a new and coherent theory of the modern world, first developed in the journals of the SI: *International Situationniste*, of which nine issues have appeared so far; *Situationistisk Revolution* and *Der Deutsche Gedanke*.<sup>2</sup> This theory simultaneously exposes and fights against progress in the organization of the passive “spectacle” in culture and in all aspects of life in the consumer society, and also sketches out new forms of contestation, from détournement in artistic language, “communication that contains

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<sup>1</sup> Original version of the text published in an English translation by the *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 September 1964. To date, only this English translation has been available; unfortunately, it is not a complete version of the text. Complete French version published in Raoul Vaneigem and Gérard Berréby, *Rien n'est fini, tout commence* (Editions Allia, 2014). Translated by NOT BORED! 4 November 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Translations of situationist materials into Danish and German, respectively.

its own critique,” to unitary urbanism, “which isn’t a doctrine of urbanism but a critique of it.” Inspired by philosophy as well as by art, the SI also refuses to constitute any kind of doctrine and rejects the term “situationism,” which is only used by the enemies of the situationist program.

The development of this theory goes hand-in-hand with a practical organization of collective activity. The situationists refuse disciples; they only require the assembling of “geniuses” to accomplish the avant-garde task that they have traced out; they reject all compromise and even any contact with the conformism or the pseudo-modern repetition of currently-known culture. The situationists immediately exclude from their ranks those who cease to support any of the group’s rigorous positions in practice, for which they have often been reproached: it seems an excessive manner of taking their own declarations seriously. The situationist label has thus been taken up several times, in different gossipy cultural occasions, by diverse intellectuals who have been chased from the SI or were never even members of it: such as the partisans of Nash in Sweden, the Germans who publish *Spur*, the Dutch Nashists who publish *The Situationist Times*, and the technocratic urbanists who follow the conceptions of the architect Constant. Veritable situationists are infinitely more opposed to all the dominant mechanisms of culture and information, and so far they have accomplished the largest part of their progress underground.

The important works by the Situationist International are currently on the road to being completed. We must cite three books that will be published: the *Traité de savoir-vivre à l’usage des jeunes générations*, by Raoul Vaneigem; *La Société du Spectacle*, by Guy Debord; and *L’Architecture et le Détournement*, by Rudi Renson.<sup>3</sup> There is the reversal of “pop art” by the New Irrealism experimented with by the painter J. V. Martin; and, finally, in the cinema, experimental documentaries. At the same time, the situationists flatter themselves that they have influenced radical minorities in certain currents of revolt that have appeared in Spain, the Congo, Scandinavia and Japan.

It is obviously impossible to advance arguments about situationist theses or even to expose them with suitable precision in a hundred lines: the necessity of presenting the cohesion between each of them and all of their references to the ensemble prevent any summation in a few isolated points. Among the first intellectual sectors that have had the opportunity to be aware of these theses, the great majority of them wonder if the situationists are joking, or if they are completely deceived because they have reached a rarely observed degree of

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<sup>3</sup> The one project in this list that never came to fruition.

stupidity. The situationists assure everyone that none of these doubts will be supportable in a hundred years.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A reference to the hundredth anniversary of the founding of the First International in 1864.