

# *Lettrist, Provocateur, Writer, Thief:*

*An Anthology of Writings by and Documents about  
Serge Berna*

Edited by Jean-Louis Rançon  
Translated by Bill Brown

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## Translator's Note

This posthumous collection of texts by and about Serge Berna, titled *Écrits et Documents*, was edited and annotated by Jean-Louis Rançon and published in Paris by Éditions du Sandre in March 2024. This is its first translation into English.

Because *Writings and Documents* would be a rather bland title for a book by and about Berna, who was, as the reader will see, a brilliant, passionate, likeable, darkly funny, slightly crazy, self-destructive and ultimately tragic character, I have given my translation what I take to be a more suitable title.

Rançon presents and discusses the texts that he has assembled in a strictly chronological fashion. Though this approach allows the reader to follow the events in Berna's short but explosive career, it also separates topics that would be better off kept together. And so, I have slightly changed the order in which some of the texts are presented, chiefly the letters, which are now in a section of their own.

All footnotes and interpolations [in brackets] were added by me, except for the footnotes credited to Rançon or to Berna himself; all interpolations (between parentheses) were added by Rançon.

I have also taken the liberty of adding a Table of Contents and an Index.

Bill Brown  
New York City  
29 November 2024

## Preface by Jean-Louis Rançon

The noise that Marinetti makes is designed to please us because glory is a scandal.  
(Arthur Cravan)<sup>1</sup>

. . . and in fact I truly believe that those who passed through there never acquired  
the slightest honest reputation in the world. (Guy Debord)<sup>2</sup>

At the time preparations were being made for the publication of Guy Debord's *Oeuvres*, which appeared in Gallimard's "Quarto" collection in 2006, Serge Berna had everything needed to pique curiosity. This was before 2009, when Guy Debord's personal archives were prevented from going to the United States thanks to the decisive intervention of Patrick Mosconi and the directors of the BnF.<sup>3</sup> The Debord collection thus remained in Paris, acquired by the BnF in 2010-2011.

During the course of the following years, the archives of the situationists Michèle Bernstein, Jacqueline de Jong, Mustapha Khayati, Attila Kotányi, Gianfranco Sanguinetti, Raoul Vaneigem and the international lettrist<sup>4</sup> Gil J Wolman all went to New Haven (Connecticut), and among Wolman's papers, which were acquired in 2012 by the Beinecke Library at Yale University, there appeared the unpublished texts by Serge Berna that one finds herein.

Famous for being the instigator of the Notre-Dame scandal of 1950 and one of the four initial members of the Lettrist International in 1952, Serge Berna remained very little known beyond that.

We know almost nothing of the life of this poet and hoodlum, only that, according to the newspapers of the time, he was born in Venice – on 13 June 1924 – and that at the age of 25 he became a famous person, in Saint-Gemain-des-Prés as elsewhere, for being the author of the proclamation of the death of God, which was made right in the middle of the Cathedral of Paris. Assembled here are the texts that Serge Berna published between 1950 and 1952 in the journals *Janus*, *Ur* and *Ion*, or in the notebook *Le Soleil noir Positions* – a period during which he founded the Club des Ratés and participated actively in the lettrist movement, at first with the entirety of the group led by Isidore Isou, then within the Lettrist International with Jean-Louis Brau, Guy Debord and Gil J Wolman.

Fragments, shards,<sup>5</sup> dregs, and gems, these pages are a kaleidoscope in which we encounter the International Lettrists in their youth: in October 1952, Berna was 28, Wolman was 23, Brau was 22 and Debord was 20. With the writings and documents presented in chronological order, we reproduce his preface to Antonin Artaud's manuscripts, which he had discovered in 1952 and which were published by Éric Losfeld in 1953, as well as texts that he wrote for his own journal, *En marge*, in 1955.

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<sup>1</sup> From *Maintenant*, April 1912-July 1913. See "All words are lies," in Dafydd Jones, *The fictions of Arthur Cravan: Poetry, boxing and revolution* (Manchester University Press, 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Guy Debord, soundtrack, *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* (1978).

<sup>3</sup> The Bibliothèque nationale de France.

<sup>4</sup> Though "lettriste" can be translated as "letterist," as is the case in Donald Nicholson-Smith's translation of Jean-Michel Mension's *La Tribu* (*The Tribe*, San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2001), this is a somewhat awkward word and is less commonly used than "lettrist," which is what I've adopted here.

<sup>5</sup> The word used here, *éclats*, can also mean outbursts.

We also publish herein several previously unpublished pieces: letters written to Albert Van Loock, Théodore Koenig, Wolman, Debord, Marcel Mariën, René Magritte, Hervé Bazin, Étienne and André Breton between 1951 and 1961; an “influential film-novel” that he created in 1952; and documents about Serge Berna that expound upon his pictorial works displayed under the banner of the NEP (the Nouvelle École de Paris), of which he wanted to be the leader in 1959.

We also follow his many legal problems and prison terms up until 1961, and then lose all traces of him at the beginning of the 1970s.

But let’s go back to 1950, to Saint-Germain-des-Prés, where everything begins with a cry.

## “Cry”<sup>6</sup>

With my teeth I tear the bark from the trees  
The tree groans

A wild animal crouching at the corner of a rock  
Other beasts  
The slow leopard  
The crude alligator  
The absent serpent present  
The immense forest is marked by scars  
By muffled clashes  
By atrocious shifts  
Odors of rock, silences of love – open throats<sup>7</sup> –

When I meet the other man  
The blond man  
The man who wants to steal the sun from me  
Who will be the wolf concerning the other

Loudly howled clash of teeth

I will spread your clear chest  
My hands rush into the rhythmic  
Warmth of your guts  
I will fervently split open  
Your heart your stomach your lungs  
In order to breathe doubly  
Your nails to vanquish the tiger  
Your eyes to defy the eagle  
Your arms to embrace the bear

Raw ice my clear and red brother

The wolf to my mouth  
To bite your bleeding mouth  
And the blood flows over your breasts of snow  
Over my chest of bronze  
Our struggle like the shock of a plowshare  
On the forecourt of a cathedral  
Still echoing around the trees in the valley

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<sup>6</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: “Cri,” the first poem published by Serge Berna, appeared in *Janus: Cahiers mensuels bilingues de la jeune poésie française et américaine*, #1 Paris, March 1950, completed by the printer on 20 February 1950. Berna’s biographical note in this issue describes him as “frozen like a rock, [with] red hands and intellectual glasses.”

<sup>7</sup> Or “open gorges.”

## Grand Meeting of the Losers<sup>8</sup>

In Saint-Germain-des-Prés, the center of bohemian and artistic life in the post-war era, Serge Berna and a few others founded the Losers' Club in the autumn of 1949. On 16 March 1950, the Losers invited the “good-for-nothings, the worthless, the idlers, [and] the barflies” to a “Grand Meeting of the Losers” at l'hôtel des Sociétés savantes, at 36 rue Serpente, Paris, 6<sup>th</sup> arrondissement, in order to recognize and affirm themselves in the company of Serge Berna, presented as a “Leftist syphilitic,” Maurice-Paul Comte, an “individual” as well as the director of the literary notebook *Osmose* (1949-1951), Jacques Patry (Michel Mourre's pseudonym), and Madeleine Auerbach, who had published a poem in the first issue of *Janus*.<sup>9</sup>

In the words of Maurice Rajsfus, *Une enfance laïque et républicaine* (Paris: Many, 1992):

On the rostrum sat a band of cheerful fellows, each having before him a bottle of white wine as a refreshing drink. Sociologists, serious university professors and high-school teachers came to study up close this new gangrene of the youth: existentialism. The principal theme of the various presentations was simple: Are we losers? Yes!

Is this a defect? No! The conclusion wasn't any less crazy: to remain free, one must live off of society and never submit to constraints! What could have constituted the point of departure for a theory of revolt was, in the final analysis, only a demonstration of passivity.<sup>10</sup> The white wine had a lot to do with this behavior, but the jokers of the group, like my comrade Nonosse,<sup>11</sup> didn't come there to theorize.

Following an article on the Losers' Congress in the weekly *Samedi-Soir*, published on 25 March 1950, which presented Serge Berna as an Alsatian poet, the inhabitant of an attic on rue Xaxier-Privas, living off the generosity of tourists and calling himself an “laborer in the void,” on 15 April 1950 the back cover of the Milanese weekly *Tempo* presented the Grand Meeting of the Losers as “Il Congresso dei Parassiti,” the Congress of the Parasites. The decorated face of Madeleine Auerbach, “passive demon,” introduced a photo story in which the Losers' Club was described as a new Parisian movement, the “surpassing and negation of existentialism.”

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<sup>8</sup> In Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1989), “ratés” is translated as washouts.

<sup>9</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Madeleine Auerbach's biographical note in *Janus* #1 described her as “serpent fire,” a phrase that appears in one of her poems, and someone who walks around Saint-Germain-des-Prés with four chandeliers and undulating scintillation.

<sup>10</sup> Publicity for the meeting had proclaimed, “Losers, come champion powerlessness.”

<sup>11</sup> The pseudonym of Michel Smolianov.



[Press clippings]

*Samedi-Soir*, 25 March 1950:

Every misfit, every loser, every useless person must constitute a runoff canal that empties society; each of us must in some way be a social short-circuit.

*L'Aurore*, 14 April 1950:

In truth, the plot was not born on this Easter Eve alone.

Coco – a patternmaker in her spare time – who now presides over Saint-Germain like all the other queens of the neighborhood, does not object to the details.

So, here they are: for around seven to eight months, a certain number of young people, of both sexes, who have declared themselves to be intellectuals once and for all, decided to found a club.

One more. But not like the others.

The Losers' Club.

“We are losers. All losers. Why? Because life is absurd. All the people of our time are losers. We alone have the courage to say so.”

Sitting around a table at La Pergola or the Saint-Claude tobacco bar, surrounded by eccentric individuals, guys with beards, unkempt people, Coco develops her philosophy to whoever wants to hear it.

And these “losers” listen, mouths wide open, while the manager of the place, yelling, tries to collect for the last drinks he is owed.

From time to time, a large young man helps him.

His name is Serge Berna. What does he do?

“I write.”

The Losers' Club – have no doubts about it – is expanding into “the village.” It is at this moment that we see arriving in its midst a tall, thin, silent young man who is called – here we are – Michel Mourre.

*Tempo*, 15 April 1950:

The Losers are the enemies of work, but also of Coca-Cola; they praise idleness and even powerlessness. [...] “We are the parasitical flora of society. But without parasites, there is no life, without microbes in the intestines, Gentlemen, you wouldn't even be able to digest anything.” It was with this exaltation of their biological function that the congress of the losers and useless people was inaugurated in Paris. [...] During the congress, the programmatic speeches were quietly commented on by a guitarist playing sad and discordant notes. [...] “Our will to inertia increases as the ignoble pressure of society intensifies”: such was the cry of resistance (and not of struggle, which is inconceivable for them) advanced<sup>12</sup> during the first Parisian congress of the losers, the worthless and the parasites. [...] “Good-for-nothings, parasites, useless people,” says the manifesto of these street urchins, “come recognize each other at the grand meeting of the losers, salle des Sociétés savantes, Thursday 16 March at 8:15 PM.

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<sup>12</sup> Here there appears an interpolation: “by Serge Berna, according to *Samedi-Soir*.”

Vindication of parasitism.” The signatures of the promoters follows. And the hall was full of losers of all categories and of both sexes. While Serge Berna delivered his speech, a kind of altar boy<sup>13</sup> holding a bell was stretched out on the stage with his feet up on a desk.

### “Questionnaire of the Losers’ Club”

Following the Notre-Dame Scandal and so as to prove “the good faith of some of its critics,” the Loser’s Club, of which Serge Berna was one of the active members, challenged journalists to respond to the following questionnaire.

1. Which resistance requires the greatest courage: holding onto the microphone in London or completing the most dangerous missions in occupied France?
2. Can we, without hypocrisy, reproach very young people for respecting NOTHING, when, during the Occupation, they were taught to consider the armistice agreement to be “rag paper”?
3. Do you approve, as a French citizen, and in the name of the right of the people to govern themselves, the resistance movements of the Indochinese and the Madagascans?
4. If in occupied Germany (occupied by virtue of the rights of the victors) French soldiers or their allies are being periodically assassinated in a cowardly fashion, do you approve of these assassinations?
5. Do you think that it is due to Christian charity that the M.R.P.<sup>14</sup> is systematically opposed to any political amnesty?
6. Do you not admit that we can display extreme piousness and, at the same time, appear to be a bit of a bastard?

A response to this questionnaire was published in *L’Aurore* on 21 April 1950.

With respect to the incidents at Notre-Dame, and in order to prove “the good faith of some of its critics,” the “Losers’ Club” has “challenged” me<sup>15</sup> to respond to the questionnaire below, which I have nevertheless dared to do, with a courage that still surprises me.

1. Leaving for Moscow, dropping his rifle.
2. These “very young people” of 1950 should do what the charming political toddlers had to do in 1940!
3. Govern themselves? Seriously?
4. Perhaps, if I were German.
5. Lady! I do not see any other explanation.
6. Of course. We can even display a mistress and appear to be cuckolds, display price lists and apply others and, finally, display anticlericalism and appear to be a bit of an idiot.

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<sup>13</sup> Here there appears an interpolation: “according to *Samedi-Soir*, Nonosse, ‘naïve poet,’ tasked with reestablishing disorder.”

<sup>14</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: the *Mouvement républicain populaire* (1944-1967), Christian Democratic and Gaullist political party (until 1962).

<sup>15</sup> Le Rayon Z., the pseudonym of André Frossard.

*La Presse*, 14 July 1951:

Both haunted, all day and all night, the cafes and bars of Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Knowing nothing of philosophy, they were nevertheless fervent “existentialists”: for them, this meant not washing, scandalizing the “bourgeois,” personified by their poor parents, dancing the “jitterbug,”<sup>16</sup> and living like intellectual vagrants. Christine and Jean, escapees from the Latin Quarter, were the last members enrolled in the “Losers’ Club,” some of whose members, on Easter 1950, caused a scandal at Notre-Dame.

