

Comments on “The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution”¹

“The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution” was published as a pamphlet in October 1994 by Chronos Publications (B.M. Chronos, London WC1N 3XX). Previously unpublished, this text was written in October 1967 by four English situationists (Christopher Gray, Tim Clark, Charles Radcliffe and Donald Nicholson-Smith) for publication in the first issue of their review. Just a couple of months later, there were no more English members of the Situationist International: Radcliffe resigned in November, and the rest were excluded in December over the so-called Ben Morea affair. (“So many hasty journeys!” Guy Debord says in his last film, *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni*, while a picture of Nicholson-Smith appears on the screen.) The review of the English situationists never came out, and neither the four original authors, nor the SI itself, ever saw fit to publish “The Revolution” as a separate text. When compared to the texts the continental SI was publishing at the time, “The Revolution” is something of a throwback. In it the English situationists seem to be in the process of absorbing the SI’s first set of themes concerning art and culture, catching up with them, trying to make them their own. In the meantime, the central focus of the continental situationists had shifted to other matters: the “crisis” of the university system, the rise of a youth “counterculture,” and the role played by the left-wing political parties that sought voters and members among students and faculty members. As Tim Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith themselves write in “Why Art Can’t Kill the Situationist International” (October 79, Winter 1997), “it was the Left (as opposed to, say, the art world) that the Situationists most hated in the 1960s and thought worth targeting.”

Significantly, the only quotation from the review *Internationale situationniste* that appears in the English situationists’ pamphlet comes from *I.S. # 1*, which was published in 1958. But one suspects this is a not reflection of the relative “immaturity” of the English situationists’ theoretical development, nor a consequence of the delay in the translation and dissemination of situationist texts in England. One suspects that this is an expression of discomfort or ambivalence, an intentional distancing. Unlike situationist manifestoes – such as that issued by the Spur Group – “The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution” doesn’t speak at any length or in any detail about the situationists, and doesn’t encourage the reader to believe that the SI is a unique or even an interesting group. “There is *no* organization to date which would not completely betray [the new revolutionary movement],” the authors assert; “*all* previous political critiques of the repressive hierarchy engendered by the past revolutionary argument . . . have completely missed the point: they were not focused on precisely what it was that this hierarchy repressed and perverted in the form of passive militancy” (emphasis added). It is possible that the English situationists were excluded or resigned from the SI so quickly after their admission because they weren’t ever really committed to being members of any type of official organization. But it is quite clear that the English situationists (especially Gray, Clark and Nicholson-Smith) were and are still deeply committed to the dissemination of situationist theory and to the undertaking of the situationist project by as many autonomous people as possible. Clark and Nicholson-Smith’s efforts, as we have seen, continue to the present day.

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Presented as a series of subsections that have their own titles, “The Revolution of Modern Art” is a strongly-worded condemnation of what passes for human creativity in modern capitalist societies (that is, “art” and “culture”), and a call for revolutionaries to begin the recreation of the nature of creativity itself. Much like Debord’s 1956 text “Preliminaries,” the article by the English situationists insists on the central importance of what they call “the most radical theses of the European avant-garde during the revolutionary upheavals of 1910-1925: that art must cease to be a specialised and imaginary transformation of the world and become the real transformation of lived experience itself.” Much like the founding documents of the SI, the article by the English observes that a parallel realization took place within the workers’ movement during the 1910-1925 period: that class struggle must cease to be a bureaucratic transformation of the specialized world of parliamentary politics, and become the real transformation of everyday life. “Only now,” the English situationists write, “with the Welfare State, with the gradual accession of the whole proletariat to hitherto ‘bourgeois’ standards of comfort and leisure, can the two movements [avant-garde art and radical politics] converge and lose their traditional animosity.” The practice of art, if the artist does not recognize and move as fast as possible toward the historic, previously impossible and Utopian convergence between art and politics – that is, the continued allegiance to “phantasy erected into a systematic culture” – “has become Public Enemy Number One.” As for the traditional cultural “philistinism” of the left, it “is no longer just an incidental embarrassment,” the English situationists assert. “It has become deadly.”

