

“Manifesto for a Construction of Situations”¹

The gestures that we’ve had the opportunity to make have been quite insufficient, we must admit it. We only get excited about people when we noisily leave them behind.

For a long time, we have been busy turning full bottles into empty ones. The general strike failed after three weeks; the return to work marks another defeat for the Revolution in France.² I will be 22 years old in three weeks. Wasting time. Earning a living. All the mockeries in the vocabulary. And the promises. We will meet again. You speak.

And Vincent Van Gogh in his *The Night Café*³ with the crazy wind in his ears. And Pascin,⁴ who committed suicide because he had wanted to found a society of princes, but a quorum could not be reached. And you, lost schoolgirl; your beautiful, your sad youth; and the snows of Aubervilliers.⁵

The universe in the process of exploding. And we went from one bar to another, holding the hands of various little girls who were as perishable as the drugs that we, of course, abused. All that was relatively funny.

But what will become of her in all the illuminated ports of summer, in all the abandonments of the world, in the aging of the world?

WE WILL REMEMBER THIS PLANET.⁶ So little. Now let’s move on to serious things.

*

Our era is witnessing the death of Aesthetics.

“The arts begin, grow and disappear because dissatisfied men surpass the world of official expressions and the festivals of its poverty.” (*Hurlements en faveur de Sade*. June 1952.)

¹ Guy-Ernest Debord, “*Manifeste pour une construction de situations*,” September 1953, unpublished. The text (incomplete) is composed of 11 typewritten sheets, the first of which bears the inscription “Copy specially corrected for Gil J Wolman, G E.” Translated and annotated by Bill Brown, 26 January 2025. Note well that Debord’s “*Rapport sur la construction des situations*” (Report on the Construction of Situations) was one of the texts drafted in preparation for the conference at Cosio d’Arroscia, Italy, held in July 1957, at which the Situationist International was founded.

² On 13 August 1953, more than four million French workers went out on a general strike to protest against the government’s austerity measures; it ended on 25 August.

³ A painting of the open-all-night Café de l’Alcazar in Arles (September 1888), a place frequented by vagrants and prostitutes. Van Gogh took his meals there.

⁴ Julius Mordecai Pincas, aka Pascin (1885-1930), was a Bulgarian painter. He committed suicide in Paris at the age of 45.

⁵ It was in Aubervilliers, a working-class neighborhood just outside Paris, on 7 December 1952, that the Lettrist International held its first and only conference.

⁶ This phrase – *on s’en souviendra de cette planète* – appears in Antoine Albalat, *Souvenirs de la vie littéraire* (Paris: G. Crès, 1924): “This one really knew bohemia and poverty, which he summed up in such a picturesque phrase, one night when he was sleeping under the bridges with a friend: ‘It doesn’t matter, we will remember this planet.’”

For a century, every artistic approach has started with a reflection upon its material, culminating in a more extreme reduction of its means (the final explosion of the word or of the pictorial object. The cinema has followed the same course, accelerated by the precedent of the older arts).

The isolation of a few words by Mallarmé on the dominant white of a page, the flight that highlights the meteoric work of Rimbaud, the frenzied desertion of Arthur Cravan across the continents, and the culmination of Dadaism in Marcel Duchamp's chess game are the stages of the same negation, the bankruptcy of which we must declare today.

Aesthetics, like Religion, might take a long time to decompose. But their survivors have no interest. We must simply denounce the hope that might still be placed in those retrograde solutions, and this is the meaning of our demonstration against Chaplin in October 1952.⁷

Modern Art hurries towards and demands something that is beyond Aesthetics, the latest formal variations of which only announce its arrival. In this respect, the importance of Surrealism is that it considered Poetry to be a simple means of approaching a hidden and more valid life. But the morning only retains traces of the night's incomplete dream-like constructions. The years pass in a bourgeois fashion, waiting for "objective chance," improbable passers-by, and uncertain revelations.

Two generations cannot live on the same stock of illusions.

Isou's Lettrism was a kind of *positive Dadaism*. It proposed an unlimited creation of new arts, through accepted mechanisms. In the inflation of explained values, the last remaining interest of these disciplines is detached from them.

The arts come to an end amidst their last riches or they continue for the purposes of commerce.

"We will create new forms every day; we will no longer bother to prove them, to explain their resistance through *valid works*. . . . We will go further in order to discover other *ancient sources* that we will abandon, in their turn, in the same state of unexploited potentiality. The world will overflow with so many aesthetic riches that we won't know what to do with them." (Isou, *Mémoire sur les forces futures des arts plastiques et sur leur mort*, March 1951).