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<sup>16</sup> English in original.

## The Notre-Dame Scandal

Along with Ghislain Desnoyers de Marbaix, Jean Rullier and Michel Mourre, Serge Berna organized the scandal at Notre-Dame, where, on 9 April 1950, during the Easter High Mass, Michel Mourre, dressed as a Dominican friar, ascended the pulpit and proclaimed the death of God. Serge Berna wrote the text of this proclamation:<sup>17</sup>

Today, Easter Day of this Holy Year, here, in the exalted Basilica of Notre-Dame of Paris, I accuse the Universal Catholic Church of the lethal misappropriation of our life forces in favor of an empty heaven.  
I accuse the Catholic Church of swindling.  
I accuse the Catholic Church of infecting the world with its mortuary morality, of being a canker on the rotting West.  
Verily I say unto you: God is dead.  
We regurgitate the moribund tastelessness of your prayers because your prayers have profusely manured<sup>18</sup> the battlefields of our Europe.<sup>19</sup>  
Go forth into the tragic and thrilling desert of a land in which God is dead and work the land with your bare hands, your PROUD hands, your prayerless hands.  
Today, Easter Day, of this Holy Year, here, in the exalted Basilica of Notre-Dame of France, we proclaim the death of the Christ-God so that Mankind might at last live.<sup>20</sup>

Pursued by the furious faithful, the creators of the scandal were arrested by the police, thereby escaping from being lynched. The next day, the affair had a very great impact on all of the newspapers.

[Press clippings]<sup>21</sup>

*France-Soir*, 11 April 1950:

An emotionally disturbed person, Michel Mourre, who wore a Dominican frock that he'd rented, yesterday at 11:15 AM caused a scandal at Notre-Dame of Paris at which he had, during the

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<sup>17</sup> An unattributed text in Jean-Michel Mension, *The Tribe*, translated from the French by Donald Nicholson-Smith (San Francisco: City Lights, 2001), p. 25, is a bit more precise: "The immutable thousand-year-old rite proceeded normally until the moment of the Elevation. It was then that the vast silence blanketing the praying mass was riven by the voice of the false Dominican declaiming as follows [...]."

<sup>18</sup> Note that the word used here, *fumé* (*fumer*), means "to slaughter" in French argot.

<sup>19</sup> As translated by Nicholson-Smith, *The Tribe*, op. cit., this line reads: "We spew up from the blandness of your moribund prayers such rich manure for the killing fields of our Europe."

<sup>20</sup> In *The Tribe*, op. cit., this last phrase reads: "so that man might have everlasting life."

<sup>21</sup> These are ranged in the roughly the same order in which they appear in Serge Berna, *Écrits et Documents*, pp. 14-22. Because of its large size, the photograph from the 12 April 1950 issue of *Combat* has been placed at the end of these press clippings.

pontifical High Mass led by Monsignor Feltin, Archbishop of Paris,<sup>22</sup> climbed the pulpit to harangue the faithful. “I accuse the Catholic Church of infecting the world with its mortuary morality . . . God is dead,” he cried out. The roar of the great organ soon after drowned out his voice. At the same time, a group of 20 young regulars at a bar located on the boulevard Saint-Germain, nearby the Mabillon metro station, which is the headquarters of the Club des Ratés, whose members claim to be nihilists, set off firecrackers in the confessionals. In the general chaos, the gang of weirdos<sup>23</sup> fled, at first pursued by the verger,<sup>24</sup> who’d struck them with halberds, and then, on the quays, by police officers. Four arrests were made.

*Combat*, 10 April 1950:

The fake Dominican, a corrupted young man, calls himself Michel Mourre, 22 years old. A nonbeliever until the age of 18, he was, he says, touched by grace and spent six months among the Dominicans, and then threw the sackcloth to the nettles. He was the one who came up with the idea of climbing the pulpit and “protesting.” His “comrades” are Ghislain Desnoyers de Marbaix, 21 years old, a decorator; Jean Rullier, 25 years old, a student; and Serge Bernard [*sic*], unemployed. It is this last one, a poet in his spare time, who was the author of the unpleasant diatribe.

*La Gazette provençale*, 25 April 1950:

Berna, who is 25 years old, claims to be a journalist and filmmaker. He’s declared that he met Michel Mourre a month ago. “We spoke about poetry, philosophy, literature. Mourre denied the existence of God and affirmed the bankruptcy of the Catholic Church. We agreed on all points. This is what gave us the idea of striking at the minds of the masses through a spectacular protest and especially of doing so in front of important secular and religious people. This is why we chose Easter Sunday and the Cathedral in Paris. We’d already worked out all the details of this protest and the wording of the exposition that Mourre would read from the pulpit. We were in agreement and I regret nothing.”

*La Croix*,<sup>25</sup> 11 April 1950:

“Miscellaneous Facts: A troublemaker at Notre-Dame de Paris”

Sunday morning, at the moment that mass was being celebrated in the Notre-Dame church, an individual succeeded in climbing up to the pulpit and making remarks that were violently hostile to the Church, which he accused of being responsible for all the ills that the world currently suffers from.

Strong emotion manifested itself among the faithful, and several individual accomplices, who’d come from the “hipster” wine cellars of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, having decided to

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<sup>22</sup> Born in 1883, Maurice Feltin served as the Archbishop of Paris from 1949 to 1966 and became a cardinal in 1953. Among other things, he supported the Vichy regime during World War II and the French Army during the Algerian War for Independence.

<sup>23</sup> The word used here, *énergumènes*, can also mean people who are possessed by the devil.

<sup>24</sup> *le suisse* can also refer to the Swiss Guard, which is in charge of security at the Vatican.

<sup>25</sup> A daily newspaper, founded in 1883 by the Congregation of Religious Catholics. In 1949, under the direction of Father Émile Gabel (1908-1968), it began to cover such topics as sports, the cinema, fashion and the theater.

support the troublemaker, a scuffle broke out, at first within the basilica and then in the forecourt.

The man, finally captured, was led away to the police headquarters of Saint-Gervais.

He is a former student of the Dominicans, named Michel Mourre, 21 years old, residing at 46, rue Saint-Louis-en-l'Île.

He was arrested, as were three other individuals who'd interposed themselves between the faithful and him: Ghislain Mesnoyers [*sic*] de Marbaux [*sic*], 21 years old, a decorator, [residing at] 33, rue Dauphine; Serge Berna, 25 years old, born in Venice, residing at 16, rue Xavier-Privat, and Jean Rullier, 25 years old, a student, [residing at] 9, rue Git-le-Coeur.<sup>26</sup>

*Le Monde*, 11 April 1950:

“The disruptors of Easter High Mass at Notre-Dame of Paris will be prosecuted.”

Michel Mourre, the 22-year-old fake friar apprehended after his protest in dubious taste on Sunday morning at Notre-Dame of Paris, spent the night in a jail cell. The chapter of Notre-Dame has signed a complaint against him based upon Article 32 of the 9 December 1905 law that concerns the protection of the rites and places of worship. He will also be prosecuted for his illegal use of ecclesiastical clothing.

In front of the local police superintendent, Mourre willingly explained himself, but one continues to wonder if his gesture was that of an emotionally disturbed person or of a “hipster” in search of existentialism or publicity.

The idea of the scandal came to him, he says, following a “philosophical meditation in his bed.” And straightaway sought to recruit a few accomplices. As he had quite recently spent six months as a novitiate among the Dominicans of Saint-Maximin, before he, as he claims, definitely lost his faith, he dreamed of once again donning the frock in order to more easily carry out his destiny. Thus we saw him on Sunday up in the pulpit of Notre-Dame of Paris during the pontifical Easter High Mass, led by Monsignor Feltin, from which he tried to hurl his pomposities: “I accuse the Catholic Church of infecting the world with its mortuary morality.”

He quite quickly found himself on the forecourt, thoroughly manhandled. The police took him into custody. Several friends who came to assist him, all in the best “wine cellar” style of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, have been released after making statements.

But are there not people as guilty as he is, those who benefited from the disarray caused by the appearance of the pseudo-Dominican friar, those who pushed bad taste as far as throwing firecrackers into the nave in order to “spice up” their farce?

*Le Monde*, 14 April 1950:

“The fake Dominican of Notre-Dame will be examined from the mental [health] point of view.”

M. Jacquinot, the examining magistrate, has tasked Dr. Robert Micoud, a psychiatrist, with examining Michel Mourre, the fake Dominican friar who disturbed the Easter ceremony at Notre-Dame, from a mental [health] point of view. On this subject we can say that the young man will not be prosecuted for the illegal use of an ecclesiastical costume, as the investigators

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<sup>26</sup> Quite obviously, by revealing the precise locations of these men's residences, *La Croix* was exposing them to possibly violent retribution by its readers. Note that de Marbaux's address is the same as that of the Au Tabou bar and Rullier's address later became known as “the Beat Hotel.”

had announced. This infraction hasn't been on the books since the law of separation.<sup>27</sup> An attempt to reenact this interdiction was made in 1947, but Parliament still hasn't discussed it.

The indictment by the public prosecutor will be limited to applying to the delinquent Article 32 of the law of 9 December 1905 that concerned the separation of Church and State.

*Franc-Tireur*, 21 April 1950:

“Michel Mourre is free.”

But because Mourre couldn't speak at Notre-Dame, he wants to organize a public *meeting*<sup>28</sup> to which all the revolutionary associations will be invited. Berna has even sent a letter on this subject to Monsignor Feltin, the Archbishop of Paris, in order to ask him to lend the Cathedral of Paris to the speaker for a day, but he hasn't received a response.

*Le Monde*, 22 April 1950:

Michel Mourre is free. And so a return to common sense ends the story of the “Notre-Dame scandal,” which, begun in the tone of a “prank” in the worst taste, risked wandering off in the direction of psychiatric delirium. [...]

All the same, it took the help of three experts to complete the report that was drafted by Dr. Robert Micoud and that depicted an “artistic, but republican mind” that was affected by, among other things, “Sartrean viscosity” and a “shamefully avowed orthosexuality.” The experts' conclusions were clear: the only way to face the “surprise attacks by sonorous parachutists and neologisms in nosedive” of this individual who is “dangerous for public tranquility in the bourgeois neighborhoods” would be to confine him. Whichever you like! With his shaved head and his dazed face, Michel Mourre has, according to André Breton, “struck the blow at the very heart of the octopus that still grips the universe.” [...]

But doesn't the unfortunate judge have a new client on his hands? We have learned that Serge Berna, who drafted the lecture, has been confined before: a good reason to examine him.

*Libération*, 2 June 1950:

The conclusions of the three experts who examined Berna aren't any less encouraging: “the figure of a fakir in gabardine,” says the report. “The physique of a funeral-home worker. Deficient from the moral point of view. Undernourished and self-taught.” Thus responsible. [...] Berna was more concise: “We wanted to affirm the death of the Great Judge,” he declared. Which wasn't nice for the little one.

Nevertheless, Berna risks more than his leader and friend [Michel Mourre]. He has already been condemned to six months in prison (suspended sentence) for the theft of a 20,000-franc book (“I knew the value but not the price,” he could have responded following the example of another eccentric, the poet Jean Genet, who found himself accused of a similar offense). His conduct during the Occupation had been more honorable. Inducted by force into the German army as a subject of Lorraine, he deserted and joined the F.F.L.<sup>29</sup> in Algeria. He then had a brief

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<sup>27</sup> The Law of Separation of Church and State was passed on 9 December 1905.

<sup>28</sup> English / anglicized English in original.

<sup>29</sup> *Forces françaises libres* (the Free French Forces).

stay in a nursing home. His attorney didn't fail to emphasize these decisive points of the defense, which fortunately counter-balanced the psychiatrists' fervent flights of fancy.

*Qui? Detective*, 12 June 1950:

“Brains filled if heaven is empty.”

Freed from the claws of the psychiatrists, Michel Mourre and Serge Berna were grabbed by those of the fur-lined cats.<sup>30</sup> A noticeable improvement because a judge is much less frightening than a psychiatrist!

One can express oneself to a judge.

Berna didn't take advantage of it. He was content to say: – we wanted to proclaim the death of the Great Judge.

Which leads one to believe that if psychiatry was wrong to take Mourre for a madman, it was right to judge Berna as mentally unsound.

Michel Mourre is much more talkative.

*Le Monde*, 16 June 1950:

“Michel Mourre the fake Dominican of Notre-Dame is condemned to six days' suspended sentence.”

This afternoon, the Fourteenth Correctional Chamber rendered its judgment concerning the charges filed against Michel Mourre and Serge Berna, for violation of the law concerning the exercise of worship. The fake Dominican was sentenced to six days' suspended sentence and a 2,000-franc fine.

Mr. Serge Berna maintained that his guilt had not been established. Presiding Judge Lasnier recalled to him that, the day before Easter Sunday, he had gone to Notre-Dame to reconnoiter the place, that he had participated with Mourre in the drafting of the declaration that he made from the pulpit, and that on Easter Sunday he came to assist his comrade and to secure his escape. The tribunal imposed a 2,000-franc fine upon him.

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<sup>30</sup> *Chats fourrés*, argot for appeals court judges, who wear ermine coats.





*Combat*, 12 April 1950:

Three madmen? Three louts? Three heroes?

This page is made to allow you to fix your opinion of the gesture by Michel Mourre, 21 years old (fake Dominican), Serge Bernard [*sic*] and Ghislain Desnoyers de Marbais [*sic*], whom one sees here united after the “scandal,” sitting on the bench at the Saint-Gervais police station.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Berna is on the left, Mourre is in the middle, and Marbaix is on the right.

## [Letters and recollections concerning the scandal]

In an open letter<sup>32</sup> to Louis Pauwels, the Editor-in-Chief, André Breton defended the creators of the scandal by excoriating the manner in which *Combat* and the press had commented on the affair; he ended his letter<sup>33</sup> this way:

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<sup>32</sup> Published in *Combat* on 12 April 1950.