In place of both traditional avant-garde art and traditional communist/socialist politics, the English situationists – in step with the continental members of the SI – propose to place the game (more precisely, the *détournement* of whole cities into game-cities). “If all the factors conditioning us are co-ordinated and unified by the structure of the city,” reason the English situationists, “then the question of mastering our own experience becomes one of mastering the conditioning inherent in the city and revolutionizing its use.” Situationist games, which in the words of the article by the English are intended to be both “the means and the end of total revolution,” must be “simultaneously self expressive and socially disruptive,” and are thus easily distinguishable from the socially edifying so-called participatory art forms thrown up by the various pseudo-avant-gardes (the mass media, the avant-garde art establishment and the entertainment industry).

The social class most likely to immediately take to heart the idea of the situationist game is the intelligentsia. “While the way of life of the servile intelligentsia is the living denial of anything remotely resembling either creativity or intelligence,” the English situationists declare,

the rebel intelligentsia is becoming caught up in the reality of disaffection and revolt, refusing to work and inevitably faced, point blank, with a radical reappraisal of the relationship between creativity and everyday life. Frequenting the lumpen, they will learn to use other weapons than their imagination. One of our first moves must be to envenom the latent hostility between these two factions. It shouldn’t be too difficult.

To the intelligent rebel, situationist games are deeply desirable: they will eradicate modern poverty, which is defined by the English situationists as “the inability to live, the lethargy, the boredom, the isolation, the anguish and the sense of complete meaninglessness which are eating like a cancer” through the proletariat of the 20th century, and not as the “brutal struggle to

survive in the teeth of exposure, starvation and disease” that typified the experience of the proletariat in the 19th century. Situationist games only need everything – “the whole accumulated power of the productive forces” – for them to be totally satisfying for all.

A couple of things stand out here, worthy of remark. The first is this ridiculous and yet uncanny stuff about the lumpenproletariat, the social milieu the rebel intelligentsia will “frequent” and therein learn to fight. In the “lumpen” the English situationists include rioters, juvenile delinquents, petty criminals, thrill seekers, shoplifters, members of such organized groups as the Provos and the Hell’s Angels, and working-class subcultural groups as the Mod and the Rockers. To the English, the lumpen represent “the assertion of the desire to play in a situation where it is totally impossible,” and “the turning point between the pure destruction of the commodity and the stage of its subversion.”

The new lumpen will probably be our most important theatre of operations. We must enter it as a power against it and precipitate its crisis. Ultimately, this can only mean to start a real movement between the lumpen and the rest of the proletariat: their conjunction will define the revolution. In terms of the lumpen itself the first thing to do is to disassociate the rank-and-file from the incredible crock of shit raised up, like a monstrosity, by their leaders and ideologists.

This is a remarkable passage, and it is so for a variety of reasons.

We have said that the themes of “The Revolution of Modern Art” seem to be throwbacks to those of the great situationist texts of the 1950s. But if we compare the article by the English to, say, the SI’s seminal pamphlet *On the Poverty of Student Life* (published in 1966 and translated into English by British situationist Christopher Gray as *Ten Days That Shook the University*), we find a sharp disagreement on tactics. Though situationists on both sides of the English Channel agreed with Vaneigem when he wrote that the real heirs of Dada are the juvenile delinquents, the continental SI believed that its most important theatre of operations was the rebel intelligentsia, not the lumpen. For the continental SI, the goal was to negate the separation between the intelligentsia (which includes the art world and the student milieu) and the proletariat; but for the English situationists, the goal was to negate the separation between the lumpenproletariat and the proletariat.

At first the latter goal seems far-fetched. After all, the situationists themselves were members of the rebel intelligentsia, and not the lumpenproletariat; therefore, they would seem more likely to have success in uniting the intelligentsia (and not the lumpen) with the proletariat. In the notes to Chronos Publications’ edition of the article by the English – which Chronos mistakenly calls their “manifesto” – the eulogy on the violence of the juvenile delinquents is called “crass” and cited as an incidence of “vulgarization,” presumably of the SI’s lofty analyses. But the English situationists were right, or, rather, they worked diligently to help create a situation in which their analysis was proved right.

In the same way that the continental SI tried diligently to instigate and later participated in the occupations movement when it broke out in France in 1968, the English situationists tried diligently to instigate and later participated in the punk movement when it broke out in England in 1976. In addition to translating, publishing and distributing *On the Poverty of Student Life*, Christopher Gray teamed up with Jamie Reid, who’d been publishing the situationist-influenced fanzine *Suburban Press* since 1970, to produce *Leaving the Twentieth Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International* in 1974. Designed to introduce situationist theory to a new

generation of lumpen, *Leaving the Twentieth Century* was the first English-language anthology of situationist material. Eventually, Reid and his friend Malcolm McLaren found the right group of lumpen to give copies of the book to: the future members of the Sex Pistols and all their friends. Nothing if not the revolt of the lumpenproletariat, the punk movement clearly demonstrated the revolutionary power created and released when the separation between lumpen and prol is negated.

