

Faces of the Avant-Garde
By the Lettrist International

Edited by Jean-Louis Rançon
Translated by Bill Brown

Preface by Jean-Louis Rançon¹

“After all, it was modern poetry, for the last hundred years, that had led us there. There were a few of us who thought that its program had to be fulfilled in reality and, in any case, to do nothing else.” Guy Debord, *Panegyrique*, first volume (1989)

Written at different periods and by several different people, *Faces of the Avant-Garde* retraces the history and the ideas of the Lettrist² movement from 1945 to 1953.

In its conclusions, this document emanates from the radical wing of Lettrism (Serge Berna, Jean-Louis Brau, Guy-Ernest Debord and Gil J Wolman), who, after their break with Isidore Isou in November 1952, gathered together into a Lettrist International [LI] (1952-1957).

Chronologically, *Faces of the Avant-Garde* comes after issue number two of the journal *Internationale lettriste* (February 1953) and subsequently took the form of a recording of three people reading it aloud, punctuated by Lettrist poems and choruses. Some time later, Serge Berna was excluded from the LI, and *Faces of the Avant-Garde* wasn't published. Preserved in the LI's archives, it became item number 101 in the Situationist Archives (AS 101) after the founding of the Situationist International [SI] in July 1957.

The beginning of the text, set between two *Improvisations mégapneumes* by Gil J Wolman that were recorded in May 1951, is an extract from a text by Max-Pol Fouchet that was published in the journal *Fontaine* in October 1947. In it, Fouchet gave a prominent place to Lettrism, which he considered to be the only post-war school of poetry in existence. This issue of *Fontaine* caused a scandal among both former Dadaists and Surrealists.

After a brief review of the history of [French] poetry between 1857 and 1945 – Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine, Lautréamont, Rimbaud, Jarry, Apollinaire, Tzara, Breton and Isou – that history is defined and illustrated in its various periods. Adopting the terminology used in Isou's “*Les principes poétiques et musicaux du mouvement lettriste*,” which was published by the journal *La Dictature lettriste* in June 1946, poetry was said to be “amplique” up to Victor Hugo, “chiseling” since Baudelaire and finally Lettrist.

Several critical remarks about Surrealism – principally taken from Isou's “*Qu'est-ce que le lettrisme?*” which was also published in the October 1947 issue of *Fontaine* – are followed by an evocation of the activities of the Lettrist group since 1946, particularly those of the protagonists of the 1950-1952 period. This evocation includes excerpts from texts by Brau, Wolman and Berna that were published in the first issue of the journal *Ur* in December 1950, as well as accounts of the various scandals caused by the Lettrists.

After an account of the intervention of the Lettrist International at a press conference held by Charles Chaplin at the Ritz Hotel in October 1952 and its disavowal by Isou, *Faces of the Avant-Garde* concludes with the LI's “Manifesto” of 19 February 1953³ and this assessment of

¹ *Visages de l'avant-garde*, edited and annotated by Jean-Louis Rançon (Paris: Jean-Paul Rocher, 2010). Translated by Bill Brown, 22 January 2025. All footnotes by Rançon, except where noted. All text [in brackets] added by the translator. A few spelling mistakes corrected on 9 February 2025.

² *Translator*: As the reader will see, I have consistently used “lettrist” rather than “letterist,” which strikes me as a bit awkward and unmusical.

³ *Translator*: that is to say, it concludes before the exclusions of Serge Berna (June 1953) and Jean-Louis Brau (September 1953), events that, no doubt, caused further work on this text to be abandoned.

the group's irreversible break with Isouian lettrism: "But the schools are dying to make way for complex men."

These pages vividly depict the activity of the Lettrist movement from its genesis to the creation of the Lettrist International and retain the scent of a bygone era. To me it seemed pertinent to publish them, especially because they describe the moment in which Guy Debord made his entrance into the world of the demolition experts: what followed was already contained in the beginning of this voyage

Faces of the Avant-Garde

Mégapneumatic improvisations (30 seconds)

Silence (3 seconds)

Voice #1: In the issue of *Fontaine* dedicated to the trends in [French] poetry in 1947,⁴ Max-Pol Fouchet wrote:

Les Champs magnétiques appeared in 1921, as did *Les Nécessités de la vie et les Conséquences des rêves*. A year earlier, *Sept manifestes Dada* came out.⁵ It was in 1924 that André Breton published the *Manifeste du surréalisme*, Paul Éluard published *Mourir de ne pas mourir*, Benjamin Péret *Immortelle maladie*, and Pierre Reverdy *Les Épaves du ciel*. But, in any case, the first three years of peace [after World War I] saw the appearance of works that bore witness to conduct that was at the extreme end of previous discoveries and a decisive commitment of poetry to the paths of adventure and revolt. In other words, three years after [the Treaty of] Versailles, books were published that established the movements known as Dada and surrealism.

Today, three years after the Liberation and in the domain of poetry, are we seeing comparable events and developments? The question is important: we can't avoid it without [displaying] indifference. But the question requires that we respond to it with hindsight, and even that we postpone determining the precise interest of such contributions. In the same way, we will not make the mistake of believing that, inevitably, wars are followed by renewals, that they impose new frameworks and trace out starting lines as they trace out sudden [new] borders on maps. Wars are periods, not epochs. The proof of this is that the most important books of poetry published in the last three years – at random: *Seuls demeurent*, *Le Poème pulvérisé*, *Exil*, *Paroles*, *l'Ode à Charles Fourier*,⁶ etc. – are not signed by previously unknown names. The major poets of 1947 are those of 1939, and even before that: on the one hand, Péguy, Apollinaire, and Valéry, still alive, or Fargue, Claudel, and Gide; on the other, Breton, Éluard, Supervielle, Saint-John Perse, Reverdy, Artaud. . . . The recent popularity of poets such as Henri Michaux and René Char should not deceive us: they wrote before the war, just like poets such as Gracq and Queneau. It is only a matter of an accession to a much larger public, and this is no different for someone like Prévert, whose *Dîner de têtes* was published in 1931. By contrast, Frénaud and Césaire . . . but what? Almost all of

⁴ Max-Pol Fouchet (1913-1980), a poet and literary critic, the founder (in Algiers) of the journal *Fontaine* (1939-1947), which during the war was a platform for the “literary Resistance.” In the next-to-last issue, published in October 1947, under the title “Instances de la poésie en 1947” (no. 62), he presented texts by the surrealist Sarane Alexandrian and the lettrists Isidore Isou (“Qu'est-ce que le lettrisme?”) and André Lambaire (“Considérations sur une phonétique lettriste”), as well as “Trois poèmes lettristes” by Jérôme Arbaud, François Dufrêne and Clément Swenssen and two texts by Henri Pichette and Henri Hell.

⁵ André Breton and Philippe Soupault, *Les Chants magnétiques*; Paul Éluard, *Les Nécessités de la vie et les Conséquences des rêves*; Tristan Tzara, *Sept manifestes Dada*.

