

# A Report to the Academy:

## Annie Le Brun Doesn't Write "Situationist" Books

People got their opinions.  
Where do they come from?  
Each day seems like a natural fact  
And what we think changes how we act.  
People got opinions.  
Where do they come from?

“Why Theory?” Gang of Four (1981)

You might expect, as I did, that Annie Le Brun – a poet and essayist born in Rennes, France in 1942, a member of André Breton’s surrealist group in the 1960s and the author of dozens of books – respected and perhaps even liked Guy Debord. After all, the two of them shared a love for the writings of the Marquis de Sade, French poetry of the 19th century, and modern art of the early 20th. Between 1989 and 1993, they exchanged letters and met each other at least once. From those letters – or, rather, from the letters that Debord sent to Le Brun and were later published in *Guy Debord Correspondance, Vol 7: Janvier 1988-Novembre 1994*<sup>1</sup> – we can deduce that, after the publication of the first volume of Debord’s autobiography, *Panegyric*, in 1989, Le Brun contacted his publisher and her letter was in turn forwarded to him.

In what appears to be Debord’s first letter to Le Brun (we do not know if there were any previous exchanges), he says to her, “I am happy to learn that my veritable history pleases you. One has always verified that poets are the only good critics. And, for my part, I will abstain from considering any others after you” (letter dated 4 October 1989).

In his second letter to her, dated 28 February 1990, Debord – who’d obviously been sent copies of Le Brun’s books in the meantime – praises what he’s received: “Thanks are long due for the books on Sade. I immediately read the shortest one [*Le Châteaux de la subversion*, published by Jean-Jacques Pauvert in

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<sup>1</sup> None of the eight volumes in this series include any of the letters written to Debord.

1982] and *Bloc d'abîme* [published by Jean-Jacques Pauvert in 1986]. Your Sade is the true one, I am sure of it.”

By Debord's third letter to Le Brun, which is dated 23 April 1991, he was ready to meet her in person: “Despite the circumstances, no doubt regrettable, which had previously kept us far apart, due to attachment to nuances [of opinion] or, better, to *people*, but considering what has happened since then, do you not believe that we must now get together?” (emphasis added). It is not clear who Debord means by “people”; it could be André Breton, of whom Debord had been quite critical in the late 1950s, just a few years before Le Brun joined Breton's surrealist group. Though Debord and Le Brun might have disagreed about Breton as a person or the legacy of surrealism, these subjects are not mentioned in any of the letters that he sent to her. Perhaps they simply agreed to disagree about them.

It is clear from Debord's next letter to Le Brun (dated of 11 May 1991) that these two extraordinary people did in fact meet each other. He writes, “I enclose the copy of the letter that I wrote to my English translator on the very day that I met you.” And Debord was keen to spend more time with Le Brun. In his letter of 11 May, he writes, “Yesterday I received your letter of the 5th, which continues so well our conversation from last week. I do not know how to tell you how much I found it moving and instructive in so many ways [...] This century has led us to such harsh results that for almost ten years I have literally not met someone with whom it is possible to be understood concerning slightly difficult subjects [...] Diverse circumstances, fortunately coinciding with the delay of the usual dog days of summer, have led us to delay our departure until the end of May. Could we see each other once more before then?”

Over the course of the following two years, Debord sent Le Brun five more letters. In the last one, dated 14 March 1993, he says, “Thank you for your many letters,” which certainly suggests that these exchanges were pleasant and productive for both of them.

And so, it seems fitting somehow, that, in its review of Le Brun's book *The Reality Overload*, which was published in French in 2000 and translated into English in 2008, the website Dangerous Minds referred to it as “a Situationist critique of our current Internet culture.” What with her condemnations of commodification and voluntary servitude, and her calls to “re-impassion life,” Le Brun sure *sounds like* a situationist, though more like Raoul Vaneigem than Guy Debord.

Well, *something* must have happened between 1993 and 2000 – something that changed Le Brun's attitude towards Debord – because *The Reality Overload* contains an unexpected and cheap personal attack on him. After mentioning the manner in which “the young anarchist Jean-Jacques Liaboeuf” escaped capture by the police (he had “leather armbands studded with long, sharp spikes” under his

cape), Le Brun writes, “Thinkers of any intensity must be equipped with devices of this kind in order to avoid apprehension. Despite, or because of, the serious airs they assume, manners of speaking exist that are much less armed than they appear.”