<sup>33</sup> The beginning of Breton's letter is as follows:

Paris, 11 April 1950  
Dear Louis Pauwels,

Many others besides me must have been surprised and troubled by the way *Combat* commented on the incidents that occurred at Notre-Dame on Sunday. The judgment passed on these incidents anticipates the ones made by the news media properly speaking, as if the reader were not old enough to form an opinion for himself. An extreme bias is evident from the first lines and, in a sense, this is the opposite of what one might expect from a "left" newspaper. It is distressing that on such a subject *Combat* felt the need to join in chorus with the reactionary newspapers and, moreover, with those who practice the underhanded [Communist party] politics of the "outstretched hand" (in order to better strangle as soon as possible).

The few preliminary generalities – "Everyone is recognized as having the right to believe or not to believe in God. It is even recognized that farce is necessary," etc. – which are formulated in an insincere tone that would have one believe in liberalism, have no other purposes than to discredit the young people in question and to create the most unfavorable climate around them. Given that one of these young people exposed himself to all the risks that his act entailed and declared himself ready to face the legal consequences, I consider that this was an enterprise unworthy of the newspaper in which it was conducted.

We are told that, "it's only a question of a regrettable boorishness." Excuse me! In that case, the Chevalier de la Barre, who, in effigy, continues to turn his back on the Sacred Heart, would demand to be held up as the model boor. And how to describe someone who speaks of religion in the following terms? "Think about how it has created and perpetuated the most violent antipathy between nations. . . . Think about how, in society, it has created and perpetuated the strongest and most constant hatred between citizens and, in the family, between relatives. Christ said that he'd come to separate the husband from his wife, the mother from her children, the brother from his sister, the friend from his friend; and his prediction has only been too faithfully accomplished." Have we become too weak to understand this? It is true that, in the same *Entretien*, Diderot hastens to add "that the mad have always been and will always be the greatest in numbers, and that the most dangerous are those whom religion has made."

By the way – to put us in the perspective of the present – what was the name of the abominable hoodlum who wrote "Shit to God" on the walls of the church in Charleville? It seems that the children's penal colony, lacking a pyre. . .

Against these madmen (from Diderot's point of view), with great preference for the time and place that they chose to assemble, in order to test their strength (the most contrary to every kind of social modification, the most hostile to every restoration of human understanding), it doesn't seem to me too soon that a voice has succeeded in making itself heard. The fact that this was the first time in human memory that these vaults have resounded with such a protest only proves that there remains a "taboo" attached to them, unrelated to the evolution of society. Observe, my dear friend, that the "faithful" of Notre-Dame, for example, can only very fallaciously claim that they work cut off from the rest of the world [*en vase clos*]. Of this vase, you will agree that it overflows on all sides, and that there is nothing more ostentatious, physically and morally, than the manner in which, once a week, they fill up and empty the gloomy and gigantic oil-and-vinegar set that holds the horrible vinaigrette that the Christian religion makes of life and death. For that matter, the smallest village church tower casts even more shadow over the countryside. The great secret that this religion has been able to transport from the depths of the

A scandal at Notre-Dame? The die is cast and there won't be any effective purification ceremonies. It was there, at the very heart of the octopus that still grips the universe, that the blow had to be struck. For that matter, it was also there that, sometimes, in their youth, men with whom I have traveled or continue to travel dreamed of striking it, as I did: Artaud, Crevel, Éluard, Péret, Prévert, Char and many others. In favor of Michel Mourre, I think that none of those who are alive today would equivocate when it comes to remembering and bearing witness to this profound community of intention.

No more so than the grotesque halberds of the Swiss Guard, whose blows the press has meted out – perhaps the time has come when the halberds should be replaced by firearms – it isn't the prison walls on which the profiles of Sade and Blanqui are outlined in light that will bring darkness [*faire la nuit*] to a well-made head and prevent a highly salutary act from being accomplished.

In Brussels, the surrealist Paul Nougé wrote a letter of approval<sup>34</sup> that was cosigned by René Magritte and Marcel Mariën:

To Mr. Michel Mourre  
In care of the Prefect of Police, Paris  
12 April 1950,

Sir,

It almost goes without saying that your gesture has profoundly touched us. We see in it the most direct expression possible of the condemnation of an intellectual and sentimental social structure that, in simple terms, is equivalent to whitewashed tombs. We praise you for this admirable borrowing of the frock coat, of the frock coat that makes the monk.

May there be no ambiguity here.

Please accept, Sir, the expression of our perfect consideration.

Paul Nougé<sup>35</sup>

Guy Debord, letter dated 6 April 1989, written in response to Gilles Cahoreau. Excerpt published in Gilles Cahoreau, *François Truffaut 1932-1984* (Paris: Juillard, 1989). See also *Guy Debord Correspondance*, vol. 7 (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2008):

I did not know Michel Mourre, who immediately repented,<sup>36</sup> and I did not participate in the scandal. But shortly thereafter I came to know two of the leaders

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ages in order to dissipate it miserably along the way – where is it, what remains of it, I ask you, on the day that the pope, referring to Cicero, as he did this past Sunday, enjoins us, if we want to spend the short time of our lives in peaceful tranquility, to resist by every means the troubles that stupidity introduces into human life? As you see, this Pius XII is modest, with petit-bourgeois aspirations.

<sup>34</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Paul Nougé, *Quatre Lettres (1948-1950)* (Brussels: Le Vocatif #43, 1974).

<sup>35</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: the Prefect of Police returned this letter with the note [addressee] “unknown.”

of the operation, Ghislain de Marbaix and Serge Berna, also imprisoned on the spot, who became my friends. It is true that this scandal was the expression of the most radical thugs of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, as was the attempt to dynamite the Eiffel Tower shortly thereafter, and in this sense they counted among the acts that led to the formation of the Situationist movement (notably through Berna, who in 1952 was a member of the Lettrist International).

Boris Vian, *Manuel de Saint-Germain-des-Prés*, written in 1950 and first published in 1951 (Paris: Éditions du Scorpion), reprinted in 1997 (Paris: Pauvert):

This is what is called “freedom” since Pius XII held the reins of the French government:<sup>37</sup> Michel Mourre, who had perhaps heard the priests every Sunday on the so-called national radio broadcasts, also experienced the desire to bring his words to them, also at home; but our current freedom only works in one direction.

Guy Debord, “*In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*” (1978)

To finish off art, to declare right in the middle of the cathedral that God was dead, to plot to blow up the Eiffel Tower – such were the small scandals to which those whose way of living was always a great scandal sporadically devoted themselves.

### [Statement by Serge Berna]

“Concerning Notre-Dame”<sup>38</sup>

I suppose that the warmth radiated by a real presence in a place defined as sacred makes the statues *move* within the great dance that is a living religion.

On that famous Easter Sunday, the rock remained immobile at Notre-Dame. This indifference, by the way, wasn’t that of the rock; only the weight of death reigns in the churches – a weight that on the day called the Day of Resurrection is a total freezing of all life. A mass is a slower and more majestic game than the slowest and most majestic games of those devised by brilliant playwrights. But during a mass one gets the strange impression left by an auditorium that was just now full of presences and very rich exchanges and that brusquely – while everything remained in place: actors, lights, spectators – emptied itself of an impalpable element. Then nothing can stop the great silent laughter at all those sudden movements struck by absurdity. A laughter that would be the first movement of an iconoclasm that is in order.

Formerly, but undeniably, this magnificent machinery that is the church *put into gear* an extraordinary psychic turmoil with which the life of each person aligned itself. Slowly the

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<sup>36</sup> See Michel Mourre, *Malgré le blasphème* (Paris: René Julliard, 1951), translated by A.W. Fielding, *In Spite of Blasphemy* (London: John Lehmann, 1953).

<sup>37</sup> During World War II.

<sup>38</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: These two-and-a-half typed sheets written by Serge Berna in April 1950 were among the papers kept by Henry de Béarn, a young man who, after publishing several poems in the literary notebook *Osmose* (number 4, 20 April 1950), became known on 19 May 1950, at the age of 19, as “the man who wanted to blow up the Eiffel Tower.” Berna’s text was published under the title “Le scandale de Notre-Dame” as an appendix in Jean-Michel Menson, *La Tribu* (Paris: Allia, 2018). [*Translator*: this is its first translation into English.]

declutching was accomplished, definitively: thenceforth the mass remained the remnant of a bygone vital form, a perfectly oiled machine, laid out to draw the faithful to a complete, visual, olfactory, auditory and sexual attention, to the stage. For me, a mass can have a certain charm, and be quite spectacular, as the word “Atlantis” can be, if only one decides to declare the church to be a public monument, but a public monument in this affective region, supplied with respect and poetry, to which one relegates standing stones, sphinxes, pyramids and the thermal baths of Caracalla. Life is withdrawn from the beautiful machine that, nevertheless, continues to revolve – a golden carousel that lacks neither organ nor barker.

To spur you to take the tickets that allow access to the shacks of the Mysteries, the House also possesses “active methods” of persuasion. It is useless to be specific. There are too many. Also, we have thought it would be good to go among them, into their plugged-in-radio pulpit, to indicate to them the point at which the dance around a hollow bone becomes ridiculous.

Both ridiculous and odious, because one doesn’t think enough about this movement that a certain tolerance would tend to excuse (if it pleases them to pray), this movement that causes one to kneel, beat oneself and commit certain anthropological acts such as communion; it rules the entire West. From Norway to Portugal, Europe is in the hands of the men of the Church, and not by the band – straw men, henchmen or pressure tactics – because the Christian political parties are in power in all indecency. And that isn’t by chance. Our time is the time of FEAR.

If in the world they employ, on the right and on the left, some bombs whose destructive powers are less and less *imaginable*, these machines must inscribe in the psyches of all comers unique treks and considerable devastation, of which the very first is fear, otherwise and attractively called the dread of a total death from which nothing and no one will be spared. These machines set in motion around themselves a gravitation of men and ideas that fit their size, that is to say, enormous, which promises events *the apprehension* of which constantly strikes our internal worlds, strikes the thresholds opening on regions that no one in human memory has traveled across.

But faced with the necessity of protecting oneself from a situation in which tragedy comes from a lack of precedents, do we not find anything better to do than turning ourselves towards men determined to employ against fear the old trick, the worn-out trick, that is religion? Men glorify their fear in God, before whom they prostrate themselves, adoring their fear in complete honor and irresponsibility.

No, there is no need to avert your eyes. Because of one of two things: either aggression will be unleashed and this will be the black suicide of the scorpion – and, in such case, we will train on this possibility the most light possible through a realization that doesn’t come to me without a *hieratic* joy (to which the Church cannot consent without denying its substance). Or men will commit themselves to the discovery of the roads that guarantee their survival with the precautions taken by bomb-disposal experts, and these roads will lead to forms that are at present *inconceivable*. It is possible, given the acceleration of technological development, that a *sudden* mental mutation is necessary for our adaptation.

In any case, salvation can only reside in a social and personal change that is also unforeseeable when it comes to its moment and content. What is here and now in our power is limited to a tension towards a complete impoverishment. To expose oneself by systematically demolishing the human being as it has been understood by all until now, to *dismantle* it in all of its possible manifestations: in politics by abstention and disordered and messy interventions; in economics by theft, parasitism and other activities of pure consumption; in morality the choices of means are nearly unlimited, exemplary laziness, ostentatious vice, inversion applied

indiscriminately to the smallest gestures, the supposed normality of which plunges into the dreadful ignorance of its gruesome destiny, because the smallest gesture is straightaway *deformed or falsified* by a tradition, by a precept, by a custom fixed to a state of things that is thenceforth upset and threatening.

All of this structure that we must break simply in order to continue to live was born and named in Christian turbulence at the time in which Christianity was the whirlwind of life in the crumbling marble of the Roman Empire. Christianity, in its turn, hardened into the crumbling marble of its current form.

The team of scruffy young men at Notre-Dame – at the moment in which Catholic repression was in full swing in all domains – demonstrated a fanatical refusal of a weak kind of death. It was a *crazy* need to live by the handful, voraciously, sexually,<sup>39</sup> that motivated this first attack against the entirety of obsessions that stupefy contemporary men, very varied obsessions that go from the church to the prison by way of the insane asylum, ancient obsessions the preservation of which appears necessary to those few who always know how to make good use of them. The first of these obsessions has the face of the Grand Sournois in his stone castle. The gesture was necessary, if only for this reason: so many dreamed it but no one dared to do it! Moreover, we were tired of going in circles around certitudes that were only communicable by the attenuated channels of literature. In any case, the indignant cries, the laughter, the scorn, and the mobilization of both the regular and the psychiatric police clearly proved the sensitivity of the spot that was touched. We have committed the unpardonable crimes of tearing off the mask of respect and wanting to reveal the old mystification to which all tend to adhere in fear of fear.

But we have declared that the lacerated face, contorted like that of a gargoyle, which suddenly and crazily springs out of the central wall of Notre-Dame, will be one of the faces of our tearing away from the frozen fear of our era. Feeling our way in the night heavy with phosphorus and iron, we will look further for the *absolute* trigger that will allow the [appearance of the] other man.

[Essay by Marcel Mariën]<sup>40</sup>

“The Way of the Cross”

On 9 April 1950, Easter Sunday of that holy year, a group of several men crossed the threshold of Notre-Dame de Paris and weaved in and out of the considerably large crowd that had assembled for the High Mass, and gained access to the area near the pulpit. One of them, Michel Mourre, was dressed in a Dominican friar’s frock, which he had rented the day before, just for the occasion.

Immutable, the millenarian rite unfolded as far as the moment of the Elevation. It was then that the vast silence that weighed upon the pensive audience was split by the voice of the fake Dominican, which suddenly rang out and proclaimed:

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<sup>39</sup> The French here is *à pleines mains, à pleines dents, à plein sex*.