After the trial of this idealist academicism, and the exclusion of its supporters, I wrote: "All the arts are crude games that change nothing." (*Notice pour la Fédération française des ciné-clubs*, November 1952).

Our contempt for Aesthetics isn't something we chose to have. On the contrary, we were talented at "loving it." We've arrived at the end. That's all.

At the limits of Expression, which we now consider to be a secondary activity, the most recently discovered forms demonstrate both a clear awareness of the extreme attrition of the idea of communication and a desire to intervene in existence.

"He wanted to renovate and transform love through a new cinematic technique." (Gil J Wolman, *L'Anticoncept*. February 1952).

Wolman's *anticonceptual* cinema achieves a work that can be changed by each individual reaction, by the means of a visual ambiance and a vocal game that is unrelated to the narrative. Thus does Art advance, from a given form to a participatory game.

In the film titled *Hurléments en faveur de Sade* (an enterprise of cinematic terrorism), I have mostly used *détourned phrases*: articles from the Civil Code, innocuous conversations and

⁷ A reference to the Lettrist International's infamous disruption of a press conference held at the Ritz Hotel in Paris by Charles Chaplin, who was promoting his latest film, *Limelight*.

quotations from well-known authors, which take on another meaning through their *confrontation with each other*.

The détournement of phrases is the first manifestation of the *arts of accompaniment* that have been aimed at another goal, in which we see the only [possible] use of the definitively closed past of Aesthetics.

Moving in the same direction, Gaëtan M. Langlais has written *Jolie Cousette* by using various press clippings from different sources. The unrelated cannot exist. As in the arbitrary rapprochement of a photo and a text (see the photographic illustrations in issues no. 1 and no. 3 of *Internationale lettriste*), the juxtaposition of two phrases necessarily creates a new whole and always imposes an explanation.

Gilles Ivain's four-dimensional novel "takes place in 20 already published works. . . . It will overflow the frameworks of literary FACTS in order to invade and violently modify life by all means, the simplest of which will be just like the phenomenon of magnetic induction. The novel will be a four-dimensional body of engraved signs and key images. The novel will sketch out a new mathematics of situations⁸ or it will not exist." (*Gillespie*. Forthcoming from éditions Julliard.)⁹

*

Our action in the arts is only the outline of a sovereignty that we want to have over our adventures, given over to shared chances.

These works in progress are only research into direct action in everyday life.

In a pragmatic universe, the profound intention of Aesthetics has much less been *survival* than living absolutely.

With us, it is truly the case that "poetry must have practical truth as its goal."¹⁰

The same concern with *investing* in beings and their development completely dominates this goal of Aesthetics, from Wolman's initial proclamation that "the new generation will leave nothing to chance"¹¹ to Gilles Ivain's "influential metagraphy."¹²

*

⁸ It is possible that the lettrist concept of the "situation" has its roots in the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, who made use of the term many times. For example: "there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom," *L'Être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943).

⁹ This novel by Ivan Chtcheglov aka Gilles Ivain, was never published.

¹⁰ A phrase found in Lautréamont, *Poésies* (1870) and, much later, in the title of a poem by Paul Éluard, included in *Deux poètes daujour'hui* (1947).

¹¹ Gil J Wolman, in "Fragments de recherches pour un comportement prochain," *Internationale lettriste* No. 2 (February 1953).

¹² It wouldn't be until June 1954, when Gil J Wolman organized an exposition of 66 "influential metagraphics" by André-Frank Conord, Mohamed Dahou, Guy-Ernest Debord, Jacques Fillon, Gilles Ivain, Patrick Stram and Wolman himself, titled "Avant la guerre," that this phrase came to be used outside of the Lettrist International.

The set [the scenery] fills us and determines us. Even in the current, rather lamentable state of urban construction, it is generally far above the acts that it contains, acts that are confined in the imbecilic lines of morals and primary efficiencies.

WE MUST ACHIEVE A CHANGE OF SCENERY THROUGH URBAN PLANNING, a non-utilitarian urban planning or, more exactly, an urban planning conceived of according to another utilization.

The construction of new frameworks is the first condition for other attitudes, for other understandings of the world.

The same desire follows its subterranean course over several centuries of liberatory efforts, from Sade's inaccessible castles to the surrealists' allusions to houses complicated by long dark corridors that they would have liked to inhabit.

