

Interview with Clairette Schock

By Gérard Berréby, Brussels, 30 April 2012¹

Robert Dehoux and I met in the Belgian Congo. Personally I detested the Congo. I detested being Belgian. I detested being white.

What were you doing down there?

I lived there with my first husband, but we'd decided to separate. Then I met Robert. We returned to Brussels together. I swore I'd never set foot in the Congo again. It was a continuous scandal. But I fell in love with Robert and so, when he went to Leopoldville to work for Mobil Oil as an engineer, I obviously followed him. When we thought about the Second [World] War, the Holocaust, all these horrors, we quickly asked ourselves, "How was all that possible?" One would have to be a great investigator to be able to understand how a population could let itself go to such aberrations. We fed upon history, philosophy, economic and psychoanalysis to try to determine what happened among the German people and similarly what happened to us so that we could agree to continually reproduce an unsatisfying pattern in our lives.

So you returned to Brussels after that?

Yes, and that was when we decided to open a bar, to be able to speak with people, to find out what they wanted. In bars, the discussion flows . . .

Robert gave up his job.

Yes, his beautiful career, too. Yet he'd been paid quite well, given that he'd been working for Americans. But we left anyway.

Why?

Because the Africans who came to dine at our place were very badly regarded by their community and we were very badly regarded by ours. The discontent of the Congolese was obvious and terribly well justified, but it was impossible to establish real contact with them. We were powerless to help them. So we concluded, "Let them make their revolution and we will make ours."

Who were you in contact with in Belgium?

Precisely no one.

¹ Published in Raoul Vaneigem and Gérard Berréby, *Rien n'est fini, tout commence* (Allia, 2014). Translated by NOT BORED! 2 December 2014. Footnotes by the translator.

All this took place during the big strikes [of 1960-61]. The tenor of the discussions must certainly have been very political . . . Who frequented your café?

There were several artists . . . In fact, what we finally succeeded in launching was far from our original idea. At the beginning, we wanted to open a working class bar so we could take the temperature of the population. Robert had let his career as an engineer go so that he could foment revolution – a vast project! We sought to meet people, palpate their opinions, evaluate the aspirations of each, and talk, talk, talk, talk. But it turned out that it wasn't so easy to open a bar. It cost a lot of money. We had to pay a tax upon opening. Because we didn't have a lot of money, we opened a private club, on a very chic avenue in Uccle, a magical spot, invisible from the street, a sculptor's studio with a large glass roof, hidden at the back of a garden. We had to be completely crazy to do such a thing!

We must make clear that Uccle is far from the city center.

Yes, it is a very bourgeois area, located in the south of Brussels. We'd been saved by the man who'd lived in the place before we rented it. His name was Jean-Marie Strebelle.² He was a painter, and the place had been his home and studio. He had many relatives. When he spoke to us about our project, he was a bit wary because we were going to be investing in a place that he'd occupied with his family for years. He feared it a bit when he was wasted drunk. One evening, he showed up with his dog and said, "OK, it's good; it's very good." From then on, he returned with materials for private showings. People came in groups to drink a nightcap at the bar, which we called *L'Estro Armonico*, out of a fondness for Vivaldi.³ Those who frequented Jean-Marie's studio automatically knew the address and could easily find it. That's how everything began . . . Thanks to that place, we met people we could never have dreamed of meeting ordinarily – like Louis Scutenaire, who came there with Magritte. Louis became a charming friend. It was a private club; we had the right to invite people on the sole condition that they signed the register. One evening, some people knocked on the door. A group of a dozen people came in. We said to this large table, "We invite you to be here, but be nice: write your names down and keep the cops away." Then these big mouths started to get angry: "Oh, no. We don't want to." We said to them, "So sorry, but you must leave." "Bunch of cunts." They went out, and one of the gentlemen broke the windowpane on the door with his heel on the way out. It was Roel D'Haese.⁴ This angry gesture gave him the idea for a bronze sculpture: *A Lumumba*.⁵ We saw each other again. But the first encounter was comic, at least. In fact, we had to throw out Albert Niels and his friends, to whom Corneille Hannoset had spoken of us.

Albert Niels had already helped the Taptoe Gallery by furnishing drinks and lodging the artists, the most famous of whom was Asger Jorn.

² According to the entry for Strebelle in the French version of Wikipedia, he too had lived in the Belgian Congo in the 1950s.

³ "Harmonic Inspiration," a collection of concertos written by Vivaldi in 1711.

⁴ A famous Flemish surrealist sculptor and artist (1921-1996).

⁵ It includes a boot.

Of course! I also remember the dreadful moment when our bar became fashionable. It was horrible! The people who frequented the bar were different: very young socialites. I chased them away with organ music – Bach and Buxtehude! Thus I had no need to ask them not to return! There was thus a certain efficiency in this. It was radical.

How did you find yourself mixed up with the situationist milieu?