<sup>40</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Several years later, in January 1955, the surrealist Marcel Mariën revisited the Notre-Dame scandal in the fourth issue of his magazine, *Les Lèvres nues*, the first issue of which was published in Brussels in April 1954. Marcel Mariën, who had met Serge Berna in Brussels in 1951 and who was given the manuscript of the proclamation, as well as several clarifications concerning this action, provided the first account of the scandal that was based upon the direct testimony of its principal actor.

Today, Easter Day of this Holy Year, here, in the exalted Basilica of Notre-Dame of Paris, I accuse the Universal Catholic Church of the lethal misappropriation of our life forces in favor of an empty heaven.

I accuse the Catholic Church of swindling.

I accuse the Catholic Church of infecting the world with its mortuary morality, of being a canker on the rotting West.

Verily I say unto you: God is dead.

We regurgitate the moribund tastelessness of your prayers because your prayers have profusely manured the battlefields of our Europe.

Go forth into the tragic and thrilling desert of a land in which God is dead and work the land with your bare hands, your PROUD hands, your prayerless hands.

Today, Easter Day, of this Holy Year, here, in the exalted Basilica of Notre-Dame of France, we proclaim the death of the Christ-God so that Mankind might at last live.

To tell the truth, this address, conceived by Serge Berna, one of the leaders of the protest, was only half-heard. People did not at first realize the true meaning of the words that fell from the heights of the pulpit. But as the phrase that ended “God is dead” sounded within the venerable vaults, the great organ began to play at full volume, drowning out Mourre’s voice. The tumult soon became extreme. If the listeners who were near the pulpit knew what then to expect, those who were close to the choir, like those who were near the exit, and who saw unusual movements in the audience, continued to be unaware of the meaning of that agitation. Some remained undecided, not knowing if they should turn around or continue to follow the progress of the mass. The women fell to their knees, making the sign of the Cross. The panic increased. An American soldier, attending the service, forgot himself to the point of drawing his revolver.

Meanwhile, a group went in the direction of the pulpit in order to try to stop the protestors. A Swiss Guard also set off in that direction and, with his halberd, cracked the skull of one of those who, seriously injured, started bleeding profusely.

Nevertheless, an escape was organized. First, it was important to reach a balustrade, which didn’t happen without damage to the fake Dominican, whom some tried to hold onto, while his friends tried to drag him down from the pulpit. Nevertheless, they managed to free him, not without leaving shredded pieces of his frock in the hands of the faithful. Forming a kind of triangle around him, in order to protect him, the group violently cleared a way out through the crowd, to the great consternation of those who saw the emergence of this bizarre collection of people, one with a bloody face, while at the center a Dominican in tattered clothes blessed the stunned crowd with imperturbable humor. So great was the confusion that, despite everything, they succeeded in reaching the exit without the officers on duty at the entrance having the time to recover from their astonishment and apprehend them.

Once outside, the protestors ran towards the closest bridge in order to reach the Left Bank, where a taxi had been instructed to wait for them. But the crowd rushed outside of Notre-Dame in pursuit of the atheists. Seeing this substantial mass of people, screaming and shouting at his customers, customers who were even more unusual because Mourre, embarrassed by his tattered frock coat, thought it would be good to throw it over the parapet next to the Seine and run almost naked in the street, the uneasy

driver took off without asking for his money. It was then that the small group was caught up with, surrounded and very close to being lynched by the screaming pack of Christians when they were finally encircled by the police, who took them to their headquarters.

The very next day, the affair started to have incredible repercussions. The press of the entire world reported on the scandal, to the great astonishment of the concerned parties. Originally, they had only envisioned a harmless pleasantry: the release of red balloons inside of Notre-Dame. It was only later, during the fire of discussion, that an extraordinary conjunction of time and place got their attention: Easter High Mass of the Holy Year at Notre-Dame de Paris demanded an intervention of a more serious character, of a more elevated order. This is how they were led to draw up the plan for the protest that they were going to inscribe in reality.

Although surrealism has never mentioned, it is clear that the Notre-Dame scandal was directly related to its example, to its spirit, and that the scandal appeared a little like the crowning achievement of all the demonstrations of this kind, no preceding one having reached such a scale. Nevertheless, according to some, such a perfect success ultimately amounts, on an essential level, to nothing more than total failure.

The consequences of the Notre-Dame scandal merit careful examination. As appealing as this enterprise was on moral grounds and from the point of view of humor, we must recognize that it remains without impact on the plane of facts. It did not affect religious sentiment, which escaped unscathed, if not strengthened. A Parisian daily newspaper, after having opened an investigation that invited the stars of the intellectual world to give their opinion of the scandal, took advantage of the opportunity to slide toward the Right. As far as the Church, it succeeded in skillfully diverting the scandal to its advantage. Mourre, a capricious and inconsistent person, let himself be drawn into the disavowal of his intervention, turned his renunciation into a book, and did it so well that the Archbishop of Paris, the very one who officiated during the scandal, recommended its acquisition by the parochial libraries. Finally, the indignation that bordered on fury, the veritable thirst for murder and vengeance that took possession of the faithful, by rescuing them from the torpor with which they had ordinarily observed the ritual of the mass, far from diverting them from religion, made them more attached to it, as one does when goods are threatened.

Thus it is not without pertinence that the day after the scandal, *L'Humanité*<sup>41</sup> stigmatized the enterprise and denied that it had a revolutionary character. And one has quite correctly observed that the scandal was only approved by those who were already convinced, that it hardly crossed a very narrow circle, and that however real it may have been, it nonetheless remained gratuitous. Lacking a profound and veritable influence, it didn't go beyond the level of a simple dream or an aesthetic game for the rejoicing and satisfaction of an isolated elite.

But for such an opinion to be just, we must nevertheless distance ourselves from it somewhat. The consequences of the scandal were not so negative that praise cannot find a way to bounce back. Indeed, how can we not recognize in it the most commendable form of human activity and, on the whole, one that is a little more thrilling and necessary than a thousand other activities that we curiously respect: card games, for example, or visits to museums or the Tour de France.

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<sup>41</sup> The daily newspaper of the French Communist Party.



## The Auteuil Scandal

Scandal calls for scandal. Logically, Serge Berna met Isidore Isou and the lettrists and, on 18 June 1950 – three days after his sentencing for the Notre-Dame scandal – Serge Berna and four friends, including the lettrists Albert-Jules Legros and Gil J Wolman, led an action against the bad treatment inflicted on the young residents of l'Œuvre des Orphelins Apprentis d'Auteuil,<sup>42</sup> 40, rue Jean-de-La-Fontaine, Paris 16<sup>th</sup> arrond. This institution, which operated under the triple tutelage of the Minister of the Interior, the Archbishopric of Paris and the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, was tasked with “making orphans honest workers and good citizens.”

In the name of the movement *Soulèvement des jeunes* (Isidore Isou having published a manifesto for *Le Soulèvement de la jeunesse* at the beginning of the year), the lettrists attacked with the cry of “Orphans of Auteuil, your school is a penal colony!” There was a brawl, which ended in the arrest of Serge Berna. Released from custody on 24 June, he would be sentenced by default on 9 October 1950 to four months of imprisonment and a 6,000-franc fine for attacking a police officer.

It was only much later, in 1973,<sup>43</sup> in the course of a vast mobilization of high-school students against a law that would have eliminated military deferments, that the residents of the Work of the Apprentice Orphans of Auteuil went on strike and denounced their everyday lives in a notebook of grievances: insufficient nourishment, mediocre heating systems, deplorable hygiene (“At Auteuil, the dirt keeps you warm!”), archaic pedagogy and corporeal punishment.

### [Press Clippings]

*Le Monde*, 21 June 1950:

“Serge Berna the accomplice of Michel Mourre disturbs a religious ceremony in Auteuil”

Serge Berna, who had already distinguished himself at Notre-Dame at the side of Michel Mourre, has relapsed on the premises of the Work of the Apprentice Orphans of Auteuil, rue La Fontaine, at which Monsignor Feltin was presiding over a “tribute to Saint Teresa.” Accompanied by four other troublemakers, this fanatic tried to give a speech, inviting the orphans to “revolt against those who preach charity and live handsomely.” The affair ended in a fistfight. The police calmed things down and have him at their disposal. This afternoon he appeared before the deputy prosecutor who will decide whether to refer him to an *in flagrante delicto* hearing or to order the opening of an investigation.

*Combat*, 20 June 1950:

“Violent incidents during the celebration of ‘the tribute to Saint Teresa’”

On Sunday, violent incidents marked the celebration of “the tribute to Saint Teresa” that took place at the Work of the “Apprentice Orphans of Auteuil.”

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<sup>42</sup> The Work of the Apprentice Orphans of Auteuil, founded by Louis Roussel in 1866.

<sup>43</sup> See press clipping from *Le Monde*, 11 May 1975 below.

When Monsignor Feltin was coming to the end of his address, Serge Berna, a co-defendant with Michel Mourre in the “Notre-Dame scandal,” Albert Legros and three other young people tried to grab the microphone in order to make a speech of their own.

“Orphans of Auteuil, your school is a penal colony. . . . Revolt against those who preach charity and live handsomely. . . .”

But the rest of the improvised diatribe was lost in the hostile murmuring of the crowd. A violent fight broke out between the faithful and the “troublemakers,” at the end of which the five young people were arrested.

Four of them were released at the end of the evening, while Serge Berna, accused of attacking the police, was kept at their disposal.

*Combat*, 24 June 1950:

“Provisional freedom for Berna”

Questioned yesterday afternoon by the examining magistrate Jacquinet, Serge Berna will be provisionally released today. “It was in the name of the ‘Youth Uprising’ movement that, the other day, I incited the orphans of Auteuil to revolt against their teachers, who are guilty of mistreating them,” Serge Berna stated to the magistrate.

*La Presse*, 3 September 1950:

“Disturbances”

Before returning to haunt the rue Saint-Benoît, several specimens of the existentialist fauna (untamed specimens) have directed their latest raid against la Côte d’Azur.

Serge Berna, who, with Michel Mourre, created a scandal at Notre-Dame, and Henri de Béarn, who wanted to blow up the Eiffel Tower, have shaken Saint-Tropez . . . to such an extent that the police have had to close the area’s existentialist wine cellar for several days.

To the great displeasure of its boss, who didn’t think that these agents of publicity would ever go so far.

*Qui? Detective*, 30 October 1950:

“Obstinacy”

Serge Berna, the young 26-year-old existentialist who, along with Michel Mourre, disrupted the religious service at Notre-Dame de Paris on Easter Sunday, hasn’t reconciled with the Church since then.

On 18 June, in the gardens of the Work of the Apprentice Orphans of Auteuil, during a ceremony presided over by Monsignor Feltin, Archbishop of Paris, five young people cried out: “Death to your school, which is only a penal colony.”

The baton of the orchestra leader was held by Berna, who, in addition to screaming, when into action by kicking Comble, a guardian of the peace.

Charged with attacking a police officer, Berna must appear before Presiding Judge Bocquet (14<sup>th</sup> Chamber). But at this time, Berna is in a *carcere duro*<sup>44</sup> in Rome, where, having protested (there as well) against the processions of pilgrims who have come there for the Holy Year celebrations, he was arrested.

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<sup>44</sup> Italian in original: “hard prison.”

He wasn't reproached at his hearing for the steadfastness of his atheism, but the kicks with which he showered [*combla*] Officer Comble earned him four month's of prison time and a 6,000-franc fine, by default.

*Le Monde*, 11 May 1975:

“The pupils at an orphanage in Paris go on strike”

The protest movement continues among the pupils of the Work of the Apprentice Orphans of Auteuil, which operates about such 20 establishments in France as a whole. After the agitation at the Saint-Philippe orphanage in Meudon, which provoked the exclusion of four of its residents, the pupils at the principal establishment of the organization, situated at 40, rue La Fontaine in Paris, 6<sup>th</sup> arrond., went out on strike on Thursday 10 May.

They are demanding what has already been obtained by the residents at the Meudon orphanage: profound adjustments in internal regulations and in the educational regime.

## **The Auteuil Scandal, continued**

While in detention, Serge Berna opposed the judgment rendered by default on 9 October 1950, which sentenced him to four months of imprisonment and a 6,000-franc fine for attacking a police officer during the Auteuil scandal. On 21 September 1951, his sentence was [partially] reduced to 10 days in prison and [in part increased to] a 10,000-franc fine.

[Press clippings:]

*Tunisie-France*, 22 September 1951:

“The young existentialist who kicked a police officer – 10 days in prison”

Paris. Yesterday, at the 16<sup>th</sup> correctional chamber of the Seine, the young existentialist Serge Berna, sentenced by default last 9 October [1950] to four months in prison and a 6,000-franc fine for attacking a police officer, appeared in court.

At issue was a scene that took place on 18 June of last year at the gardens of the Work of the Apprentice Orphans of Auteuil.

On that day, a religious celebration at that location brought together a compact audience. Monsignor Feltin spoke, but the silence that followed his address was disturbed by the sudden intervention of Berna and one of his comrades. Abruptly positioning himself atop the ledge of a small wall, Berna cried out, “Orphans of Auteuil, your school is a penal colony. . . .”

But the crowd rushed at the two troublemakers, who, it seems, would have been lynched were it not for the arrival of two guardians of the peace. Nevertheless, one of these officers received a kick to the ankle and Berna was arrested for that attack.

“I contest the facts,” the accused exclaimed, yesterday, to the court.

He is a young man of athletic stature, with a dark complexion, a laughing look in his eyes and an intentionally neglected appearance.

“I am a former resident of Auteuil. I know that these kids are subjected to inhuman treatment. This is why I wanted to publically express my opinion on this subject. But I was quickly attacked by a human cluster that thrashed me without any superfluous charity. I soon felt four or five layers of the faithful above me. . . . Then a police officer was thrown into that

turbulence. He grabbed me by the shoulders while I was blinded by blood and my hair was being pulled out. A second officer appeared like a godsend. I did not try to hit him.”

Nevertheless, Officer Combes [*sic*], heard as a witness, came forth to declare that Berna had kicked him, but without being able to make clear if the blow was intentional or not.