“For example,” she continues, “Guy Debord failed to prevent Philippe Sollers – followed by all the underlings of arts and letters – from invoking Debord’s name today to the point of obscenity. This occurred even though Debord himself took the trouble to emphasize how ‘insignificant’ something appeared to him ‘because it was signed PHILIPPE SOLLERS.’” The footnote attached to this passage cites the right source for Debord’s remark: *Cette mauvaise reputation*, published by Gallimard in 1993. (Note well: Debord dismissed Sollers as “insignificant,” not in a private letter, but in a publicly available book brought out by a major publisher. That was going pretty far to dissuade him from writing any more, I’d say.)

“The above event,” Le Brun goes on, “refers to the oration to Debord that Sollers, the former 1960s Maoist and/or Stalinist who has since become a festive papist and a Ballardian of a libertine bent, rushed to deliver in the November 5, 1992, edition of *L’Humanité*.”

It is, perhaps, one of the ironies of history that we know that Debord had in fact read and disapproved of Sollers’ “oration” because he, Debord, *wrote to Annie Le Brun* (of all people) about it. In a letter to her dated 5 December 1992, he writes, “The way Sollers has been acting can leave no doubt in anyone’s mind, especially me, as you know. After reading his laughable *La Fête à Venise* [published in 1991] it appears clear that he wants to insinuate that he participated in the [Situationist International’s] Conference in Venice and that he figured among the mythical ‘clandestine situs.’ And, moreover, I have heard, thanks to Jean-Jacques [Pauvert], that this beast has claimed to Antoine Gallimard that he knows me personally. He has redoubled his cynical audacity by giving me a wreath of laurels in the pages of *L’Humanité*.”

So why is Annie Le Brun – of all people – giving Debord a hard time about this nonsense, eight years after the fact and six years after Debord’s death, when there’s nothing to be gained from rehashing such gossip?

What else does Le Brun think that Debord could have done to “prevent Philippe Sollers [...] from invoking Debord’s name today to the point of obscenity”? Break his legs? You can’t sue someone for saying nice things about you. But you *can* sue someone if they say false things about you, and that’s precisely what Debord did, back in 1984 and 1985, when various French newspapers were insinuating that he was in some way responsible for the murder of his friend and publisher, Gérard Lebovici; *he put his money where he mouth was*; he sued them and he won.

And so, in these passages, Annie Le Brun isn't really arguing a position about Debord or Sollers. Motivated by what appears to be spite, she is merely holding Debord up for ridicule by people who don't know all the facts. And here's her punch-line: "It would be nice to believe that Guy Debord, who wished to be the 'extreme artist' of *détournement*, did not himself fall victim to such a wretched *détournement*." Yes, he "fell victim" to "a wretched *détournement*." Oh, the irony! But it doesn't seem to matter to Le Brun – she doesn't stop to tell her readers – if Debord was in the end "détourned" by Sollers and *L'Humanité* in 1992 or if the *détournement*(s) came later, after Debord was dead. Either way, the "irony" of the thing is still good for a cheap laugh.<sup>2</sup>

It isn't just Debord whom Le Brun wants to ridicule and dismiss. She also has her sights on the entire situationist project. (In case you don't know, Debord was a prominent member of a revolutionary group called the Situationist International, which he co-founded in Italy in 1957 and dissolved in France in 1971.) Le Brun rarely speaks of what the situationists said and did while they were active; she almost always speaks of the subsequent and (for her) deplorable popularity of their works among other people, especially young academics.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Reality Overload*, Le Brun laments the obsolescence of "the dream and subsequently the imagination as a dream of the body, along with the body as the shadow of the imaginary realm." She writes that, "If, up to now, technical

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<sup>2</sup> There is a certain irony, if not a full-blown *détournement*, involved in the publication of *The Reality Overload* by Inner Traditions, a small publisher based in Rochester, Vermont. As its name indicates, Inner Traditions focuses on works about symbols, the occult, mysticism, the soul, the Laki Yuga and William Blake. How such a publisher ended up publishing a book by Annie Le Brun (not a hippie) is a mystery! This footnote to a passage by Le Brun, provided by the book's Editor, gives us a pretty good idea of the distortions involved in such a mismatch: "Situationism held that individuals are influenced more by external – situational – factors than by internal motives." And that's why "situationism" is bad: it ignored the (wait for it) inner factors and must have known nothing of the Inner Traditions.