Thanks to Attila Kotanyi. He then worked – this was around 1960 – in an architectural office run by a distant cousin whom I asked to design a staircase for *L'Estro Armonico*. We had a chat and determined that we shared the same opinions on the subjects that impassioned us. One day he said to us, “I must have you meet the people I know in Paris, who are quite formidable, you’ll see for yourself.” This was how we learned about the SI. Robert and I had no idea that such an intelligentsia existed in Paris. We were very innocent.

What was Attila Kotanyi like?

Despite his handicap (one of his arms – left or right, I no longer remember – had been atrophied by polio, I believe), Attila possessed a mad charm. He was originally from Hungary and suffered from being stateless. It was uncomfortable for him. I’ve forgotten his accent but his French was very peculiar. This didn’t prevent him from expressing himself very well. Guy, Raoul and Attila embarked together on a day in January 1961, during the big strikes.

You knew Raoul and Debord⁶ at the same time. What impression did they make on you?

They were very taciturn, perhaps a little distrustful, the first time that I saw them. Raoul was clearly very timid, very nice, but reserved. Over the course of the conversation that followed, this much became obvious: we thought in the same direction; we had the same aspirations; we had the feeling of being able to speak for hours without exhausting the smallest subject; we could finally get to the bottom of things. A real thirst for discovery existed: it was magnificent. We had to see each other again. We also soon came to know Maurice Wyckaert, who came to hang a very beautiful and large painting at *L'Estro*.

When you met him, Debord wasn’t yet 30 years old.

All this goes back 50 years. We were all very young then. Debord was a bit cold at first but this impression was attenuated by his discourse, which was passionate.

Was Michèle Bernstein there?

No. I no longer remember if I first met her in Brussels or in Paris, at their place on the impasse de Clairvaux, where we stayed. From our first meeting, that woman impassioned me. She was so funny, full of spirit, full of humor! I have the memory of a marvelous person, with whom I never

⁶ Perhaps conversations with Dehoux and Schock helped Guy Debord formulate his text “Conditions of the Congolese Revolutionary Movement” (July 1966), which has been translated into English here: <http://www.notbored.org/congo.html>.

even had a single personal conversation. Guy was also funny, very funny at times, with a deadpan sense of humor. A completely different person – less sentimental – than Raoul, who relaxed enough to become the affectionate person that he still is today.

Debord kept a certain distance.

A distance – I don't know – in any case, a reserve, perhaps. He was not an expansive person. Raoul wasn't either, but Raoul was warmer. Another thing to note: how each one earned his livelihood – that's a subject no one talked about.

It was a taboo subject?

Yes, it was obscene. Robert had dared to ask, "How do you survive?" Debord had responded to him, his mouth to his ear, "I work." But it was Guy, I suppose, who'd said –

– that he never worked. Furthermore, he hadn't worked very much. He worked for his books. And then he'd always managed to find people around him who would –

A certain sponsor.

Yes. At the time she was married to him, the role fell upon Michèle Bernstein. She worked. What memories do you have of the time when you came to Paris and stayed at Debord and Michèle Bernstein's place?

Magnificent! Truly wonderful. I was a little surprised by the small size of their apartment. We slept in their bed and I believe they slept on the floor. A small room with a small table and two chairs. There were four of us. Given the phenomenal culture of both of them, I expected to discover a house full of books. Well, no – just a few books on the floor . . . The conversations were passionate and endless! After that whole era was over, and after I left Robert, I realized that I'd never spoken to anyone as I had spoken back then. I am certain that I was really living at that moment. I hadn't imagined that the boiling ideas, the dynamism, the creativity, would end one day.

What were the relationships like between Robert Dehoux, Raoul Vaneigem, René Viénet, Guy Debord, Attila Kotanyi and you? Did those meetings and discussions lead to the creation of "Alternative," a small pamphlet?⁷

It was Robert, Raoul and I who drafted it.

⁷ The front page of *Alternative* #1 (July 1961) is reproduced elsewhere in Raoul Vaneigem and Gérard Berréby, *Rien est fini, tout commence*. This page includes the slogan "The power of the last workers guarantees democracy" and an indication that *Alternative* #1 is a "publication of Pouvoir Ouvrier Belge." The caption to this reproduction ("extract from the journal *Alternative*, #1, Brussels, July 1961") is, "We have embarked upon the organization of a power that is exercised over us, that gives us commands. Otherwise, neither workers' organizations nor struggles have any meaning."

No one else was involved?

No. We had our [own] little projects. We wrote miles of texts. Robert reflected by writing. We spoke and he wrote. I limited myself to reworking and summarizing it. He wanted to publish these scathing texts [*ces brûlots*] because he was convinced that, given their tenor, no publisher would ever accept them.

How did René Viénet seem to you?

Someone who was charming. He had a lot of imagination and nerve – impertinence, too. He was joyful. I liked him a lot. He always stayed with us.

Was he quite close to Raoul at the time?