After the statement by Mr. Jouffa, the defense attorney who asked for the acquittal of his client, at least for the benefit of the doubt, Berna was eventually sentenced to 10 days in prison and a 10,000-franc fine.

*France-Soir*, 23 September 1951:

Serge Berna, who accompanied “the blasphemer of Notre-Dame” Michel Mourre, and who was sentenced yesterday afternoon to 10 days in prison for having cried out, on 18 June [1950], “To death!<sup>45</sup> Your school is a penal colony!” during a sermon by Monsignor Feltin, during a celebration at the school of the Orphans of Auteuil, was very disappointed: “I was hoping for two years in prison,” he said, “and far from Saint-Germain-des-Prés, so I could write in tranquility.” What is more, he accused Michel Mourre, who has returned to better intentions, of being a turncoat.

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<sup>45</sup> *À mort!* Hyperbole: all the way, to the extreme of what is possible, absolutely, totally or completely.

## Fresnes

Shortly after his release from prison, Serge Berna went to 100, rue Réaumur, Paris, 2<sup>e</sup> which was the headquarters of the daily newspaper *Franc-Tireur* – founded during the Resistance – in order to meet the editorial committee and relate to its members the abuses to which he'd been subjected during his detention at the Fresnes prison. On 9 October [1951], *Franc-Tireur* published (on page 3) an article that denounced the guards' machinations during his incarceration.

“Arbitrary detention and revolting brutality: are these methods democratic?  
The experiences of a ‘prisoner’, Serge Berna”

Everything that concerns a man's freedom and dignity cannot leave us indifferent.

A young man has come to see us; his name is Serge Berna, who, with some of his friends, lightheartedly “heckled” a ceremony at the religious orphanage of Auteuil to protest against the bad treatment to which, it seems, the pupils are routinely subjected. This “crime” was not serious. But, as Berna had already caused a scandal at Notre-Dame, he was sentenced to 10 days in prison and a 10,000-franc fine, not for “sacrilege,” but for attacking the police.

But he was forced to spend his 10 days of detention at the prison in Fresnes.<sup>46</sup> He protested. The guards refused to transmit his letters to the warden. He insisted. It was then that scandalous scenes started to take place. Against this prisoner who only demanded his rights, they directed a violent blast from a fire hose for five full minutes. [Nearly] asphyxiated, suffocated, Berna remained in the icy water of his cell from noon until 7 o'clock. The next day, they announced to him that he would be released and brought him out of his cell. Four brutes surrounded him, subjecting this poor soul to what in jailhouse lingo is called “the crushing blow,” which consists in putting violent pressure, using the knees and fists, on the ribs and temples of the patient, in a way that leaves no visible traces of those brutalities.

That is how they released this young man, exhausted and starving, on the Parisian cobblestones. That is how, with impunity, they can place in arbitrary detention anyone at all, refuse to transmit the complaints of a citizen who has the right to all the guarantees of protection and inflict upon him the most revolting brutalities.

We do not doubt that there are upper- and lower-level officials in the penitentiary services who are endowed with human feelings, but we wonder if it is acceptable that such Gestapo morals continue to exist,<sup>47</sup> as is too often the case, due to the presence of several brutes, in the prisons of the Republic.

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<sup>46</sup> Built between 1895 and 1898, Fresnes Prison was and still is the second largest prison in France.

<sup>47</sup> That is, since the end of the Occupation and the withdrawal of German troops from France.

## Lettrist Performances

From Lettrist International, *Visages de l'avant-garde: 1953* (Paris: John-Paul Rocher, 2010), new edition (Toulon: La Nerthe, 2020):

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 these manifestations.<sup>48</sup> 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 18<sup>th</sup>, and the Maison des Lettres, on the 21<sup>st</sup>, 22<sup>d</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup>.

A “lettrist audition” was also staged at La Rose rouge on 9 December 1950; it featured Serge Berna, Jean-Louis Brau, François Dufrêne, Jean-Isidore Isou, Albert-Jules Legros, Maurice Lemaître, Gabriel Pomerand and Gil J Wolman.

Maurice Rajsfus, an attendee of a lettrist performance in the salon de thé du boulevard Saint-Germain, relates its reception in *Une enfance laïque et républicaine*:

Lettrist poetry, as it was originally envisioned by its creator, was, little by little, transformed into spectacle, and the performances, backed up by a choir of speakers, sounded like the fierce monotonous chanting of a people who had come from the depths of time. In the forefront were the howlers Serge Berna, Albert-Jules Legros, and Claude Matricon, who later became an important person in the world of advertising. Impossible to forget the evening at the Cercle Paul Valéry, to which I went in the company of Jean-Louis Brau and Gil Wolman. That evening the issue at hand was the parallel evolution of music and poetry. A serious problem debated by a group of bearded men, very taken with the importance of the subject. We were bored stiff in the salon de thé du boulevard Saint-Germain and, with the approval of the host, Gil Wolman, who presented himself as an avant-garde poet, proposed a “mégapneumique poem” for the consideration of the participants. Gil then threw into their faces, as one would spit out an insult, a combination of screams and feverish maledictions, which was called 41° 5/10.<sup>49</sup> Under that dislocated verbal avalanche, the connoisseurs of modern poetry were floored. Some ostentatiously covered their ears, as a form of protest: the window panes of the hall vibrated so much that the manager of the place thought it would be good to close the doors so as to not bother the neighbors. Because it was a summer evening and grueling heat was now being added to the racket, we were at the limits of physical collapse. Those brave people must have taken us for escapees from the Saint-Anne asylum. The evening ended

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<sup>48</sup> The line-up for the 14 October 1950 performance at Au Tabou, 33, rue Dauphine (poster reprinted in Serge Berna, *Écrits et Documents*, p. 25), was Serge Berna, Jean-Louis Brau, Bu Bugajer, François Dufrêne, Ghislain [Desnoyers de Marbaix], Jean-Isidore Isou, Albert Jules Legros, Maurice Lemaître, [Claude-Pierre] Matricon, Nonosse, Pac Pacco, Gabriel Pomerand and Gil J. Wolman.

<sup>49</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Gil J Wolman recorded the *mégapneumie* 41° 5/10 (three minutes and 20 seconds long) in June 1950.

in a scandalous fashion, in the midst of insults and glasses that littered the floor. We withdrew with a glorious air, shown out of the place by the young men of the café.

## Communiqué from the *Notebooks for An Artistic Dictatorship*

While the lettrist group was preparing the publication of what would become the journal *Ur. Cahiers pour un dictat culturel*, the *Cahiers pour un Dictat Artistique*<sup>50</sup> [CDA] distributed a communiqué in defense of Serge Berna, who was arrested in Béziers (Hérault) during a round of conferences on lettrism.

On Saturday, 16 December [1951], a telegram from Béziers informed us of the arrests of SERGE BERNA, an editor of the CDA and the author of the Notre-Dame scandal, and CANDELIER, who are charged with theft. Our friends had organized a round of conferences on LETTRISM in Montpellier and Béziers. They committed the act for which they are reproached in order to have the possibility of continuing this campaign of manifestations organized by the CDA.

We do not think that the moral integrity of SERGE BERNA has been compromised. We do not know the content of the accusation, we cannot place ourselves on the legal plane – which, for that matter, is secondary – but we can guarantee the value of the motives that led BERNA to commit this act.

*Cahiers pour un Dictat Artistique*: Jean-L. Brau, Louis Gros, J. Isidore Isou, A.-Jules Legros, Maurice Lemaître, CP-Matricon, Gil J Wolman

Two days later, CP-Matricon, “having become aware of the communiqué concerning the arrest of Serge Berna and by which the CDA group declared that it would not change its attitude with respect to Serge Berna, charged with theft,” informed Jean-Louis Brau by letter that he was “totally opposed to this gesture,” which he considered to be “inappropriate.”

On Saturday 10 February 1951, Henri Pastoureau, who had participated in the activities of the surrealist group since 1932, noted the following in his *Aide-mémoire relatif à l'affaire Carrouges*:<sup>51</sup>

At this juncture – we were at the Café de la Place Blanche – unusual visitors arrived: Madame Claudine Chonez, who accompanied M. de Richaud. They'd come to solicit the signature of André Breton in favor of Henry Miller, who was being hounded in America. Then the young man brought out a note from another young man who was seated apart from us at a table. This note asked that a subscription be started to help out Serge Berna, a friend of Michel Mourre, the fake Dominican of Notre-Dame. Locked up in a prison in the Midi, for having stolen “a briefcase containing money,” Berna had no tobacco. A subscription was started.

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<sup>50</sup> The editorial board was composed of Jean-Louis Brau, CP-Matricon and Gil J Wolman.

<sup>51</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: *Tracts surréalistes et déclarations collectives*, tome 2, 1940-1969 (Paris: le Terrain vague, 1982).



## *Ur: Cahiers pour un dictat culturel*

After *La Dictature lettriste*, of which the first and only issue appeared in June 1946, *Ur* was the second journal<sup>52</sup> that gathered together the entirety of the lettrist group. Serge Berna published [the text of] a lettrist [sound] poem in it, “Du léger décalage qu’il y a entre le Tam du Coeur et son écho aux tempes” [On the slight gap between the Tam du Coeur and its echo in the temples]<sup>53</sup> as well as a text about scandal and his aesthetic, *Un nommé Berna Serge, né à . . .*

A manifesto by Jean-Isidore Isou was published on the back cover of *Ur* and co-signed by Serge Berna, \*\*\*,<sup>54</sup> François Dufrene, Marc-Gilbert Guillaumin (Marc,O.), Albert-Jules Legros, Maurice Lemaître, CP-Matricon and Gil J Wolman.<sup>55</sup>

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*.

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<sup>52</sup> Published on 30 December 1950.

<sup>53</sup> Reproduced on the next two pages.

<sup>54</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Jean-Louis Brau, whose name was replaced by \*\*\* as a double sanction after the loss, during an evening of drinking alcohol and smoking hashish, of a manuscript with which Isidore Isou had entrusted him.

<sup>55</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: In the 1940s, the fashion was to give newborns a compound first name, which was supposedly more distinguished than a simple one. And so it was that many lettrists – one must be absolutely modern – added another first name: Joseph Wolman became Gil J Wolman (no period after the initial J), Isidore Isou became Jean-Isidore Isou, Guy Debord became Guy-Ernest Debord, etc.

Du léger décalage qu'il y a entre le Tam du coeur  
et son écho aux temps.

Lento - Mezzo - Toste  
WOOF  
 DID-GIVAM    DID-GIVOUM    DID-GIVAM } ter  
 #  
 DOUPTAM  
 Sourd  
WOOF

ALTO-HIERATIQUE  
RITIVIM    KTEM    IHOULEH  
ZTANG  
BARRAPARANG    PAIR    BARRAPARANG  
WROAK  
RITIVIM    KTEM    IHOULEH  
ZTANG  
 Sourd  
WOOF (bis)

MODÉRATO  
 DID-GIVAM    DID-GIVOUM    DID-GIVAM } ter  
 DOUPTAM  
WOOF  
 2 ↓ WOUTZAW    NINIV    VAHAM

ALTO et ANIME

	<u>WRTOOM</u>		
	<u>TOOTOOWOOM</u>	<u>VIREM</u>	<u>HEKLONIK</u>
	<u>ITZAK</u>		
	<u>WOOTZAW</u>	<u>NINIV</u>	<u>WAHAM</u>
	<u>WRTOOM</u>		

WOOF

RAPIDE

	<u>DID-GIVAM</u>	<u>DID-GIVOUM</u>	<u>DID-GIVAM</u>
	<u>DOUPTAM</u>		
brutal	<u>WOOF (8:6)</u>		

SPASMODIQUE

	<u>KYSKYLLYS</u>	<u>SCHYZONIE</u>	<u>TÄMTORAK</u>
	<u>OE-ARHA</u>		
	<u>LIBIDEK</u>	<u>ZOUMWIRR</u>	<u>LIQIDINI</u>
	<u>TOOMAR</u>		
	<u>KYSKYLLYS</u>	<u>SCHYZONIE</u>	<u>TÄMTORAK</u>
	<u>OE-A-RHA</u>	→ (rôle)	

≠

très lent et sourd

	<u>DID-GIVAM</u>	<u>DID-GIVOUM</u>	<u>DID-GIVAM</u>
	<u>DOUPTAM</u>		
brutal	<u>WOOF</u>		

2

Serge Berna

“A man named Serge Berna, born in . . .”<sup>56</sup>

There are those who will bend over backwards in order to obtain from their peers the respect that is, for them, the *straw* honoring the bottle for its belly. And not hesitating to deck themselves out in horrible rags in order to fruitfully exasperate the “bourgeois” with their enormous, immense desire to *arrive*. If they dared, they would bring everyone down the next time.

All this wrapped in a greasy and slippery cowardice that takes away your desire to set foot there, except violently.

Now, if you consider with a certain objectivity (improbable, I might as well say because the burning coals that simmer in my poor . . .) the behavior of the aforementioned Serge Berna, you will observe that he tends (to the extent that we can speak of tendencies because this is, no more, no less, a question of a statue), at more or less regular intervals, to *spit* in your face. Not you and the other singularly, but well and truly during your vast couplings for some reason or another (cannibalistic motives under a vaguely religious disguise – teeming peasant motives under the fat strings of politics) – anal sadism quite clearly proven if you take a single look at your ritual rush to go under one porch or another (Vél’ d’Hiv,<sup>57</sup> Notre-Dame, etc.). Then I come running, the obligatory or indispensable sad clown, in order to spit my recommended quantity of saliva on your collective faces.

Imagine that one day, one of the pathetic people who are members of the Compagnons de Lorraine, the Unionistes Staliniens or whatever argues with me that, at Notre-Dame, during the scandalous Easter, we should have remained in place in order to “suffer the consequences of our actions.” I would immediately throw into the Seine such an imbecile, who is dangerous due to his spirit of sacrifice, which is endowed with transfer mechanisms that are so easy to trigger.