The on-going charm (in the strongest sense of the word) possessed by the great castles of the past, the villages surrounded by hedges from the good old days of the *Far West*,¹³ the disturbing buildings in the port of London – cellars that communicate with the Thames – or the labyrinths in the temples of India must not be abandoned to weak evocations in period films, but used in concrete new constructions.

The prestige of *Enfants terribles*¹⁴ among an entire generation ultimately derives from the atmosphere created by the highly unusual construction of a place and the decision to live there exclusively: an abstract room, a Chinese city with ramparts made of screens. “A single desert-island room surrounded by linoleum” (page 163). A couple of sentences in the book clearly reveal all the opportunities for adventure contained in a house, following an “error” in the classic architectural plans: “They had noticed one of its virtues, which was not the least one: the gallery drifted in all directions, like a ship moored to a single anchor. When you found yourself in any other room, it became impossible to situate it and, when one went inside it, to account for its position relative to the others” (page 159).

The new architecture must condition everything:

New conceptions of the furniture, the space and the decorations in each room. New uses of thermal sensations, odors, silence and stereophony. A new image of the House (stairs, cellars, hallways, doors and windows) that will be extended to the notion of the architectural complex, a larger unit than the current house, which will be the unification of all the buildings – clearly separate from the outside – contributing to the creation of an ambiance or a clash of several ambiances.

Architecture, achieving the utilization of other arts, no matter what their past stages as practical objects of *accompagnement*, will once again become the guiding synthesis of the individual arts that marked the great eras of Aesthetics.

All of the already-existing examples of these *complexes* clearly introduce a baroque architecture that is simultaneously against the “harmonious presentation of forms” and “maximum comfort for all.”

(What does Mr. Le Corbusier¹⁵ suspect about people's *needs*?)

¹³ English in original.

¹⁴ A novel by Jean Cocteau (1929), eventually made into a film by Cocteau and Jean-Pierre Melville (1950).

¹⁵ Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris, aka Le Corbusier (1887-1965), was a French architect, urban planner and writer.

Architecture as an art form only exists by getting away from its basic utilitarian concept: the Habitat.

It is quite symptomatic that, in this discipline, in which so many works have been limited by a utilitarian intention (gigantic *buildings*¹⁶ in which to lodge the greatest number of people or cathedrals for prayer), the simultaneously gratuitous and influential direction of which I speak was announced some time ago by the marvelous *Palais idéal*, built by Cheval the Postman,¹⁷ which is certainly more important than the Parthenon and Notre-Dame taken together, and by the astonishing creations that the latest material techniques have made possible: walls made of compressed air, glass roofs, etc.

The recent appearance in America of houses intimately mixed in with the surrounding vegetation also goes in the foreseeable direction of our urban planning, which will be a puzzling juxtaposition of nature in its wild state and the most refined architectural complexes in the city's central neighborhoods.

This effort could develop along two parallel paths: the creation of cities in the most favorable climatic and geographical conditions; and the layout of already existing cities, some of which, like Paris, allow us to anticipate much of this future. (Places such as la Place Dauphine or la Cour de Rohan constitute a very attractive base for an architectural complex.) The new urban planning must integrate the older forms of construction and invent absolutely new ones.

Due to their diversity and their opposition (cf. Gilles Ivain's notion of the Neighborhoods-States of Mind),¹⁸ the neighborhoods of the new city would allow one to travel for a long time in a single aggregation, without exhausting it but by discovering ourselves in it.

Urban planning as a means of knowledge will annex all the minor separate domains with which, at this moment, we have ceased to concern ourselves. It will make use of both the latest state of the plastic arts to decorate the streets, the squares, the vacant lots, and the sudden forests, and the results of the neglected [or abandoned] Poetry that names them (Jack the Ripper Alley, the Noble and Tragic District, the Street of Louis II of Bavaria's Castles, the Andalusian Dog Impasse, the Palace of Gilles de Rais, the Closed Street, Drug Road).¹⁹ It will make the best use of lights through the windows, totally dark streets, hidden rivers and labyrinths that are open all night.

The future lies, if you will, in *Luna-Parks*²⁰ built by the greatest poets.

To take the case of already-existing cities, several of their neighborhoods could be very rapidly diverted from their current use. In Paris, l'île Saint-Louis could be kept just as it is, provided that the bridges were blown up and it was populated by about 20 inhabitants, nomads among all the deserted apartments. Several of today's sumptuous anachronisms cost more.

¹⁶ English in original.

¹⁷ Joseph Ferdinand Cheval (1836-1924), a postman, spent 33 years of his life perfecting his "Ideal Palace."