<sup>3</sup> There's one notable exception to this, and it comes from an interview with Antoine Mercier from 2008 or 2009. Asked what she meant when she said "the system manages the catastrophe," Le Brun answered, "It is the commodification of all the forms of life, and its principle aim is infinite development. In this regard, the crisis that appears and is lived as a permanent state of exception constitutes a great opportunity to not open new markets and thus impose new forms of servitude. Where this is concerned, I refer to Riesel and Semprun's book *Catastrophism*, whose subtitle – 'administration of the disaster and sustainable submission' – shows how the notion of catastrophe is now used to prolong and worsen the on-going process of voluntary servitude." Though Le Brun doesn't mention it, René Riesel was a member of the Situationist International; Jaime Semprun was close to Debord in the 1970s; in the 1980s, both Riesel and Semprun were involved in the founding of the "post-situationist" journal *Encyclopédie des Nuisances*, to which Debord himself contributed a few articles; and, in the 1990s, *Encyclopédie des Nuisances* became a publishing house. *Catastrophism* was one of the titles it brought out in 2008.

criticism has not offered words on this point, the recent infatuation for Situationist theses, which are even more silent on the question of the imaginary realm and the body, gives us food for thought.” But she offers no proof that the situationists were “silent” (or even “more silent”) on these questions, and she would be hard-pressed to do so, given the group’s production of dozens of highly imaginative works of sculpture, paintings and films, and its consistent use of the semi-naked bodies of women as illustrations in their journal.

“Here we may see,” Le Brun continues, “one of the major reasons why it has suddenly become incumbent upon spectacle criticism [*sic*] to follow the example of technical criticism [...] In fact, the Situationist vogue, which continues to seduce academic snobbism in the countries that no longer have any resistance to the tyranny of the technical – particularly the United States – is significant, especially because these countries’ inopportune evocation helps to disguise an internalization of the technical. This is an irreversible condition resulting from the logic of computers.”

But the situationists weren’t only concerned with critiques of the spectacle. They were also concerned with the critique of everyday life, with living everyday life – their own everyday lives – outside of the constraints and empty satisfactions of the spectacle. One of them (Raoul Vaneigem) even wrote a book (first published in 1967) that was titled *The Revolution of Everyday Life* when it was translated into English.

But these facts do not seem to concern Annie Le Brun. “Thus,” she writes, “the denunciation of the image and the denunciation of the spectacle are the latest critical illusions offered to us *by society* at the very moment when these denunciations cannot explain this new modeling of the world” (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> It may well be that “society” is the current source of “critical illusions,” such as

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<sup>4</sup> What does the “new modeling of the world” look like today, in 2019? The new world order is now modeled around Russia. It was Russia, not the United States, that won the Cold War. Who obviously controls Donald J. Trump, the President of the USA and the putative leader of the Western world? Is it any of the usual suspects (the oil and gas companies, the arms manufacturers, the banks, the CIA)? No. It is Vladimir Putin, the ex-KGB agent and plutocrat who controls Russia. Putin controls Trump and helped get him elected. Now, what author, what “spectacle critic,” could you seek out to help you understand this “détournement” of history? Back in the day, what theorist was talking about the integration of the diffuse spectacle associated with the United States and the concentrated spectacle associated with the Soviet Union, and thus the formation of a third type, the “integrated spectacle”? The answer, of course, is Guy Debord, who, between 1988 and 1992, wrote a new book about “the spectacle” (*Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*) and added a new preface to his first book on the subject, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Both of these texts warned that the apparent defeat of the Soviet Union didn’t mean that the West had won; indeed, without the East to fight against, the West was at even greater risk of collapse due to its own internal contradictions.

“the denunciation of the spectacle,” but this has precious little – if anything at all – to do with what Debord, Vaneigem and the other situationists were doing in the 1960s, or with what Debord did until his death in 1994 and Vaneigem is still doing today.

Le Brun wants her readers to know that, these days, “Situationism acquits itself no better [than the believers in surrealism], having become in the space of a few years the credo of the prevailing cynicism.” Things have gone so far that “the major thesis of situationism is invalidated: The thing has been replaced, not by its image, but by its opposite. This has been done so skillfully and to such an extreme that emphasizing the spectacle would no doubt constitute the best means for diverting attention from how the harnessing of meaning is now perpetrated on a broad scale.”

But the SI’s major thesis *wasn’t* that “the thing has been replaced by its image.” It was that “the image” had become a thing, a material force, and thus was capable of penetrating into and colonizing everyday life – the realm of dreams, the imagination and the body.

Weren’t these basic questions about Situationist theory asked and answered back in the 1980s, when “situationism” first became fashionable, if not back in the 1960s, when “situationism” didn’t even exist yet? I find it tiresome to have to repeat such banalities, and no doubt the reader finds them tiresome to reread.

It’s regrettable that Annie Le Brun doesn’t write “situationist” books, that she is opposed to “situationism.” There’s something in the way, something we don’t know about. In any case, I am not appealing for a verdict. I am only imparting what I’ve learned; I am only making a report.

Bill Not Bored  
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