If you look at any given scandal, its *start*<sup>58</sup> and its subsequent evolution strictly obey unchanging rules (were it not for this charm, which results from danger, it would be necessary to *intensify* it each time so that it doesn’t stop exciting the head of my cock). In what concerns “withdrawal,” here are a few possibilities: set sail by benefiting from the lateral swirls projected by the central whirlpool that you’ve caused; or set your feet against the howling winds and await the *main* hatred as one awaits an over-excited beast, contemplating the low, drooling, purple muzzle so as to allow your contempt its Great Deployment. I love your hatred in this *massive* form. Ah, there’s no more beautiful moment than the moment when *grouped-together* violence is unleashed against the ONLY ONE (who wanted it so much that he carefully prepared – as one does in the dramatic theater – the details of the staging of the piece mystically mounted against himself).

Today, 25 October 1950, when I think of my image, which imprints itself on the community with and in which I make my way, I shudder with pleasure and draw on my cigarette, ensconced in the tranquil determination of someone who has done his duty. Because, with the effective work of only two-times-three-minutes (three minutes at Notre-Dame, three minutes at Auteuil, and I am not at all concerned about the common law convictions that have only added to my luminosity because they are under the rays of the first two suns); with this limited amount of

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<sup>56</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Drafted on 25 October 1950, this text was conceived as the first attempt at an essay on *The Aesthetics of Scandal*, a work that Serge Berna didn’t complete.

<sup>57</sup> Short for *Vélodrome d’Hiver*, the largest mass arrest and deportation of Jews from France during the Holocaust, 16-17 July 1942.

<sup>58</sup> English and italics in original.



work I have obtained a whole train, a long line of insolent insults, a delightful embroidery of indignation all over my body; and I, a transcontinental discus-thrower, have managed to project my dubious halo as far as the most remote edges of the gloomy Subcarpathian Rus.<sup>59</sup>

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? And so, if they assemble in the underground (whose anxious race under your steps you are ignorant of and whose gray heads are raised to suck from your heels the detritus of your laughable days) the elements of a gigantic public confession (try to imagine the incredible organization that this pale magic would have required at the very spot from which the Losers of Friday emerge: one-way streets, locked Yale-style security gates, conveyor belts, That Damned Microphone, air-conditioning, and here and there some signs that would be worrisome at the very least: Snack-bar, Snack-bar<sup>60</sup>) to this attempt at exorcism (and despite the gentle constraint of 15 subway trains ready to slash into me the weight of the souls put in danger on the turns), I will still show you ONE MORE MASK.

Because the Great Boredom of which I am the triumphant bearer is this: given the NOTHINGNESS below (one must hide, be hidden), a single grimace-ritornello is prescribed, indispensable for a lifetime.

Good, they tell me: this is done, tacit, accepted: FORGOTTEN, you know. So let us say that there's *one* in this world who spends his time changing his face: by announcing in a loud voice (like the one used at the fair to praise the merits of the serpent-girl, the cannon-man, etc.) the mutations of his person, with, when it comes down to it . . . no one (mutations, not according to a "progression," but in a circle, if not a pentagon). And so we must eliminate the proclaimer, inflict upon him such an injury to his face (with quicklime) that it remains marked for a long time afterwards or let it be known through word of mouth, "He is crazy . . . He is crazy . . ."

Some people want to fuck me over by treating me as if I were a pure-hearted hero, my soul being a true Pyrenean landscape to the nth degree. Nonsense. For me, "shit" only exists in the perspective of a princely indifference with respect to gold, toothbrushes or poetry. Others have wanted to see in Serge Berna a seeker of publicity – the manure of success. That wears me out. They take the effect as if it were the cause. A thing is done. Then it makes noise. And these idiots repeat that it was done simply in order to make noise. Faulty reasoning that denotes their advanced senility.

You horrify me with your questions, with your eyes like sewer grates, your fingers like sheet metal, your slightly slutty tenderness. Nevertheless, nevertheless . . . It is useless to insist: I will never leave you with only a coat in your hands and the burning traces of pale-blue aspic.

A book is nothing other than an official report about certain events that have split structures apart – a report about things that have been *dared*. The unique enterprise of a counter-current: while you must stand up to walk, going from Everything to Nothing, I come from Nothing, and, to the questions posed by those who cross paths with me, I respond: Nothing.

Then they speak of smashing my face and putting me in jail.

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<sup>59</sup> Note by Serge Berna: In May, on its first page, the Russian satirical-political weekly *Krokodil* published an "investigation" into the rotten and lascivious decadence of France. The text, which is in the best tradition of popular dumbing-down, is buttressed by three photos: one of J.P. Sartre, one of [the comic actor] Fernandel and one of me. My face is covered with horrible make-up, with ugly hair added on. But despite all that, one can divine that noble beauty that . . . Finally, I believe that Fernandel and I are useless here: just the appearance of Sartre alone would have been sufficient to convince the Russians to undertake the atomic destruction of a nation capable of birthing, nourishing and honoring a creature with a mug like that.

<sup>60</sup> English in original.

I am here, grinding my teeth on this book, and I'm working myself to death trying to say Nothing.

To relax, from time to time, I recount to you little stories of my experiences with a few otherwise successful or valuable types: A. J. Legros, I. Isou, Michel Mourre, etc., and I can tell you about the state of my cousin's health or things that, all things considered, are as interesting as the others . . .

It is not at all difficult to envision quite enormous or monstrous things, on the condition that they are buried in the sand of Laughter (the only rock dubious enough to tolerate everything). And so, thanks to the gracious fairness of this laughter that is mine, I see the pillars sway in imprecise but surely different directions.

.....  
And so we went to Auteuil to create the scandal of which I have become a solidier 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 . . .

.....  
This laughter (the sole mask possible in this case) fell little by little on those faces upon which cups of coffee made wretched bas-reliefs, but little by little the STYLIZATION came rushing in hieratically and secretly tumultuous, once the act was thrown on the table, beating like a heart; my temples let go of the breath; they produced a rhythm (still carrying the traces of the highest encrustation); all these faces as breathless and fleeting as the water of a young river confronted with the abrupt widening of its banks. For each forehead crying out its desire for a certain mark, I bring to the front, revived, the nine-times-beveled mark of Scandal. 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:<sup>61</sup> 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 . . .

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<sup>61</sup> A *bilboquet* is a device having a cup or a spike at the top of a stick to which a ball on a string is attached.

## Response to an inquiry sent by *Le Soleil Noir. Positions*

At the beginning of 1952, and following the polemics provoked by the appearance, at the end of 1951, of Albert Camus' *L'Homme révolté*,<sup>62</sup> Serge Berna responded to an inquiry from *Le Soleil Noir. Positions*, a publishing house and journal close to the surrealists.<sup>63</sup>

- 1) Is the condition of the Rebel justified?
- 2) According to you, what is the meaning of revolt against the current world?

His response appeared under the title "*Comment?*" [How?] in the *Témoignages* section of the first issue of these notebooks,<sup>64</sup> which was titled "*La Révolte en question.*"

### "How?"

For two millennia, an exorcising gesture was, perhaps, enough to change the gaunt face of death into a tormented mask, but one as thick as illusion. Everyone went to tell his neighbor at length that Christ had put a stop to death in a definitive manner, that anxiety was no longer possible. Now the sufferer's face crumbles under the glare of too many eyes and panic sets in, concealed, at the edge of the abyss.

But this is the central question: can Mankind live pointing at the void? If the answer is yes, then revolt is, currently, the best thing; if the answer is no, then I'm crazy. Quite simply, this is not blindingly obvious because there are a few of us who are crazy, and our two generations will be placed under the sign of Nietzsche's interminable fall.

Empty the world, but then make yourself vomit. To kill and to die: be done with it. Or, on the contrary, accept it: dash off to the grocery, to the golden plume, to politics. What a clear, tragic and completely insoluble dilemma. But the dreadful solution that Camus proposes to us . . . Because, at the extreme limits, we find ourselves in a difficult position, because those who try to walk the tightrope are quite numerous (how many more numerous are those who walk around the market square below?), because some have fallen into madness or a violent death, the author counsels us to get off the tightrope and accumulate reasons for doing so. Finally . . . Camus is first and foremost a writer. In *The Rebel*, he identifies himself with the small child in the legend that announces, in the innocence of his small voice, that the King is naked.<sup>65</sup> Poor dear! To tell the truth, life is hard for the one who belches steel and enormous Greek fires. The child tightens up into a defense from which the work of art is secreted, to "distort" an intolerable world. But here we also find the breach of trust that step-by-step affects all stages of the work: Camus proposes to provide a general solution to the problems of his times, then advocates that the only way out is to write books; implying that, if worst comes to worst (that is to say, in the place that matters), there is only salvation for a certain well-known literary author. Camus begins by going to the collective summits, sadly denouncing the black shit on the plains, so as to finally conclude

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<sup>62</sup> Translated into English by Anthony Bower as *The Rebel* (New York: Penguin Books, 1965).

<sup>63</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: edited by Charles Autrand and François di Dio, this quarterly was published four times between February 1952 and May 1953.

<sup>64</sup> Other contributors to this section included Antonin Artaud, Hans Bellmer, and René Magritte. Also included in this first issue were unpublished texts by Federico Garcia Lorca, Pirandello and the Marquis de Sade, and illustrations by Klee and Kandinsky, among others.

<sup>65</sup> "The Emperor's New Clothes," by Hans Christian Andersen (1805-1875)

that only artistic creation, only constructing a novel in a Camus-like way, can lead to Redemption. To be Camus or not to be at all. Which is pure megalomania, or at least a failure to face up to the great project. His resignation allows him to produce a significant book, certainly, and spares him from having to maintain a situation that, to be valid or valuable, must multiply its own difficulties.

In addition, I can confirm that Camus has never lived as a rebel, because he spares us the sort of French Riviera Platonism that glides or hovers over his stucco philosophy. And so [for Camus] revolt is a frame of mind. A kind of perpetual burning. And so it doesn't exist without waste and weariness, and I believe that Camus, crying in the ditch, has given in to the weaknesses that I know well. It is a matter of knocking down monoliths both external and internal. In this perspective, perhaps God is not quite dead . . . I want to say that, as long as a single person, facing death, commits the act of desertion, which fattens the gods, they will roam around in the open air of consciousness in order to recommence the rotten pain from which the world is trying to escape. The convulsions of dying gods have not stopped souring the lives of their impatient heirs, of which I am one.

My old henchman, Michel Mourre,<sup>66</sup> is one of those people who is congenitally impaled by fear, nauseated by the void on the right, the void on the left. After a good action, which was instilled in him, he collapsed and has only been resurrected when forgiven by Mother Church. Finally, he looks cute with his worn-out obelisk of Maurras-la-ruine.

But let us leave behind these figures of abdication.

My revolt exploded against, among others, God, that great chuckling and cruel peacock that is born again from our eternal cadavers because in him the forces of cessation that impede our agility crystallize anew.

My revolt proceeded from a double and apparently contradictory movement: at first, the complete acceptance of a certain force that I directed against this and that, but preferably against the social situation and its dungeons intended to ward off the waves of lava breaking over the slightly amusing embankments that were built by well-fed and pug-nosed [*repus et camus*] sedentary people; and then, an unknown ardor, the cradle of Beauty, an ardor that left me at the very moment that I was trying to catch it in the net of my words, in which I, a fanatic, tried to sprinkle the old spinning wheel with eyes.

Perhaps social ineptitude, retrograde divinity, and the end of love are only a *second* pretext with respect to the clean and bright fury coiled in the depths of the world, which makes me plunge in flames into the middle of a horde of idiots on their knees. Well, I feel under my fingers, on my skin, the cold marble of their hatred, which changes me into a statue that, from time to time, I kick in the ass.

At the moment in which I start to panic due to the rotation that annihilates me, I *see* from the inside the generative bedazzlement of the Divine – the blind resolution to ignore the fact of our death. But, as for me, I want to stay in front of this entirely fresh question – a turn of the wheel by way of a turn of blood drags us there. I refuse all means of taming the mind in the face of the “irreducible.” I refuse to give the name “rebel” to those who, by diverting their gaze from the dark star, take away from me – [there is] at least one opportunity [to do so] through cowardice or a dirty trick – the responsibility of *reducing* through subterfuge the destiny that is such only because of an ancestral powerlessness that was arbitrarily established as an eternal curse.

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<sup>66</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Michel Mourre wrote a book of repentance, *Malgré le blasphème*, published by Julliard, in January 1951.



To repulse the forces of regression, those that are the maintainers of death, it is necessary to bring this revolt down into the streets, totally palpitating; to throw it like a torn-out heart into the middle of the crowd that must be awoken from its habitual compromises with destiny. To make the words of revolt heavy with the future, without caring about the immediate consequences, whether they are massive indignation or prison. Then, beyond its great justification of tomorrow, revolt already justifies itself because it is a difficult action [to take] and bruised flesh. Then, it is each of my movements, [it is] stuck to my breath, immemorially stuck in me. Rebels are those who haven't stuck their heads into the magic sands in order to avoid the lethal evidence, who haven't transformed it into a simple transit (so they say) towards the elsewhere of ecstasy.

Then, it is very important to know, here and now, the *lever* of the night. The one that allows us to kill the killings.

Because we are telling you: DEATH CAN BE KILLED.

## *ION: Center of Creation. Special issue on cinema*

At the beginning of the 1950s, film became the lettrist group's favorite mode of expression. At first, there was the *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, a film by Jean-Isidore Isou, screened on 20 April 1951 on the sidelines of the 4<sup>th</sup> International Film Festival in Cannes, with the support of Jean Cocteau.<sup>67</sup> Serge Berna participated in the creation of this film by "singing" in the lettrist choir, alongside Jean-Louis Brau, Maurice Lemaître, Marc,O and Gil J Wolman. He is also one of the off-screen voices in the film's first chapter.