One last point. It seems necessary to say again – though we have pointed it out before (see our comments on Perspective’s *At Dusk* pamphlet in *NOT BORED!* #27, May 1997) – that the Welfare State may have arrived and grown tremendously powerful and far-reaching in the 1960s, but its existence since then has been far from unchallenged or permanent: indeed, it has been under sustained and increasingly deadly assault in the United States since the early 1980s, with the most serious damage coming in the last three years. The same reign of “austerity” has come to many other industrialized countries, but especially France, Italy, and Germany, and even the Scandinavian countries. Though the bourgeoisification of the whole proletariat may have appeared to be an essential, inevitable and irreversible aspect of the development of modern capitalism in the 1950s and 1960s, no one thinks so now, not even capitalism’s defenders, apologists and ideologues.

In part in response to the outbreak of mass disaffection and revolt in the 1960s, capitalism simply took back in the 1970s and 1980s what it appeared to be giving in the 1950s and 1960s. The brutal struggle to survive material poverty has returned (that is, if it ever really left), and with a vengeance. “One knows very few people dying of hunger,” quip the English situationists. “But everyone one knows is dying of boredom.” The times have changed, moved on but also reverted back to the intensely class-divided conditions of the 1930s. Unfortunately, today one knows thousands of people who are homeless and dying of hunger, exposure or disease: one sees them everywhere these days, in the parks, on the subways, in doorways, on the sidewalks. And so here’s a fuckin’ basic banality, yo: what the situationists took to be permanent developments were in fact temporary. As a result, their dream of a Utopian convergence between avant-garde art and radical politics – if it is to be realized – will either have to wait for another day (when the objective economic pre-conditions are in place) or have to find another way of becoming real.

Quite obviously, we’re fucking tired of waiting for reality to catch up to our dreams, and so we – as true believers in the situationists’ Utopian dreams of game-cities, of never working and yet still being able to feed, clothe and house oneself, of the uninterrupted revolution of everyday life – will have to find another way of making them real for ourselves and right now. But one can’t help thinking that the situationists’ mistaken beliefs about the future of modern capitalism are indicative of a fundamental flaw in situationist theory. The problem it isn’t so much the fact that the SI was wrong about the linearity and direction of the development of capitalism, but the fact that it put so much trust in capitalism and its technology. The English situationists write:

No project, however phantastic, can any longer be dismissed as ‘Utopian.’ The power of industrial productivity has grown immeasurably faster than any of the 19th century revolutionaries foresaw. The speed at which automation is being developed and applied heralds the possibility of the complete abolition of forced labour – the absolute pre-condition of real human emancipation – and, at the same time, the creation of a new, purely ludic type of free activity, whose achievement demands a critique of the alienation of ‘free’ creativity in the work of art.

The key word here – as it is in “Revolutionary Gamesters: S.I. Manifesto of 17 May 1960,” which glibly speaks of replacing work with “the automation of production” and the “irresistible development of technology,” and in Constant’s “New Babylon” (1974) – is automation. Everything is up for critique here except for this automation, which is presumably the highest, if not final stage of capitalist technological development. For the situationists, automation is both a given and something absolutely indispensable. And so the paradox is this: *the situationists would rely upon automated technology that was produced by and for a capitalist society to act as the basis for the creation of a “new,” workless libertarian society*. It didn’t occur to a single situationist that all capitalist technology – but especially automated capitalist technology – is inherently defective to the extent that the distinctively capitalist split between decision-maker (Capital) and executor of decisions (Labor) is part of its very functioning and substance. The split between Capital and Labor in automation is total: labor only works when the machine breaks down. But whether it is automated capitalist technology or manually-operated capitalist technology we’re talking about, one thing is crystal clear. *Capitalist technology can be put to no other uses but capitalist ones*. The new libertarian society must fashion its own technology if that society is to be really new and libertarian. Following the wisdom of the expression “Socialism will arrive on a bicycle,” we are confident that – from the perspective of capitalist technology – libertarian technology will be a step in a de-evolutionary direction.