⁶ René Char, *Seuls demeurent* and *Le Poème pulvérisé*; Saint-John Perse, *Exil*; Jacques Prévert, *Paroles*; André Breton, *Ode à Charles Fourier*.

these poets have reached or passed their fortieth years, and that is rarely the age at which one starts writing poetry.

In 1947, is our poetry, for all that, at a low-water mark? Isn't a sufficient succession taking shape? Are the young poets failing to free themselves from the onerous influence of their elders? Have the establishments of our lyricism since Baudelaire and Rimbaud, Lautréamont and Mallarmé, enervated their strength to the point that they demand crop rotation and wish for uncultivated land? Some assure us that this is the case. I know a few who, persuaded that this is in fact the case, have made an official report of exhaustion. To tell the truth, they are too hasty. Let it be born before we dig its grave.

It appears that poetry is only an end for young poets to the extent that it can resolve the destiny of mankind or, rather, give mankind mastery over its destiny through an absolute coincidence. Their highest calling isn't to engage poetry in the service of mankind, but to engage mankind in [the service of] poetry. And so we will not be surprised that they ceaselessly refer to – although they carefully (and sometimes violently) mark their distance from – André Breton and surrealism. They do not transform into a means what should be an end; they do not reverse the commitment. It remains to be seen if they are going astray and, when the systems turn out to be quite ridiculous, if there are better and more effective paths that lead mankind towards the abolition of its ruinous contradictions – consequently: towards freedom.

All of them are less than 25 years old, and we do not know if they published anything before 1944. No doubt lettrism has, on the whole, attracted the lion's share of them. Shouldn't we get to know them better? Doesn't lettrism pride itself on a body of doctrine? And we defend ourselves, once more, from the necessity of establishing proportions. The future will sort things out, will separate the wheat from the chaff, will make its judgments, but the present demands that we look at the effervescence of the sources before the waters impose their flows.

Improvisations mégapneumes (30 seconds)

Silence (3 seconds)

Voice #1: 1857.

Voice #3: One night when I was near a frightful Jewess, / Like a cadaver lying alongside a cadaver⁷

Voice #1: 1865.

Voice #2: The flesh is sad, alas! and I have read all the books.⁸

Voice #1: 1867.

Voice #3: Yet I love Kate / And her pretty eyes. / She is delicate⁹

Voice #1: 1869.

⁷ *Translator*: lines from Charles Baudelaire, "Le Léthé," one of six banned poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857).

⁸ *Translator*: the opening lines of Stéphane Mallarmé, "Brise Marine" (1865).

⁹ *Translator*: lines from Paul Verlaine, "A Poor Young Shepherd" (1867).

Voice #2: As beautiful as the chance encounter on a dissection table of a sewing machine and an umbrella!¹⁰

Voice #1: 1871.

Voice #3: A black, E white, I red, U green, O blue: vowels¹¹

Voice #1: 1896.

Voice #2: Merdre¹²

Voice #1: 1917

Voice #3: There is a poem to be written about the bird that only has one wing / We will send it by a telephone message¹³

Voice #1: 1918.

Voice #2: a e o i ii i e a ou ii ii belly / show the center I want to take it¹⁴

Voice #1: 1923.

Voice #3: One evening near the statue of Étienne Marcel / Shot me a knowing glance / Did André Breton say pass¹⁵

Voice #1: 1945.

Voice #3: A little Jew with myopic eyes,¹⁶ driven from his [home in] Bessarabia by the warrior *carcsac* [sic] arrives in Paris dragging along an infernal machine.

AI BIDJIBIDJIBAI, a lettrist poem

silence (3 seconds)

Voice #1: Sir, In answer to your inquiry, we inform you that the review panel of éditions Gallimard has judged unpublishable your essay *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*.

Voice #2: Sir, In answer to your inquiry, we inform you that the review panel of éditions Julliard has judged unpublishable . . . (*hooting*)

Voice #1: Sir, In answer to your inquiry, we inform you that the review panel of éditions Flammarion has judged unpublishable . . . (*hooting*)

Voice #3: Seghers – Stock – Calmann-Lévy – Éditions de Minuit... (*hooting*)

¹⁰ *Translator:* a line from Lautréamont, *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1869).

¹¹ *Translator:* a line from Arthur Rimbaud, “Voyelles” (1871).

¹² *Translator:* an intentional misspelling of *merde* (shit), Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi* (1896).

¹³ *Translator:* lines from Guillaume Apollinaire, “Les Fenêtres,” *Calligrammes* (1917).

¹⁴ *Translator:* a line from Tristan Tzara, “Pélamide” (1918).

¹⁵ *Translator:* the last lines of André Breton, “Tournesol” (1923).

¹⁶ *Translator:* Isidore Isou.

Voice #2: Each generation brings a mass of new values that old fools like you stifle. I warn you that my friends and I will go and smash your face in if you do not publish my work, which will bring about great upheavals. I do not greet you. [Signed] Isidore Isou.

Voice #1: And every day, [new] inscriptions accumulated on the walls: “Will your body be found on the corner of rue Sébastien-Bottin?”¹⁷

Voice #2: 1947. Publication of *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique* by éditions Gallimard.

*Voice #3:*¹⁸ We can discern two quite distinct periods in the evolution of poetry: one of amplitude, which began with the appearance of poetry in the world and ended with Victor Hugo; the other actually begins with Baudelaire and still lasts. We define it as: the period of chiseling.

Voice #2: Because it had all the necessary elements, the period of amplitude [*la période amplique*] succeeded in creating immense works that concerned many broad and diverse subjects. What constituted the preponderant trait of this period was that, possessing so much material, it could create outside of its own domain.

Voice #3: It was preoccupied with describing extrinsic subjects foreign to itself (ideas, anecdotes, etc.). The condition of poetry, the *a priori* to which the poet was bound, was speech, and its only way of resisting it was, precisely, to create through verse. The lovers of poetry were always preoccupied with knowing what the creator had expressed in his work: whether it was an epic, a love story or a sentimental narrative. For the poets of this period, poetry was only an ephemeral [*passagère*] form in which to express what they wanted to say. Above all, it was necessary that they possessed an idea, a subject. This versification was exclusively social. It was recited on solemn occasions; it was declaimed in public halls; it was read aloud in salons, during demonstrations and at popular assemblies – and this because it possessed clear and general elements. Poetry didn’t have a particular domain and discovered its subjects everywhere, and often even entered into fields that were foreign to it.

Voice #2: Maglia’s song.¹⁹

You are very beautiful and I am very ugly
Yours is splendor bathed in rays of light;
Mine is dust, mine is the spider.

You are very beautiful and I am very ugly;
You are the window and I am the shutter.
We will settle everything in our little nook.

¹⁷ *Translator:* the location of the offices of éditions Gallimard in Paris.

¹⁸ *Translator:* what follows is taken from Isou’s *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique* (Introduction to a New Poetry and a New Music).

¹⁹ Victor Hugo, *Chanson de Maglia*. [*Translator:* posthumously published in 1888. What appears here is the first stanza and two lines from the second.]

I will protect your trembling pane;
We will be happy, we will be together;
We will settle everything in our little nook.

You will make the day, I will make the night.