Then, in August 1951, Maurice Lemaître directed *Le film est déjà commencé?* and, on 25 September 1952, Gil J Wolman completed *L'Anticoncept*, which was banned by the censor on 2 April 1952.<sup>68</sup>

In the first and only issue of the journal *Ion*, a special issue on cinema, published in April 1952 and edited by Marc-Gilbert Guillaumin (Marc,O), the lettrists expounded their conception of cinema and presented their cinematographic creations and projects.<sup>69</sup> Serge Berna published *Jusqu'à l'os* [To the Bone] in it.

*Ion* was the only expression of the entirety of the lettrist group in 1952: they all expressed themselves therein, except for Maurice Lemaître, whose film script was published that same month [April 1952] in Paris by Éditions André Bonne.

Encouraged by this publication and preceded by their reputation, the lettrists went to Cannes for the 5<sup>th</sup> International Film Festival (23 April-10 May 1952).<sup>70</sup>

Shortly afterwards, in June, the lettrist movement split into three affinity groups: that of François Dufrêne, Monique Geoffrey, Yolande du Luart, Marc,O and Poucette, who published the first issue of *Soulèvement de la Jeunesse* [Youth Uprising], a "literary and cinematographic magazine of apolitical action"; breaking with this "externalist" group, Guy-Ernest Debord and Gil J Wolman "arbitrarily" founded in Brussels the *Internationale lettriste* [Lettrist International], which regrouped the lettrist left and included Serge Berna and Jean-Louis Brau; and finally Isidore Isou, Maurice Lemaître, and Gabriel Pomerand, in retreat, formed a group of "aesthetic lettrists" with which the Lettrist International broke soon after.

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<sup>67</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: see *Visages de l'avant garde*: "On the occasion of the presentation to the Cannes Festival of 1951 of the first lettrist film, *Traité de bave et d'éternité*, amidst the tumult unleashed by a hostile audience, a young enthusiastic man stood up and replied to the sarcasm of a well-known personality with a vigorous fist. In this way did Guy-Ernest Debord mark his adhesion to the lettrist movement. [...] This presentation of *Traité de bave et d'éternité* marked the intrusion of lettrism into the domain of cinematography. With his film *L'Anticoncept*, banned the censor and presented surreptitiously at the Cannes Festival of 1952, Gil J Wolman marked the definitive separation between images and sound. [...] In *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, Guy-Ernest Debord rose up with the greatest possible violence against a certain aesthetic order. Serge Berna wanted the spectators watching his film *Du léger rire qu'il y autour de la mort sait à tel point pénétré par la cadence du son* [The light-hearted laughter that surrounds death is thoroughly penetrated by the cadence of the sound] to die from heart attacks."

<sup>68</sup> Guy Debord's *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (Howls in favor of de Sade) was first screened on 30 June 1952, roughly two months after the publication of *Ion*. [Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: in his essay about "Hurlements en faveur de Sade" (*Ion*, April 1952), Guy-Ernest Debord wrote: "I do not love the cinema, but [instead] an insurrection that is promised to me every morning when I watch Violette Nozières or the monuments raised in memory of Serge Berna."]

<sup>69</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: *Ion* would [eventually] receive the Grand Prix de la Critique International for the best theoretical work on the cinema.

<sup>70</sup> See the tract titled "5<sup>th</sup> Cannes Festival: the End of French Cinema" below.

## “To the Bone”

Today, faced with the imperatives that the cinematographic tradition imposes on us, we must break the double magical circle that protects this citadel. First of all, the sacred rampart in which the credo “*The cinema is images*” is locked up.

Let us examine this first truth. Looking at current film with unscrupulous eyes, it appears, at first glance, that it comes down to a complicity between words and images that coils in a spiral around a story that is their axis. When we take any given film, from the origins of the cinema up until the present, we can see that they are all deeply structured in this way. Even the German expressionist films, if they strive to make the contours of an abusive reality *tremble*, respect the cinematographic molecule, the elements of which (they revolve in an immutable order) are: the image, which is more or less traced from or back to what’s real; pertinent speech; and incidental music, preferably symphonic. Thus we find ourselves confronted with an ensemble of petrified habits, the chief one of which – the one that commands all the others – is a veritable *hierarchy* between image, word and sound, in that order. This disposition was perhaps justified in the past, but now indicates to me the reasons for the dead-end street in which the cinema now finds itself.<sup>71</sup>

It would be a mistake to believe that the second ring of protection, the *financial*, has nothing to do with the current crisis or (especially) the purely aesthetic content of contemporary films. On the contrary, the question of money – more so than in any other art form – deposits around cinematographic creation enormous piles of shit on which daydreamers slip and fall. In both cases, artistic and economic, the cinema must maintain itself as it is, reject any profound evolution and *conserve itself*; and, in return, it must contribute to the preservation of a socio-economic structure that permits those who live off the cinema to live well and that doesn’t want anything changed.

Finally, it is strange to see an art form as vital as the cinema constantly surpassed on its left by other art forms, such as painting and poetry, the collective significance of which are much more limited. Would this be because the cinema maintains wide contact with the general public, while the other art forms refine themselves to the point of nonexistence? I believe that the loss of interest, compared to the popularity of the cinema, in which painting, poetry, etc. find themselves is instead due to concrete factors: narrowly specialized daily labor only accords to working people leisure activities that are limited in comparison with the desire for totality that is stimulated by the obtuse daily concentration on a limited number of gestures, from which come the more or less diffuse demands for a multiform, accelerated *compensation*, with its corollary of mental agitation that is, perhaps, to be deplored when it manifests itself among our contemporaries, but which we must accept as fact and try to transform, to “sublimate,” by offering it works of art that take into account both practical and psychic reality.

The cinema is the art form that best responds to the current requirements. But in what concerns its means of expression, it rests on an unshakeable postulate, tied to a state of mind that is characteristic of the beginning of the century that saw the beginning of cinema.

The bathwater in which the year 1900 swam continues to permeate the cinema.

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<sup>71</sup> Note by Serge Berna: People will retort that, first of all, the cinema is a new art form; then that large numbers of people go to see films, etc. The great misfortune of the “General Public,” which can only express itself by not showing up. If recent statistics reveal a drop in attendance, the fault isn’t only the economic crisis; this loss of interest also comes from a saturated market. The clumsy, invariable and galloping effects [of old] have fizzled out. There’s a formidable demand for the new.

In those days, mechanical scientism, detailed descriptions of bedspreads, triumphed noisily; over the course of many volumes, Auguste Comte converted the Brazilians (those Belgians of the Ocean); thus, thanks to the boxer shorts of the obvious, the muffled noise of the soundings that Freud made of the “hell” of the soul were covered over; it took 30 years to perceive that the complicated equipment of the Proustian style rendered a better account of things than [André] Bazin’s “clarities”; the cinema systematically ignored the changes that took place around it, in the fully-grown arts. Several attempts at integrating important psychological conquests (Lang, Buñuel, etc.) were made here and there, but the prohibition weighing down upon the alleged logical necessity of the intrigue (explanatory entanglement of the images) has only permitted a completely exterior enrichment; there was a change in the quality of the *meat*, but the structural *bones* remained intact.

And so *Les Oubliés*,<sup>72</sup> a recent film by Buñuel, an excellent work that, with verve, uses the sado-realistic-dream element that is relied upon so often these days, is less important for the future of the cinema than *Hellzapoppin*,<sup>73</sup> a comedic film that, under the mask of laughter, attacks the stale taboo of *meaning*.

If all current films carry the deep mark of an epoch against which the arts have led a ferocious struggle, that’s because the cinema is still in its infantile stage; it remains fixed in the 1900s despite the attempts of the various avant-gardes, which haven’t managed to shake it, perhaps because they haven’t gone far enough.<sup>74</sup>

The tacit mistake of current cinema is that it continues to abide by the lessons of a period that is *outmoded* from all viewpoints, a period during which, vacillating, it became adapted to its own internal possibilities and also to the insatiable monster that is the general public. Little by little, through the interplay of supply and demand, the cinema instinctively created a form of expression that we would be wrong to call “natural,” while it was really only a question of satisfying certain concrete demands, which have clearly *changed*. And yet it is a very obvious thing: *there is nothing natural in art*, which is well and truly a *competition with nature-reality*.

For 40 years, under the pretext that it is inherent in the art of the cinema, we have seen the fundamental the *STORY-image-word* complex tirelessly turn in circles to the rhythm of all the world’s crank-handles. Deep within every film, I perceive a small, tightly closed canister, the soft metal of which is a little story and which contains in pill form the luminous shadows and ghost words of a Sunday evening. The categorical imperative of the cinema, which we hear proclaimed in every “thoughtful” ciné-club, is that *the cinema is the image, the image, the image*. Its personality, hermetically closed upon itself, only allows invention outside of this kind of *noumenon*<sup>75</sup> of the camera.

Let’s crystallize the fundamental means of expression of our art in a film that, due to the regressive state in which the cinema currently finds itself, has passed for “crazy avant-garde.” *Après le crépuscule vient la nuit*<sup>76</sup> was an attempt to relate the genesis of a mental alienation with the help of cinematographic language.

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<sup>72</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: *Los Olvidados*. [Translator: known in the United States as *The Young and the Damned*, this film was released in 1950.]

<sup>73</sup> A musical comedy directed by H. C. Potter, released in 1941.

<sup>74</sup> Note by Serge Berna: Can the avant-gardes go further? Since 1935 the world has been at a standstill, which was then transformed into a generalized regression (nationalism, long skirts, surrealists, etc.).

<sup>75</sup> In Kantian philosophy, a posited object or event in itself, independent of perception by the senses.

<sup>76</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: In Rune Hagberg’s film *Och efter skymning kommer mörker* [After Dusk Comes Darkness] (Sweden, 1947), a young man tries to commit suicide when he discovers a hereditary mentality illness in his family. His fiancé arrives and saves him, but he kills her and ends up in an asylum.

The method of this film is to focus exclusively on the spectator's *point of view*, thus achieving the *nec plus ultra*<sup>77</sup> of the currently circulating ideal.

The central character moves about in an impressive silence, and he expresses himself through gestures. His madness must *appear* to us, because, little by little, the behavior of this "sleepy student" goes outside of the norm. He comes and goes, speaks (a little), etc. . . . this character's movements become more and more ill adapted to the situations in which he finds himself. Until the final throat-cutting scene, in which the screen is covered with gurgling blood, bubbles clearly visible.

If a film is limited to showing me only *objective* effects, such as broken plates, decomposed faces or grotesquely slit throats, I don't give a shit about madness, ambition or the love of someone else. What especially interests me are new means that make me understand these delusions from the INSIDE, through a relentless intuition that can only manifest itself if we have done with, once and for all, the little "realistic" game of the thing seen from the side of the road.

Purely objective observation doesn't go any further than the walls of the strange realities from which I suffer merely by touching the cement they are made of, whereas I seek the *mystery* [*l'arcane*] that allows for divination at all times, right down to the character's innermost secrets.

Certain innovations nourish the hope for a much larger subjectivity; thus the *interior monologue*, inherited from the novel, reveals a flaw in the logical bastion. Such a monologue fits in with the growing desire for interiorization, allowing the character to have his say and not merely to perform a series of gesticulations that, barely born, lose their way, never to return, in the eyes of the others. While the classic film would be a kind of machine that crushes the hero in the plotline, the interior monologue to a certain extent allows the exorcism of that *inevitability*, one's participation in it, at least *dismantling* it, if not directing it. The interior editing makes the image *serve* the desire of the character – this is doubled with respect to the raw or "natural" event. In *Brève rencontre*,<sup>78</sup> the screen shows a mouth saying uninteresting things and, at the same time, we hear the voice of the person opposite, saying how bored he is. And so, two realities that are normally distinct break through the barrier of "common sense" and *signify* together. It's an attempt to tear apart the traditional couple; but if the interior monologue opens the trapdoors upon the life below, which obstinately remains closed to "objective" investigations, it is nonetheless doomed to failure because it is irremediably brought back to reason – to the fiefdom of the image-story by the rigid code of logical-objective continuity, which possesses the sad face of a marriage of convenience between photo and topo, a provincial couple wrapped up in the hair shirt of the conventional.

The objective approach took a bad turn after the war. Movie screens were invaded by Italian-style neo-realism, that image-transferring wave that is to the real progress of the cinema what Merleau-Ponty<sup>79</sup> is to the progress of philosophy or a pedal-powered aquaplane. Immediately after the torrid crushing of the war, neo-realism responded to the need to *see*: it was an album of animated photos, whose primary interest was that it put in front of contemporary eyes the thundering events that had taken place previously. Thus, not based upon an in-depth study of the cinema's specific means, but upon an emotion whose aesthetic content might be

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<sup>77</sup> Latin in original: "The very best of."

<sup>78</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rancón: *Brief Encounter*, a film by David Lean, released in 1945; screenplay by Noël Coward.

<sup>79</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961) was a philosopher of phenomenology, commonly associated with existentialism.

compared to the emotion stirred in the average spectator when he sees his cousin on the news, at the head of a 14 July [Bastille Day] parade. I'd really like it if photography could be improved, if it could acquire an elliptical strength from being pared down and concentrated. But what a sensation of déjà-vu each of these films produce, even the best ones; in sum, what ease there is in all these works, in which every movement, every transition, has been used elsewhere.

Some will say that current cinematographic expression is the one that best corresponds with "reality." There are always people who utter such platitudes. In their tightly packed ranks we can find, on the one hand, cunning devils, success-first-Talleyrands, such as Malaparte and Becker;<sup>80</sup> on the other hand, the eternal followers, the soldiers of the ciné-clubs. They forget that the valuable criteria in life, and notably in politics (always being on the side of whoever is the strongest at the moment), have no place in the enchanted land of art, in which the strange law of *he-who-loses-wins* reigns. It is obvious that the art of the cinema, like any other art form, draws upon reality, but it is clearly separate from it when it sorts through the filthy trashcan of the facts, that terrible jumble.

If art begins at the level of the dream that has decided to elevate some things (in an order that it invents) above *the unimportant*, then the artist must – under penalty of deteriorating into commonplaces – invent the most capable means of expression to inform his preferences.