¹⁸ *des quartiers-états d'âme*: cf. Gilles Ivain, "Formulaire pour un urbanisme nouveau," written in 1953 and eventually published in *Internationale situationniste* #1 (June 1958).

¹⁹ "The Bizarre Quarter – The Happy Quarter (specially reserved for habitation) – The Noble and Tragic Quarter (for good children) – The Historical Quarter (museums, schools) – The Useful Quarter (hospitals, tool shops) – The Sinister Quarter, etc." *Ibid.*

²⁰ English in original. The first Luna Park was built in Coney Island, Brooklyn, New York, in 1903.

In even shorter measure, some surprising advertisements in neon lights could be used: SLAUGHTERHOUSES, ABORTIONS, VERY BAD RESTAURANTS.

Why should a sense of humor be excluded?

It goes without saying that these cities will expand with the evolution of the current condition of Mankind, which is used and salaried.

*

Destiny is Economic. The fate of men and women, their desires, their “duties,” have been entirely conditioned by the question of subsistence.

The evolution of machinery and the proliferation of produced values will allow new conditions for behavior, and demand them from now on, while the *problem of leisure* begins to be posed with an urgency that is felt by everyone. The organization of leisure activities, for a crowd that is *slightly less* obliged to work without interruption, is already a necessity for the State, even when these people are content with entertainment of the Parc des Princes²¹ type, for their gloomy Sundays.

After a few years spent *doing nothing* (as one says in common parlance) we can speak of our *avant-garde social attitude*, because, in a society still provisionally founded on production, we have only wanted to be seriously concerned with spare time and leisure activities.

Convinced that the only important questions in the future will concern the GAME, as disaffection with the absolute values of morality and gestures increases, we have played with this expectation along the poor streets of permitted facts, in the brick thickets of the Saint-Bernard quay, which we were remaking into a forest.

But, by applying new investigatory intentions to these facts – a method whose discourse still hasn’t been written – we can deduce the vaguely sensed laws of the only constructions that ultimately matter to us: DEEPLY MOVING²² SITUATIONS AT EVERY MOMENT.

In February 1953, the Lettrist International published a manifesto²³ whose desperate aggressiveness was justified by its concluding line: “Human relations must have passion, if not Terror, as their foundation.”

This passion, which is, for all that, difficult to find in our “friendships” [*fréquentations*] (we know what these things are made of, as Jacques Rigaut²⁴ dreadfully said) – we want to situate it in the perpetual renewal of the world, in which strangers would meet each other everywhere, would leave without ever believing it, simply among the tragedies and marvels of their terrestrial strolls.

“All the tree-like girls of the street have a past, so when will we be free of the perpetual virgins who have no memories and do not speak?” (Gil J Wolman, *L’Anticoncept*.)

The desire for a truer life, a more real life, simply played, is contemporary with the loss of importance of the classic subjects of passion.

“We will have determined new games and their futures before you have reached the age of serious crying about small things.” (*Première lettre à Missoum, sur le détournement des mineures.*)

²¹ A large sports stadium in the 16th arrondissement of Paris that was completed on 18 July 1897.

²² *BOULEVERSANTES* can also be translated as overwhelming, distressing and earth shattering.

²³ “Manifeste,” *Internationale lettriste*, No. 2 (February 1953).

²⁴ Jacques Georges Rigaut (1898-1929) was a French Dadaist.

This transcendence echoes Gilles Ivain's definition:

"The continent chosen as a toy."

(Gil J Wolman recently reminded that I once confessed to him: "I have never known anything except how to play." I believe that this truth must be, after all the equally useless and false declarations of affection or hostility, the final judgment of me.)

*

There have been, scattered throughout this century, signs that a new comportment is on the horizon. They cry out amidst the racket. IN THE MARGINS²⁵ of History, of the bombs thrown by little Russian nihilists hanged at the age of 15; or in the closed narrative of the *Enfants terribles* and their unconsummated incest, or in the moving and ludicrous fashion in which a few people whom I have known well have led their lives.

A complete description of these forms of behavior must be established and their laws determined. The trail of a gratuitous life has been picked up several times, and travelers in a hurry have followed it without returning – like Jacques Vaché,²⁶ who wrote: "my current goal is to wear a red shirt, a scarf"²⁷

²⁵ Perhaps it is not a coincidence that, after being excluded from the Lettrist International in September 1953, Serge Berna went on to found a magazine called EN MARGE.

²⁶ Jacques Pierre Vaché (1895-1919) was a French writer who posthumously praised by the surrealists.

²⁷ The rest of this text is missing.