Voice #3: Chiseling poetry adopts a new voice. After Baudelaire, the entire poetic vision is transformed. Subjects are eliminated. The poets try to create poetry in its essence. They seek to craft a poem through the balancing of the verses themselves, through the arrangement of the beauties of the language. The poets, seeking the victory of their works, do not set out armed with any traditional form of help. Poetic work becomes an act of purification, of destruction. The poets try to remove everything that has some kind of correspondence with the elements that are foreign to it. They seek metaphors, images, precious and rare words, the shock of certain alterations made to commonplace words. They seek to identify the laws, as well as the depths of poetry itself. This is the work of specialists, because the poets no longer concern themselves with the general meaning and no longer communicate with readers in other domains. This is why poetry is a profession that is only understood by technicians and connoisseurs, who distance themselves from the general public, which cannot be attracted to such strict specialization.

Voice #2:

Ashtray for the smoker of seaweed and interregnum filters
Isthmuses inventories inventions crime carousel
leaching
Dadaists at the helm of the *gulf-stream*²⁰ blowpipe
Wearing legitimate Latin moustaches
Treating fistulas of lazulite
lazulite lazulite
who climb the Capricorn attraction of the zealous tetrarch vaccine
and stockpiles fossils fissures
erections filtered by Jesus' thorax
prognoses chackelton attacks of the sub-brain²¹

Voice #3: We are advancing towards the complete and concrete destruction of the root word, right down to the letter. By destroying the word we have found a new material, as poetic as the old one, which no longer has meaning or logic and that, beyond this, possesses the music that was the traditional desire of poetry.

The literary critics of our time claim that it is impossible to progress any further in the perfecting of detail. We protest against the limits hurled like a challenge to the possibilities of the poet.

After the word, we can chisel away at the letter. We push the precious and the detail as far as that miniscule scorned value, which we discover as the unit of measurement of a work that must be carried out up to its perfect blossoming.

We want to create entire beauties with letters. We want to create works of art that enchant, impress and move through the beauty of its lettrist units. It's a question of taking all the

²⁰ *Translator:* English in original.

²¹ Tristan Tzara, *Cendrier pour fumeurs d'algues...* (*Cinéma calendrier du cœur abstrait*).

letters in common, of unfolding marvels accomplished in letters before the dazzled spectators; of creating an architecture of lettrist rhythms; of accumulating fluctuating letters in a precise framework; of splendidly developing the customary billing and cooing; of coagulating the crumbs of letters into a real meal; of resuscitating confusion in a denser order; of rendering comprehensible and palpable what is incomprehensible and unclear; of rendering silence concrete; of writing Nothingness.

*Voice #2: Principles*²²

Voice #3: Lettrism is the art of letters returned to themselves and considered as elements that are constitutive of new poems.

Voice #1: We have made visible the anticipated fact that poetry has nothing at all to do with literature.

Voice #3: The art of the future can only be sur-lettrist and not sub-lettrist. The letter can only be destroyed by assimilating it, perfecting it and exhausting it by surpassing it. We will not forget it by ignoring it or recalling its existence too often, to the point of being “fed up with it.”

*TKDL TAKADELENEN*²³

Voice #1: Is lettrism poetry or music?

Voice #2: Lettrism is neither one nor the other. IT IS. A hybrid compound of two moribund arts, it assures longevity in the framework of a new form of art.

Voice #1: Is lettrism a language?

Voice #3: Lettrism doesn't want to destroy some words on behalf of other words, or to forge concepts that make their nuances precise. It is a matter of speaking for the sake of speaking. There is no lettrist dictionary, we do not have concepts or words to offer you, just the beauty of letters, the ambiances that can form around vowels and consonants.

A word doesn't serve to delineate something else, to name something else, but to make people act.²⁴

The lettrist units that we create are no more vectors of concepts than a Bach chord. But we do not tackle the problem of language. By announcing the definitive divorce of poetry from literature, we have put an end to the confusion that makes dialectical, sophistic, philosophical

²² These principles can also be found in “Vingt questions sur le lettrisme” by Jean-Louis Brau and Claude-Pierre Matricon, published in *Ur*, no 1 [December 1950]. It is in that text that a Lettrist International is mentioned, but not in the sense of an actual organization: “Only wanting ‘to speak for the sake of speaking,’ lettrism can't be national. The poet ceases to write for men and now addresses himself to all of humanity (the immigrant Isou, the greatest French poet. . .) and lays the first stone of a *LETTRIST INTERNATIONAL*. For the first time it *breaks the narrow framework of national languages* and enriches its art.”

²³ *Translator:* Presumably the title of a lettrist poem.

²⁴ A phrase from the philosopher Brice Parain (1897-1971), author of *Recherches sur la nature et les fonctions du langage* (1942).

and commercial language the constitutive element of an anti-dialectical, anti-sophistic, anti-philosophical and gratuitous art.

Voice #1: Lettrism is anti-popular!

Voice #3: This is a proposition that is as stupid as those who put it forward. Because it does not appeal to any [system of] knowledge, lettrism addresses itself to all and not just a few. When we were obligated to rehearse some of our performances on the banks of the Seine, the road workers stopped working in order to listen to us, as one goes to Luxembourg on a Sunday to listen to concerts.

*DID-GIVAM*²⁵

Voice #1: What is lettrism's attitude with respect to contemporary literature?

Voice #2: Contempt!

silence (3 seconds)

Improvisations mégapneumes

silence (3 seconds)

Voice #1: Dadaism had already become aware of the weakness of the conceptual organization of language. "Thought is made in the mouth,"²⁶ the word was liberated from its intellectual burdens. But if this represents a destruction of intelligence, it presents no transcendence of poetic material. The Dadaists' use of elements extrinsic to poetry, such as chance, gratuitous automatism, and the addition of typographic, plastic and other means, is the proof of the exhaustion of all the possible combinations of words, the culmination of what we call the period of chiseling.

Voice #2: After Dada, surrealism was only a recommencement, a poetic reaction. This is why Aragon could say the following later on:

Voice #3: This anarchy had to be resolved by the adoption of a system that was called surrealism and that was the refusal, among others, to push the critique of language beyond a certain point. That is what distinguished surrealism from Dadaism. That is how it gave value to all kinds of poetic expressions that Dada had rejected.

With surrealism, the myth of liberated words dies. The sentence is *reborn*. It *becomes* the unity of the delirium. With all its traditions and resources. The periodic sentence, the balancing of propositions, is *rehabilitated*. At the end of the movements of words, the classical complements fall three by three, or as epithets. Creation, what was being created, at that time, in that system, we don't fail to emphasize that, most often, it was *reviving* many old-fashioned poetic expressions . . .

²⁵ Lettrist poem by Serge Berna that was published in *Ur, cahiers pour un dictat culturel*, no. 1 (director: Maurice B. Lemaître, December 1950) under the title *Du léger décalage qu'il y a entre le Tam du cœur et son écho aux tempes*.

²⁶ *Translator:* "La pensée se faisant dans la bouche," a slogan that appears in the work of Saint-Pol-Roux (1861-1940), a French symbolist poet.