No doubt. My daughter, who was 12 years old in 1968, remembers René as the nicest of all [the situationists]. He was the only one who had an interest in children. Before then, she hadn't been able to see it, since the [other] children were monstrously neglected during the whole adventure. Viénet was particularly skillful and inventive. He's the one who built the *Kriegspiel*, the passionate game of strategy that Debord invented and René constructed with slabs of copper recuperated from the facades of embassies or solicitor's offices. It was a formidable game.

Did you play?

Yes, I adored it. I played quite well. I beat Guy. But I was better off abstaining because he did not appreciate it at all.

How did the match with Guy go?

Guy had claimed that only revolutionaries who had sufficiently wooed the dialectic were capable of winning at *Kriegspiel*. At one moment, he unleashed an attack somewhere and I was truly very badly committed. But the game lasted a very long time and, despite my lamentable strategy, I ended up winning. Guy wasn't happy; he was even angry and sulked. He had lots of humor, but he wasn't always funny.

He took himself seriously?

Yes! But he was far from the only one. Kotanyi, too. My opinion was that it was perfectly legitimate if you didn't feel compelled to show them proper respect. The idea was laughable.

A bit ridiculous?

Yes. Furthermore, Robert and I stopped seeing Attila well before he was excluded from the SI. His discourse had become too nebulous.

He was a mystic?

Yes, completely! It was intolerable. He'd embarked along a route that was impossible to follow and that had nothing in common with the discussions that we'd had at the beginning. Subsequently, we were invited to the conference [of the SI] at Goteborg⁸ without realizing the honor that had been bestowed upon us. But we didn't go: I was pregnant out to here and we had no money. We continued to see each other after Goteborg. Everyone continued to stay at our place [when they came through town]. And then there was the conference in Antwerp in November 1962. We hadn't been invited. We telephoned and we were told, "You weren't invited." "Ah yes – but why not?" "We don't need to give you a reason. You weren't invited – that's all." We obviously asked [more] questions. What was necessary to participate in such a meeting? What interested us wasn't so much officially joining the movement as getting to meet the other members of it. This problematic slightly sabotaged their confidence because they spent a long time [during it] weighing question of this type: "Who is a situationist? How does one become a situationist?" We never really understood their explanations . . . I still think that, at the beginning of the 1960s, Debord and Michèle came to be ferociously selective when it came to the people they associated with.

This played itself out through meetings and exclusions.

Yes, but on exclusively intellectual bases. All this happened as if the fact of standing alongside the SI was a quasi-religious thing. Its members behaved like judges; some were excommunicated: that was, no doubt, extremely painful for them. For Robert and I, it had no importance. We had the privilege of being together. And so our failure to be invited to Antwerp wasn't serious; we continued on.

Without particular pretentions?

That's right. On our side, we continued to write. We weren't under the control of the SI, but more like simple satellites. It was a shame, quite incomprehensible and stupid. We would have been quite happy to meet the other members. But it didn't happen that way. But that wasn't our sole objective, anyway.

But after the Antwerp conference, you saw a few members again. Notably Raoul, René Riesel, Mustapha Khayati and Guy Debord, who all came to Brussels after May 68 to draft the book Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations.

I went to Paris during May 68 to see the revolution. In that magnificent chaos – in which no one lived anywhere in particular and everyone was hiding somewhere – I happened to run into Raoul on the place de la Contrescarpe. Then we saw each other when *Enragés* was being written. Mustapha stayed with us. I'm not sure about Riesel. But we housed two enrages whose names I've forgotten. Was René one of them? I no longer remember. Very young men, terribly alcoholic. They drank, they emptied everything.

After they left, there was wasn't a drop left. They'd finished off everything.

⁸ 28-30 August 1961.

Yes! But I knew nothing of them. It was very difficult, I must say, to be in contact with completely plastered people. I don't know how they were able to write in such a state. There was almost a sanctification of the appreciation of wine. You had to be able to "hold your liquor." That was indispensable. I believe that Guy and Raoul drank a lot, but apart, obviously, when they wrote. Later there was a break between the SI and Raoul, with whom we had no reason to break. Michèle had distanced herself; Alice must have been there already.

How did your meeting with Mustapha go?

Mustapha was a very reserved person, very calm in appearance, very self-controlled, too. But in appearance [only]. And he was very, very interesting. More welcoming than Guy was. I saw him again when I was living in Provence. Everyone was begging him to write commentaries on the Koran. He never did – quite a shame.

Yes, he studied Islamic heresies. In hindsight, what memories do you have of all these young people who were avid about everything – transformations, upheavals, revolutions?

I retain the memory of a moment when we were all convinced that we would accomplish extraordinary things, that we would truly change the way things were. We were sure of this, but, nevertheless, everyone was caught unaware by [May] 1968.

No one expected it?

No, assuredly not.

For you, what precisely were the stakes involved for such a diverse group of people who found themselves together and were attracted by the same things when it came to the overthrow of society?

We shared the certainty that the lives that were proposed to us weren't satisfying and that we had to do something to live better.