No doubt this will be what the future retains of it: this poetic *sidelining* of all that the taste for negation had gradually rejected. Surrealism *restored* citizenship in writing to all the words that were progressively banned by the successive schools, the successive tastes. . . It put an end to the Dadaist trial of language. It did not pronounce the verdict.²⁷

Voice #1: We note that the evolutionary dynamic of the first surrealists was slowed down by a mystical-picturesque jumble and that it lost sight of the formal problem of poetry, which was the necessary condition for progression. The very act of exhuming people like Maurice Scève, Guillaume Budé, and Xavier Forneret²⁸ – beyond a certain mystifying sense of humor – showed the powerlessness of those who wanted to be full-blown revolutionaries. Surrealist poetic art was not the illustration of a given moment in the golden line of poetic evolution, but was oriented around the originality of its successive leaders: the hypnotic delirium of [Robert] Desnos, the verbal delirium of Aragon, the paranoid delirium of [Salvador] Dalí.

Voice #3: What remained constant in Breton's writing turns out to be his "faith in automatism as a probe," not only as a method of expression on the literary and artistic planes, but also as the first step in a general revision of the modes of knowledge.

But any contemporary psychology textbook teaches us that automatism cannot lead to any new creation (and surrealism, beyond this very disruption, has not led to any creation) because it is only a disruption of things. A disruption of old data and not a probe into new discoveries. In so far as it is a mechanical explosion, automatism is a repetition that leads to the creation of habits. It thus becomes opposed to Bergsonian creation,²⁹ which is, precisely, the breaking of regulated actions. Automatism is a natural force, "inert," important for mankind as long as it can be regulated from the outside and not as long as it is passive and we agree to immerse ourselves in it, without self-criticism. This "snowballs" into comedy, into absurdity, even "black humor," for those who are outside of it; and for those who submit to it, it only leads to the confusion and stupidity that are the other side of discovery. The idea produces the movement because it shares a structural community with it. It acts, not by virtue of its resemblance with the movement (as Breton wants, moving, believing he is thinking), but as the result of frequent contiguity with it. General revisions of the modes of knowledge have only been obtained by a rescue beyond any automatism.

If, in comparison to Tzara, Breton was a reaction, the series of minor poets from Michaux to Ponge, by way of Prévert, René Char and Saint-John Perse, was reactionary with respect to Breton.

This is why, when the question of poetry after the years 1940-1945 was raised, even those who had reservations about the "validity" of lettrism – such as Étiemble, Gaëtan Picon, and Maurice Nadeau – were obliged to recognize that it was only in it that the hopes for a poetic renewal could be placed.

²⁷ [Louis] Aragon, "Chroniques de la pluie et du beau temps," *Europe*, 25th year, no. 16, April 1947. The words in italics were emphasized by the lettrists.

²⁸ *Translator:* Maurice Scève (1505-1569) was the leader of the Lyonnais school of poetry; Guillaume Budé (1467-1540) was a French humanist; and Xavier Forneret (1809-1884) was a French poet and playwright.

²⁹ *Translator:* see Henri Bergson, *L'Évolution créatrice* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1907), translated into English by Arthur Mitchell as *Creative Evolution* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1911).

lettrist poem
silence (3 seconds)

Voice #2: A real literary movement is born when an individual or several individuals, by discovering a domain of activity, are conscious that they will not be capable, on their own, of resolving all the problems that the new terrain suddenly unveils, that there must be years and years of tireless work, entire lives consecrated, sacrificed to these ideals, for the potential to be perfected, to lead the research to its victory.

If the terrain is authentic and *rich*, if it allows the development of the tendencies that search for each other elsewhere, if it demonstrates itself at a certain moment to be the unique means of achieving the concentration of all its driving forces, like arrows hitting their target, the last path for all desires and for every greed, only then does it become necessary and have the opportunity to project itself historically, to remain in *History*.³⁰

Voice #1: This manifesto by Isidore Isou appealed to a certain number of young people, who were drawn to it, not so much because of the possibilities for creation that lettrism opened up, but because of its apparently scandalous character. They constituted what one might call the first wave of lettrism: Paul Armandy, Gérard Baudoin, George Catinot, Max Deutsch, Charles Dobzynski, Pierre Finois, Claude Hirsch, Henri Joffe, Bernard Lecomte, Robert Loyer, Guy Marester, Richard Marienstras, Louis Mortier, Pierre Pellissier, Gabriel Pomerand, Georges Poulot, Bernard Rivollet, Jacques Sabbath, and Henri Zalestin.³¹

“*Harpe en forme de tavane*,”³² a lettrist poem

Voice #3: But their sarcastic critiques, which are the eternal grunts of pigs, combined with their lack of enthusiasm for a new mode of expression and their misunderstanding of the primary concepts of phonetics, acoustics and musical composition, gradually detached the members of this first group from lettrism, and this only became clear on the occasion of the scandals that peppered the intellectual life of Paris in between 1945 and 1947: disruptions at the premiere of *La Fuite*, Tristan Tzara’s pro-Resistance play, at the théâtre du Vieux-Colombier;³³ the

³⁰ Co-signed par Serge Berna, Jean-Louis Brau, François Dufrière, Marc-Gilbert Guillaumin (Marc,O.), Albert-Jules Legros, Maurice B. Lemaître, CP-Matricon and Gil J Wolman, this manifesto, which was written by Isou, was published on the back cover of *Ur*, no. 1., with the last phrase (“and have the opportunity to project itself historically, to remain in *History*”) voluntarily deleted by its author.

³¹ All of these names appeared on the cover of the first and only issue of *La Dictature lettriste, cahiers d’un nouveau régime artistique*, [the journal of] “the only contemporary avant-garde artistic movement” (June 1946). Charles Dobzynski was listed as Charles Dobre.

³² The title of a poem by Charles Dobre that appeared in *La Dictature lettriste* (p. 47).

³³ On 21 January 1946, at the théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, Michel Leiris presented a spoken word performance of *La Fuite*, a dramatic poem by Tristan Tzara in four acts plus an epilogue. “As soon as he said that Mr. Tzara was making the stones speak, a vehement voice from the hall was heard: ‘We know about Tzara. Speak to us, Mr. Leiris, of Lettrism instead!’ Hubbub, whistling, applause. Shouts were heard: ‘Dada is dead! Make way for Lettrism! Lettrism to the latrines!’ etc. Leiris finished up, his voice drowned out. That was a shame, because what he said was very beautiful” (Maurice Nadeau, “Les ‘lettristes’ chahutent une lecture de Tzara au Vieux-Colombier,” *Combat*, 22 January 1946). After the play, in the midst of the commotion, laughter and mockery, Isou took the stage and presented his theories and read one of his poems (“Vagn bagadou kri kuss balala chimorabisssss”), thus publicly launching the lettrist movement.

interruption of conferences by Gabriel Marcel,³⁴ and brawls with Jean-Paul Sartre's disciplines in the alleys of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

lettrist poems
silence (3 seconds)

Voice #2: After a quite long period of inaction, the beginning of 1950 saw the arrival of two poets of value who had, in their lives as individuals, experienced the exhaustion and failure of the word and who, with their works and their critiques, would bring lettrism into its period of concrete development.

Jean-Louis Brau and Gil J Wolman gathered around the Front de la Jeunesse organization young intellectuals who wished to escape the restricted framework of poetry in order to take possession of the political-economic domain.³⁵

The classic economic circuit was founded on the relations between public sector workers who possessed goods, which was Strigl's definition of the *l'homo œconomicus*.³⁶

The disruptions of the circuit could only be explained by questionable formulations, such as increases in needs (Keynes) and historicity (Marx). The discovery of a nonproductive mass – such is the externality – detached from the circuit, allows one to envision a new explanation. It was in this spirit that Serge Berna³⁷ climbed up to the pulpit at Notre-Dame, interrupted the Easter Mass, in order to demonstrate the will of an entire generation to chase away dead ideas.

On the subject of Serge Berna, the judges don't quite know which head to cut off: that of a bawd? a dangerous anarchist? a provocateur paid by the [Communist] Party? or paid by the Church itself, whose Machiavellianism is legendarily unlimited?

³⁴ Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) was a playwright and a Christian existential philosopher.

³⁵ In 1950, Jean-Louis Brau and Gil J Wolman joined Maurice Lemaître, Lips and Gabriel Pomerand on the editorial committee of the *Front de la jeunesse*, a four-page-long political publication, only the first issue of which was published (a new series of twelve issues would be published between November 1955 and September 1956). The objective of this periodical was to publicize the Isouian theory of the *Soulèvement de la Jeunesse* [Youth Uprising] (with the youth defined as a nonproductive mass, external to the economic circuit, fighting to overthrow everything). This publication adopted as its motto a phrase by Isou: "We call 'Youth' any individual, no matter what his age is, who doesn't coincide with his function, who is agitated and struggles to attain his desired place in society as a public sector worker." [Translator: note that, between 1952 and 1954, a monthly Isouian publication called *Soulèvement de la Jeunesse* was published by Yolande Du Luart, Georges Fouchart and Marc-Gilbert Guillaumin.]

³⁶ Richard von Strigl (1891-1942) was an Austrian liberal economist, a professor at the University of Vienna, and the author of *Einführung in die Grundlagen der Nationalökonomie*, (1937), published in French as *Introduction aux principes fondamentaux de l'économie politique* in 1939 and reprinted in 1948. Intended for students, this work concludes with this sentence: "In a healthy nation, the youth cannot be with those who see their interests in the maintenance of what exists, but only with those to whom the future belongs."

³⁷ Translator: it was in fact Michel Mourre, dressed as a Dominican monk, who climbed up to the pulpit and delivered a speech that had been written for him by Serge Berna. (Perhaps Mourre was erased from this narration because he repented shortly thereafter.) For a detailed account of this scandal, see "Scandale d'Notre-Dame" in Serge Berna, *Écrits et Documents*, edited and annotated by Jean-Louis Rançon (Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2024), translated by Bill Brown as "The Notre-Dame Scandal" in *Lettrist, Provocateur, Writer, Thief: An Anthology of Writings by and Documents about Serge Berna* (unpublished manuscript).

In his essay on *L'Esthétique du scandale*, Serge Berna himself recounts another scandal that he caused during a ceremony organized by the orphanage at Auteuil, where he wanted to speak out against the tyranny exercised over the young people therein.³⁸

Voice #3:

And so we went to Auteuil to create the scandal of which I have become a soldier of fortune. As laughter dripped down the walls of my throat, I insisted on doing my nails in a funereal bathroom because one must be far-sighted and expect the worst [...]

Then the interminable pairs of black orphans start to march, and I start to love (I can love anything on demand) this sordid cutting that is solidly corseted by the prayers of the faithful: a Hail Mary, a kick in the ass; a wine-cellar pariah, a *moup ne vied auv mul*; an *oupav-curie*, a *lepe-ra-pem-vel-care*; a kick in the ass, a Hail Mary. Then the hatred. To help immediately, without the slow erosive patience of time, to give birth to *hatred* among these little ones through a quite bloody Cesarean section so that they – those who survive – can immediately pull everything out [...]

I walked slowly in the Gold. I floated in the mellowness of these canticles. The skins and the too-loud voices flowed into the edges of the lawns maintained in bulk like Arlette's sponsor. The successive, thick layers of bodies, the odors swaying on the black bilboquets: cops and priests . . .

In fact, we were a bit bored waiting for the famous propitious moment to arrive: the place was full of cops, and we, standing in a very crowded area, were a bit conspicuous in our plaid shirts and sneakers (one night I got up and pissed in the fireplace; from the midst of the viscous ashes and very black stumps leaped a few short, absolutely unexpected multi-colored flames that made the damp dead cry out in discomfort). Fed up with looking over there, towards the back, over the dark line of orphans, towards the altar, colored like a wedding of yellows, reds and purples, with individuals prowling around a white iron rod erected upon a triangular head.

silence (3 seconds)

Voice #1: Nevertheless this group continued to act within the larger domain of lettrism properly speaking.

It was in October 1950 that the campaign of performances in the wine cellar of Au Tabou was begun, but the police quickly took notice of the fact that the names of some of those responsible for recent scandals appeared on the large yellow posters that announced them. Under pressure, Au Tabou was closed for “unwholesomeness.” Thus we saw the lettrists seeking out other available halls. There were performances at the Royal Odéon on 15 October, at La Rose rouge on the 18th, and the Maison des Lettres, on the 21st, 22^d and 23rd.³⁹

³⁸ *Translator:* see “*Un nommé Berna Serge, né à . . .*” in Serge Berna, *Écrits et Documents*, op. cit. and “A man named Serge Berna, born in . . .” in *Lettrist, Provocateur, Writer, Thief*, op. cit. The paragraph here that begins “On the subject of Serge Berna, the judges don’t quite know” also comes from this text.

³⁹ The posters for the performance at Tabou (33, rue Dauphine, Paris VIth arrond.) announced the participation of Serge Berna, Jean-Louis Brau, Bu Bugajer, François Dufrêne, Ghislain (Desnoyers de Marbaix), Jean-Isidore Isou, Albert-Jules Legros, Maurice Lemaître, Matricon, Nonosse, Pac Pacco, Gabriel Pomerand and Gil J Wolman in four lettrist performances (“the only possible music-poetry, the universe of ‘noises’”) to be held on 14, 15, 21 and 22 October 1950. (It appears that, in fact, none of these performances provided a reason for the administrative closure of the Tabou.) An “Audition lettriste” was also held at la Rose Rouge on 9 December with [the participation of] Berna, Brau, Dufrêne, Isou, Legros, Lemaître, Pomerand and Wolman.

lettrist poem
silence (3 seconds)

Voice #2: On the occasion of the presentation at the Cannes Festival of 1951 of the first lettrist film, *Traité de bave et d'éternité*,⁴⁰ in the tumult unleashed by a hostile audience, a young enthusiast was seen to stand up and reply to the sarcasm of a well-known personality with a vigorous fist. Thus did Guy Debord mark his adhesion to the lettrist movement. He later participated in the new orientation of the group by laying down the bases for a beautiful situation in his work *Ébauche de psychologie tridimensionnelle*.⁴¹

lettrist poem
silence (3 seconds)

Voice #2: This presentation of *Traité de bave et d'éternité* marked the [first] intrusion of lettrism into the cinematographic domain.

⁴⁰ A film that is *discrépant* (disjunction of the sound and the image) and chiseling (lacerated film stock), Jean-Isidore Isou's *Traité de bave et d'éternité* was screened on 20 April 1951 on the sidelines of the Fourth International Film Festival at Cannes, with the support of Jean Cocteau. The film is divided into three chapters: in the first ("the principle"), we see Isou leave the hall of the Sociétés savantes (8, rue Danton, Paris VIth arrond.) at the end of a meeting of a film club. Wandering around the Saint-Germain-des-Prés neighborhood, in a voice-over, he remembers his intervention in front of a heated audience during the post-screening discussion; in the second ("the development") and third ("the proof") chapters, he puts into practice the cinematographic manifesto that he had just presented to the film club: chiseling of the image, primacy of the sound, independence of the images and the sound, while in a voice-over he recounts his amorous adventures, interspersed with lettrist poems and choirs, including François Dufrêne's *J'interroge et j'invective* (September 1949), a poem dedicated to the memory of Antonin Artaud.

At the screening in Cannes, after the first chapter, only the sound track was played because the images for the last two chapters weren't completed yet. "After a few images of Saint-Germain-des-Prés in which we see our lettrists walk around and declare that they are the new gods of literature and all the arts, the screen remained white, the projector's lamp was turned off, and, as Isou says, the door was opened, that is to say, no more images would be presented to the audience, while their ears were deafened by a concert of vociferations, cries and speeches. These incidents marked the end of the 5,200 meters of film stock and it is said that Miss Sonika Bo delivered a couple of slaps to Isidore Isou's face. The literary personalities who were present seemed a little embarrassed and only Malaparte remained impassive, not seeming to know very well what to do" (*Nice-Matin*, 21 April 1951.)

After this screening, *Traité de bave et d'éternité* received the Spectateurs d'avant-garde prize for 1951 as well as the En marge du Festival de Cannes prize, which was awarded by an *ad hoc* jury composed of Cocteau, Curzio Malaparte, and Raf Vallone.

On the evening that the final cut was completed, on 23 May 1951, the film was screened by the Avant-Garde film club at the musée de l'Homme, organized by Armand Cauliez, and then again at the movie theater of the Studio de l'Étoile (14, rue Troyon, Paris XVIIth arrond.) on 25 January 1952 (the poster for the screening was designed by Cocteau; the lettrists distributed copies of the tract *Le cinéma en crève*).

⁴¹ Announced under a similar title (*Essai de psychologie tridimensionnelle*) in the only issue of the lettrist journal *ION* (editorial director: Marc-Gilbert Guillaumin, April 1952), this work wasn't published or, it seems, preserved in any archive, but three evocations of it can be found in that issue: "The values of creation are moving towards to the conditioning of the audience, with what I have called *tridimensional psychology*" (Guy Debord, "Prolégomènes à tout cinéma futur"); "tridimensional psychology or the architectural complex defined as a means of knowledge," says a voice-over while the viewer sees exterior views of the musée de Cluny (the first version of the script for the film [by Guy Debord] *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*); and "Guy-Ernest Debord 'psychotridimensionalized' the musée Cluny as if he's done nothing else his whole life" (Poucette, "Il nous arrive d'en parler...").

With his film *L'Anticoncept*,⁴² banned by the film censorship board and presented surreptitiously at the Cannes Festival of 1952, Gil J Wolman marks the definitive divorce between the images and the sound. Wolman intensifies his research in the field of speech and achieves results that even the most hostile critics were forced to recognize as the most astonishing experiments.

Wolman discovers a new movement, which he calls “cinématochrone.”

In *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*,⁴³ Guy-Ernest Debord rises up with the greatest violence possible against a certain ethical order.

Serge Berna wants the spectator watching his film *Du léger rire qu'il y a autour de la mort*⁴⁴ to be so deeply infused by the cadence of the sound that he has a heart attack.⁴⁵ As for Jean-Louis Brau's goal, it is to jump over the barriers of speech in all its forms so as to reach a raw art of primary sensations.

⁴² Completed on 25 September 1951, *L'Anticoncept* contains a single image: a white circle on a black background (“Everything that is round is Wolman”), which is accompanied by a monologue on the sound track. This is how Gil J Wolman presented his film in February 1952: “Summary by way of an introduction to *L'Anticoncept*. The film script for *L'Anticoncept* not being ‘one’ but ‘changeable by many reactions,’ its author, contrary to the customary summaries of a film’s storyline, can only briefly develop the process of physiological percussion. The Voice no longer carries the vocables, but sings in parallel with the words. The word collides with and decongests the imagination, which, until now, has rested on the concept. The concept switches sides. Finds itself without alienation in the spectator. ‘The time of the Poets is over.’ This is the day of the Acrobats.” (GJW [AS 102])

On 11 February, the film’s first screening (on a weather balloon) at the Avant-Garde film club in the musée de l’Homme causes a brawl between the lettrists and members of the public. In April 1952, the film’s script is published in *ION*. Judging *L'Anticoncept* to be “noncommercial,” the Film Oversight Board (*la commission de contrôle des films cinématographiques*) bans it on 2 April 1952 – an interdiction that remains in effect to this day.

On the sidelines of the Fifth International Film Festival at Cannes (23 April – 10 May 1952), the lettrists screen Wolman’s *L'Anticoncept* “for a few journalists, the only legal possibility” as well as Jean-Louis Brau’s *La Barque de la vie courante*. On 4 May, at the Alexandre III theater, they screen François Dufrêne’s *Tambours du jugement premier*, “an imaginary film, without screen or film roll.” “The ‘dark’ room was plunged into complete darkness, including the screen. At the four corners, only flashlights illuminated the texts held by the four ‘chatty people’ [‘diseurs’]: Wolman and Marc O tasked with ‘aphorisms’ (spoken by the former, chanted by the latter); Debord, reading the images aloud; and me, declaiming phonetic poems.” François Dufrêne, “Une action en marge,” *Archi-Made* (Paris: ENSBA, 2005).

Determined to oppose the Cannes Festival, the lettrists distribute copies of *Fini le cinéma français*, cover the Festival’s posters with slogans (“The cinema is dead”), provoke brawls and interrupt screenings: 10 demonstrators are arrested.

⁴³ The first film script for *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* was published in *ION* (April 1952). It included images and ended with a black screen and “a short silence, then very violent cries in the darkness.” Faced with the career ambitions of some of the lettrists, and after the prohibition of screenings of “the admirable” *Anticoncept*, Guy Debord radicalized his film script to the point of suppressing all images. Completed on 17 June 1952 and dedicated to Gil J Wolman, one of whose *Improvisations mégapneumes* can be heard at the film’s beginning, this imageless film alternates between sequences of white screen for the brief dialogues and sequences of silence with a black screen. Its first screening, which took place on 30 June 1952 at the Avant-Garde film club of the musée de l’Homme, was almost immediately interrupted by members of the audience and the film club’s leaders, not without violence.

⁴⁴ Although said to be “in the process of being completed” by the wall poster/tract *La Nuit du Cinéma* (published on the occasion of the first uninterrupted screening of *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, on 13 October 1952, in the theater of the Sociétés savantes, “defended by the ‘leftist lettrists’ group and about 20 reserves from Saint-Germain-des-Prés”), Serge Berna would never complete *Du léger rire qu'il y a autour de la mort*.

⁴⁵ *Translator*: “I would like it (this is surely impossible) if the spectator is so deeply infused with the cadence of the sound and its enchanting force that he might die of a heart attack if an untimely interruption occurs, such as a power outage.” Serge Berna, “*Jusqu'à l'os*” in *Écrits et Documents*, op. cit.; “To the Bone” in *Lettrist, Provocateur, Writer, Thief*, op. cit.

Laying down the bases of stressology, the study of the passage from the psychic to the physical of the effects of shocks, of stimuli, Jean-Louis Brau advances in great strides towards the development of an integral art. The illustrations of the aesthetic manifestations of the stressographic approach that he has created poetically in captivating choruses and cinematographically in a great avant-garde film, *La Barque de la vie courante*, are already taking their places among the key works of the post-war era.

lettrist choir
silence (3 seconds)

Voice #3: Between the movement's demonstrations, for which all the lettrists were mobilized around a specific action, there were long periods of internal work. Groups that formed according to the sympathies of a particular moment or because of shared precise goals frequented the cafés of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, which were already called "literary," and other cafés that would be called that in the future. There was the café Bonaparte to which Maurice Lemaître and [Gabriel] Pomerand came every day to hear Isidore Isou's orders; the Mabillon, the lair of Serge Berna and his "hooligans"; le Reinitas, in which Jean-Louis Brau and Gil J Wolman already offered a prelude of the new spirit; and the Moineau, on rue du Four, which was the incubator of the then-current generation.

lettrist choir
silence (3 seconds)

Voice #2: On the formal level of poetry, Isou, who has now lost interest in lettrism, and his followers, stagnating in the given, continue to break the very structure of the word and to invert the sonorities in a true order. Arbitrary combinations that will soon recreate a conceptual realization. Such is the only possible outcome with the elementary letter, an immutable template. It was necessary to attack the letter.

This is what Wolman is trying to achieve by creating megapneumia.

Megapneumia is the art of letters reduced down to themselves and then worked upon. Gil J Wolman disintegrates the consonant, dislocates the consonant from the vowel. The vowels are returned to their abstract hierarchical powers. For each emitted letter, a mass of vibrations remains inaudible. To compensate for the failures of hearing, Wolman introduces visual simultaneity (the introduction of lines and colors). Faced with the impossibility of the total assimilation of sight, Wolman adds relief. Thus he begins the Integral Art that, along with Jean-Louis Brau, he is in the process of creating.⁴⁶

Mégapneumies
silence (3 seconds)

Voice #1: On the ideological level, we are witnessing a definitive break between those who want to be Men of Letters and nothing more and those who want to go beyond that.

The Man of Letters only interests us to the extent that anything can interest us today.

⁴⁶ With some variations, these considerations on megapneumia can be found in Gil J Wolman, "Introduction à Wolman," *Ur* no. 1 (December 1950).

In October 1952, when Charles Chaplin and his escort of paunchy deputy prefects and representatives from the Arts and Letters came to Paris, Serge Berna, Jean-Louis Brau, Guy-Ernest Debord and Gil J Wolman tried to shout their disgust at this formalization [*officialisation*] of anti-conformism.

At Charlot's⁴⁷ press conference at the Ritz Hotel, copies of a tract⁴⁸ were thrown into the face of the former vagabond:

Voice #1: Sub-Mack Sennett filmmaker, sub-Max Linder actor, the Stavisky⁴⁹ of the tears of abandoned single mothers and the little orphans of Auteuil, you, Chaplin, are the swindler of feelings, the blackmailer of suffering.

Cinematography needed its Delly.⁵⁰ You have given your works and your good works to it.

Because you are said to be the [champion of the] weak and the oppressed, attacking you means attacking the weak and the oppressed, but behind your bamboo cane some people already feel the cop's billy club.

You are "the one who turns the other cheek and the other buttock," but we who are young and beautiful, respond "Revolution" when you say "pain and suffering" to us.

We do not believe in the "absurd prosecutions" of which you, a Max du Veuzit⁵¹ with flat feet,⁵² would be the victim. In French, the Immigration Service means advertising agency. A press conference like the one you gave in Cherbourg could have launched [and made a success of] any old dud. Thus, fear nothing about the success of *Limelight*.⁵³

May your latest film truly be the last one.

The fires of the footlights have melted the makeup of the supposedly brilliant mime and we now only see an ominous⁵⁴ and self-interested old man.⁵⁵

⁴⁷ *Translator:* Charlot was a loving French nickname for Charles Chaplin.

⁴⁸ *Translator:* *Fini les pieds plats* (No More Flat Feet).

⁴⁹ *Translator:* The Stavisky Affair was a financial scandal in France in 1934, named after Alexandre Stavisky, who embezzled funds.

⁵⁰ *Translator:* A kind and noble person.

⁵¹ *Translator:* The pseudonym of Alphonsine Zéphrine Vavasour (1876-1952), the author of dozens of popular romance novels.

⁵² *Translator:* A flatfoot is slang for a police officer; in French *pied plat* can also mean a yokel or country bumpkin.

⁵³ *Translator:* Chaplin's last film. English in original.

⁵⁴ *Translator:* *sinistre* can also be translated as "dreary" or "dull."

⁵⁵ Note that the sixth paragraph, "Allez vous coucher, fasciste larvé, gagnez beaucoup d'argent, soyez mondain (très réussi votre plat ventre devant la petite Élisabeth), mourez vite, nous vous ferons des obsèques de première classe" ["Go to bed, latent fascist, make lots of money, be sociable (your groveling in front of little Elizabeth was very successful), die soon, we will hold a first-class funeral service for you"] and the last sentence, "*Go home Mister Chaplin*" [English in original], weren't included in this version of the text.

On 31 October [1950], in *Paris-Presse l'Intransigeant*, the critic Robert Chazal gave an account of the press conference at the Ritz Hotel, which included the following: "There was also a shocking note: several young pseudo-literary hoodlums rained down upon Chaplin copies of a tract that called him 'latent fascist,' 'ominous old man,' 'the Stavisky of the tears of abandoned single mothers' and other profanities."

To which Jean-Louis Brau, Guy-Ernest Debord and Gil J Wolman, then in Belgium for a screening of *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, replied:

To the late [Mr.] Chazal,

You were ill advised to insult us as a way of defending the most recent *super-production* [English in original] by United Artists, which, as everyone knows, pays you handsomely.

Voice #1: Isidore Isou, who had aged considerably, disavowed responsibility for the incident in a letter published in the 1 November 1952 issue of *Combat*.⁵⁶

We happened to learn of this written proof of your permanent stupidity while in Brussels and have decided to smash what serves as your face as soon as we return to France.

You will pay for the others, whose conformist cowardice and publicity-minded admiration you have brought to the highest level of perfection.

False witness, informer and probable pederast, you have drooled enough. We will rid the French press of one of its most representative pieces of trash.

See you soon.

⁵⁶ On 1 November 1952, Jean-Isidore Isou, Maurice Lemaître and Gabriel Pomerand publicly disavowed the attack against Chaplin in the pages of *Combat*:

The members of the lettrist movement are united on the basis of new principles of knowledge and each one guards his independence with respect to the application of those principles. We all know that Chaplin has been “a great creator in the history of the cinema,” but the “total and bizarre hysteria” that has surrounded his arrival in France has embarrassed us, as would the expression of any [mental] instability. We are ashamed that the world today lacks more profound values than the secondary ones of the “idolizers” of the “artist.” The lettrist signers of the tract against Chaplin are the only ones responsible for the outrageous and confused content of their manifesto. As nothing has been resolved in the world, Charlot received, along with all the applause, the splotches of this non-resolution.

We, the lettrists who, from the beginning, were opposed to our comrades’ tract, smile at the maladroit expression that the bitterness of their youth took.

If Charlot must receive handfuls of mud, it will not be us who throw them. There are others who are paid to do this (the Attorney General, for example).

Thus we distance ourselves from our friends’ tract and we associate ourselves [closely] with the tribute paid to Chaplin by the entire populace.

Other lettrist groups in their turn will explain their position on this affair, in their own publications or in the press.

But Charlot and all this only constitute a simple and slight difference [of opinion].

The next day, writing from Brussels, the international lettrists, with the exception of Berna (who’d remained in Paris), sent the following update to *Combat*, which refused to publish it.

The Position of the Lettrist International

Following our intervention at the press conference held at the Ritz by Chaplin, and the reproduction in the newspapers of a part of our tract *No More Flat Feet*, which rebelled against the hero-worship that has commonly been lavished on this writer-director, Jean-Isidore Isou and two of his sheepish followers, who have whitened under the harness, published a notice in *Combat* that disapproved of our actions in this precise circumstance.

We appreciate the importance of Chaplin’s work *in its time*, but we know that today novelty is elsewhere and that “the truths that are no longer amusing become lies” (Isou).

We believe that the most urgent exercise of freedom is the destruction of idols, especially when they identify themselves with freedom.

The provocative tone of our tract was a reaction against the unanimous and servile enthusiasm [for Chaplin]. The distance that some lettrists, and Isou himself, have been led to take with respect to it only betrays the perpetually renewed incomprehension between extremists and those who are no longer such; between us and those who have renounced “the bitterness of their youth” in order to “smile” at established luminaries; between those who are *over 20 years old* and those who are *under 30*.

The break was consummated and the signatories to the tract regrouped as the Lettrist International.⁵⁷

Some young people who had been attracted by the pragmatic character that Isou had inculcated into lettrism joined with them. Among them were Sarah Abouaf, P.-J. Berlé, Leibé, Mohamed Hadj Dahou, Linda, Jean-Michel Mension, and Éliane Pápai, who co-signed the “Manifesto” of the Lettrist International.⁵⁸

Voice #2: Lettrist provocation always serves to pass the time. Revolutionary thought isn’t elsewhere. We pursue our little disturbances in the restricted beyond of literature, for lack of anything better. Naturally it is to manifest ourselves that we write manifestoes. Casualness is a very beautiful thing. But our desires are perishable and disappointing. Youth is systematic,⁵⁹ as one says. The weeks spread out in a straight line. Our encounters are by chance and our precarious contacts get lost behind the fragile defense of words. The Earth turns as if nothing had happened. To be honest, the human condition doesn’t please us. We have discharged Isou, who believes in the usefulness of leaving traces. Everything that maintains something contributes to the work of the police. Because we know that all the ideas and forms of behavior that already exist are insufficient. Current society is thus divided solely into lettrists and informers, the most

We alone claim responsibility for a text that we alone signed. We have not disavowed anyone.

We are indifferent to the various indignant responses. There are no degrees among reactionaries.

We abandon them to the anonymous and shocked crowd.

Serge Berna, Jean-L. Brau, Guy-Ernest Debord, Gil J Wolman

At the end of that same month, the International Lettrists published the first issue of *Internationale lettriste*, which assembled the documents that were relevant to this break and which included Guy-Ernest Debord’s text “Mort d’un commis voyageur” and Gil J Wolman’s illustration *HHHHHH Un home saoul en veut deux*.

⁵⁷ A month later, on 7 December 1952, in Aubervilliers, where Jean-Louis Brau lived, the Lettrist International (founded in Brussels in June 1952 by Guy Debord and Gil J Wolman) held its first and only conference and adopted the following resolutions:

1. Adoption of the principle of the majority. In cases in which a majority cannot be obtained, discussion will be taken up again on a new basis that can lead to the formation of a majority. Principle of the use of names by the majority.
2. Acquisition of the critique of the arts and of some of its contributions. It is in the surpassing of the arts that the work remains to be done.
3. Prohibition of any member of the Lettrist International from supporting or maintaining a retrogressive morality; the elaboration of precise criteria to be worked out.
4. Extreme circumspection in the presentation of personal works of art that implicate the LI – Exclusion *ipso facto* for any collaboration with Isouian activities, even in defense of the LI – Exclusion of anyone publishing a commercial work under his own name.

In full payment [of all accounts].

Serge Berna, Jean-L. Brau, Guy-Ernest Debord, Gil J Wolman

This document was torn up and stuffed into a bottle, which was then thrown into the Saint-Denis canal. The next day, Jean-Louis Brau fished it out.

⁵⁸ Drafted on 19 February 1953, the “Manifesto” of the Lettrist International would be published in issue #2 of *Internationale lettriste*.

⁵⁹ *Translator: systématique* can also mean automatic.

notorious of whom is André Breton. There are no nihilists, there are only powerless people. Almost everything is forbidden to us. The corruption of minors and the use of drugs are pursued just like, more generally, all of our gestures, in order to overcome the void. Several of our comrades are in prison for theft. We rise up against the penalties inflicted on people who have become aware that it is absolutely not necessary to work for a living. We refuse to engage in discussion. Human relationships must have passion, if not terror, as their foundation.

[Signed] Sarah Abouaf, Serge Berna, P.J. Berlé, Jean-L. Brau, (René) Leibé, Midhou Dahou, Guy-Ernest Debord, Linda (Fryde), Françoise Lejare, Jean-Michel Mension, Éliane Pápaï, Gil J Wolman

silence (3 seconds)

Voices 1, 2 and 3: But schools die to make way for complex people.⁶⁰

silence (3 seconds)

lettrist choir

⁶⁰ The three voices scheduled for the recording of *Faces of the Avant-Garde* [which never took place] were to declaim this final iteration of the Lettrist International's break with Isouian lettrism in unison.