And so, in the film that I will make,<sup>81</sup> I want to *disturb* the normal order by anointing the royalty of the sound and reducing the two other elements to the role of assistants. I will cut them up and reconstitute from their pieces a fluid statue, more moving than the old one, so caressed . . . Take into my hands and model the incredible, the unheard of. The mass of affects, once pulled outside of the conceptual shell and the stranglehold that the cinema hastens to put around the neck of its images, can spread out in complete freedom. Thus I will connect the narrative and the images to the electrical current of the *sound*. No doubt an uncertainty, towards which I am irresistibly drawn (like a magnet) by the very technology of the film that, based upon the irrational depths of the sound, confronts dark forces with no guarantee of success, will linger over the uncertain matter between the flesh and consciousness.

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. To achieve a result as conclusive as that, we must involve all of the spectator's senses, as in a religious service; but the necessity of gradually leading the "faithful" away from dark rooms and towards intense moments prevents the accumulation of them and renders the danger minimal. From one "sequence" to another, we cannot avoid the artifice of an explanation through words or an illustration through images (all of the actions that we call craft). That part of the fire that, as a general rule, devours entire cathedrals is unavoidable. Nevertheless, I would shorten the stages of the story and the image so as to keep myself at the edge of the troubled zones into which one presses the buried face of beauty. The attack on the broad, square tower of cinematographic unity has already been begun by ISOU and WOLMAN: their films are landmines in the walls of the Boredom in which some people (for hardly disinterested reasons) want to bury us. Separating the word and the figure from each other, they have freed the screen creator from the incubation in which so many

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<sup>80</sup> "Talleyrand" (after Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord [1754-1838]) is a by-word for crafty and cynical diplomacy; Curzio Malaparte (1898-1957) was an Italian writer and filmmaker; Jacques Becker (1906-1960) was a French director and screenwriter.

<sup>81</sup> *Du léger rire qu'il y autour de la mort sait à tel point pénétré par la cadence du son* [The light-hearted laughter that surrounds death is thoroughly penetrated by the cadence of the sound], never completed.

“beautiful” productions sleep blissfully. Wolman, loyal in this regard to an exigency that is his own, has pushed the image as far as total destruction and replaced it with a series of black and white masses. The sound, the photography and the text have been chased from their old orgies and returned to the joyous dignity of being autonomous, after the deflation of pale anecdotal transcendence.

Each of the isolated elements has been charged with the energy that is consecutively released from the disaggregation of the ensemble. The principal beneficiary of this toppling of values is the background music. The so-called organic ordering of the cinema had, until then, kept this music at the level of a more or less melodic sound-effect that was shamelessly set in motion beneath the kiss at the end of the film, drooling over [Marie] Bizet as the hero nabs the traitor. The sound is the servant that one disavows at the slightest scare, and we prefer to stick to a close-up of the first idiotic face we see (all faces, even mine, are idiotic without the mutilation of their raw natural features).

At present, the sound, this extra, is summoned to serve the almost absolute fiefdom of the screen. But we must ruin the authority in place – the image – by certain procedures, such as superimpositions, lacerating the film stock itself by hand, etc. Isou has put on screen the most joyful disorders. For his part, Wolman brings confusion and discord to the film reel itself. This plunge into the material foundations that normally remain subconscious, that one *passes over in silence*, provokes in the spectator who is truly stupefied by habit a shock (anger, howls, sarcastic laughter and other manifestations of bad humor, which in turn provoke a general disturbance).

The murmuring of those settled into their pleasure is the obvious proof concerning the airing out of a concrete emotional core, moving painfully like the touch of iron on a decayed tooth. Underneath the dead skin of the cinematographic superstructure, the sound abruptly and brutally rises to a deafening level, and we perceive, standing in plain sight, a kind of *prolox*<sup>82</sup> that until then had been crushed under the weight of movie stars and words. At present, it surges from the depths of the arsenal of illusions, dripping rough matter.

In the film I’m working on, I try to project the gaze literally outside the hinges by the surprising movement of the damaged images and to incarnate all of the emotional “mana” in the cadences of the voice, whose tonal oscillations will be in charge of the meaning of the words and the relationship of the images. I will not retreat when faced with the use of the inhuman *instrument* and, in a gentle way, I will compel it to *signify*. The Wolman precedent: he belches through an amplifier, which results in a sound clearly evocative of an equinoctial backwash against the Diappe jetty, the one that snaps mooring lines. In *Traité de bave et d’éternité*, some passages have a gripping depth and originality when the poems resound, chanted by a chorus, raising the images, which are sometimes quite powerful, the way the sea raises shipwrecks.

For my part, I try to capture the heat that comes from the murder of the usual forms, which threatens to restart the hilarious tragedy. We reach the *inside* of things by crushing their forms (perhaps), but this inside seems incommunicable, ineffable, ANNIHILATED. The nothing, you know. But, situated as I am on the terrain of art, that is to say, exhibition, I must express this “depth”<sup>83</sup> through a form that takes account of two things: a) the quite recent memory of the old form that, even if it is dead, still *lingers* in the heads of “people”; and b) the undesirability of starting a new crystallized order.

A tall order, for sure.

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<sup>82</sup> The brand name of a hair-growth tonic.

<sup>83</sup> *fond* can also mean “content.”

One might expect from such a method results that are strange, to say the least, and that might scandalize like a painting by Picasso in 1925 or Einstein's statement that matter is a simple figure of speech. Nevertheless, I do not believe in such a scandal, because there is a collective immunity against things that are increasingly appalling now, but which will be the norm tomorrow. On the other hand, I credit the average spectator with possessing a cinematographic culture that is quite superior to his pictorial or scientific culture. Nevertheless, resistance will spring up on all sides, but especially on the part of the highly "evolved" public, which is by far the most dangerous for researchers. If the inhabitants of Béziers, seated in a dark movie theatre, possess a kind of *innocence* that reacts much more appropriately than one might think to the performances of the camera, the "evolved" imagine that they have touched the very depths of the Seventh Art because they saw *L'Arroseur arrosé*<sup>84</sup> at the Cinémathèque<sup>85</sup> or because they follow the weekly reviews written by the poor oedipal C. Mauriac.<sup>86</sup> The "evolved" will tell you that, ever since Méliès,<sup>87</sup> everything has already been done in the cinema and they know all about it. Come on! These are fanatics of black-and-white films. From whence comes the peril, because if you mistreat this beautiful disposition, which for them is self-evident, always self-evident, as the number 12 was self-evident to Boileau<sup>88</sup> when he examined poetic meter, then the "evolved" of Paris and Province will start bellowing *that isn't cinema*. Quite forgetting that, by the grace of Apollinaire, "I've had enough, I'm going to take a piss"<sup>89</sup> has become pure poetry.

It is quite obvious that the procedure itself (the inversion of the hierarchy) is only and undeniably a Spanish inn that is open to the four winds, which only possesses the artistic value that you bring to it. Automatic writing worked for Éluard, on the one hand, but if Étiemble, on the other hand, tried it out, it would not have suited him any better than existentialism. Same thing for the torn cinema [*le cinéma déchiré*]. I already know some people who believe that, by creasing the film roll, they will be promoted to the first rank of cinematographic geniuses; that the fact of having provoked disjointed laughter in a movie theater confers upon them the bloody laurels of the martyr, the victim of the general public's incomprehension.<sup>90</sup>

The fact remains that there have been innumerable breaches made in the insipid landscape of the cinema. They open towards a totally new imagination and possibilities for expression that are more exciting than the old ones.

But the heart of the problem doesn't appear on these pages; it is definitely on the screens. It is a matter of going TO SEE . . .

The trouble is that the screens are solidly defended by the old guard, who persist in not dying. Nevertheless, I am convinced that the *subjective* cinema, that is to say, the *totally subjective* cinema, will be able to reach the general public through the dense spider's web woven by the interests that become entangled with pleasure when they are faced with new and troubling things.

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<sup>84</sup> *L'Arroseur Arrosé* [The Sprinkler Sprinkled] is a short black-and-white silent comedy film that was directed and produced by Louis Lumière. It was first screened on June 10, 1895.

<sup>85</sup> The Cinémathèque française, founded in 1936 and located in Paris, has one of the most extensive film archives in the world and offers daily screenings.

<sup>86</sup> Claude Mauriac (1914-1996) was a French author, journalist and film critic. He is "oedipal" because of his relationship with his famous father, François Mauriac (1885-1970).

<sup>87</sup> Georges Méliès (1861-1938) was a pioneering magician, actor and film director.

<sup>88</sup> Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux (1636-1711) was a French poet and critic.

<sup>89</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: [Guillaume Apollinaire,] "Chapeau-tombeau," from *Quelconqueries* (1914).

<sup>90</sup> One wonders who Berna has in mind here.



Additionally, the eruption of the aesthetic forces that bubble out of the trauma of rupture necessitates a relentless effort to establish the new equilibrium that will counteract the turmoil caused by the dismemberment of the glacial ice that surrounds the cinema. To do that, we must take account of the wise men that we are.

## 5<sup>th</sup> Cannes Festival: *Fini le cinéma français*

Determined to oppose the 5<sup>th</sup> International Film Festival at Cannes, the lettrists distributed copies of the tract *Fini le cinéma français* [The End of French Cinema], covered over the festival's posters with graffiti ("The cinema is dead"), provoked fights and interrupted screenings: a dozen demonstrators were arrested.<sup>91</sup>

### "The End of French Cinema"

Men unsatisfied with what has been given to them surpass the world of official expression and the festival of its poverty.

After L'ESTHETIQUE DU CINEMA by Isidore ISOU;

TAMBOURS DU JUGEMENT PREMIER, an attempt at an imaginary cinema by François DUFRENE, systematized at the extreme exhaustion of the means of filmmaking, by situating it beyond all of its mechanisms.

Guy-Ernest DEBORD with

HURLEMENTS EN FAVEUR DE SADE, reaches the end of the cinema, in its insurrectionary phase.

After this refusal, definitively outside the norms that you love, the

CINEMA NUCLEAIRE by Marc O. integrates the movie theater and the spectator into the cinematographic representation.

Henceforth, the cinema can only be NUCLEAR.

And so we want to surpass the derisory competitions of cheap imitations between small traders who are either illiterate or are destined to become so. Our mere presence here kills them.

And here are the men [and women] of the new cinema:

Serge BERNA

G. E. DEBORD

François DUFRENE

Monique GEOFFREY

Jean Isidore ISOU

Yolande du LUART

MARC,O.

Gabriel POMERAND

POUCETTE

Gil J Wolman

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<sup>91</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: ". . . the spheres that were closed off for us since 1952, as you know, after the Festival's management had us arrested en masse, at the moment that we were threatening to sack its offices and – they claimed – defenestrate its personnel (but this last reproach is unjust)." Guy Debord, letter to Marcel Mariën, Tuesday, 19 March 1957. *Correspondance* vol. 0 (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2010) and Guy Debord, *Lettres à Marcel Mariën*, edition by Francois Coadou (Toulon: La Nerthe, 2015).

On the other side of this tract, there appeared the following:

ION  
Center of Creation  
Director: Marc-Gilbert GUILLAUMIN

12, rue de la Sorbonne\*  
PARIS (Vth arrond.)  
Telephone: DANton 80-30

*L'UNIQUE ÉSTHETIQUE du CINÉMA*  
(existing until now in the world) by Jean-Isidore ISOU  
(the author of *Traité de bave et d'éternité*), winner of the Prix En Marge  
[19]51

*LA LÉGENDE CRUELLE*  
(winner of a prize for short films) screenplay by Gabriel POMERAND,  
1951

*HURLEMENTS EN FAVEUR DE SADE*  
screenplay by Guy-Ernest DEBORD

*TAMBOURS du JUGEMENT PREMIER*  
first attempt at an imaginary cinema by François DUFRENE

*L'ANTICONCEPT*  
film banned by the censor, by Gil J WOLMAN

*LE CINÉMA NUCLÉAIRE*  
or the future cinema, by MARC,O

\*Storehouse of the works by Isidore ISOU and the lettrist group

On the sidelines of the Festival, the lettrists screened Gil J Wolman's *L'Anticoncept* "for several journalists, the only legal possibility available," and, on 4 May [1952], at the cinéma Alexandre III, *Tambours du jugement premier*, an "imaginary film, without a screen or rolls of film" by François Dufrière. "The 'dark' room was plunged into 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 Dufrière, "Une action en marge," *Archi-Made* (Paris: ENSBA, 2005).

[Press clippings]

*Paris-Presse, L'Intransigeant, 27 April 1952:*

“Alert in Cannes: a lettrist commando unit came to sabotage the Festival: an organizer is beaten up.”

From our special envoy Max Favalelli.

Cannes, 26 April [1952], by telephone.

With the first ray of sunshine, the festival finally came to life and registered its first incident, which mixes the odious and the ridiculous.

A sizable “commando unit” of “lettrists,” constituted by thirty members, all dressed in the dirty uniforms that are their only truly original trademark, showed up at the [Boulevard de la] Croisette with the quite determined desire to cause a scandal that would be likely to draw attention to them.<sup>92</sup>

Led by a disciple of the Master Isidore Isou, someone named Guillaumin, the young troublemakers, renouncing *le cinéma discrèpant*,<sup>93</sup> carried in their suitcases three samples of a supposedly newly christened catchphrase, “nuclear cinema,” and had as their secret project the screening, in a hall in the town, of those three films, one of which, *Le Triomphe de Sade* [*sic*], is, it seems, an aggressive obscenity.

Already provided with an entry card as a film producer, Guillaumin, in an ill-mannered way, sought a second card as a journalist. Madame Christiane Rochefort, who directs the press office, refused to give it to him. Which caused her to be attacked on the staircase of the palace by a furious lettrist who undid [*discrépa*] her hair bun and beat her up.

*La Bourgogne républicaine, 2 May 1952:*

“The (unwashed) disciples of Isidore Isou created a scandal by trying to lynch a press officer”

But the festival is not merely a succession of films: it also includes comic interludes. Thus, all of Cannes was talking yesterday about the brawl provoked by the spotty, unwashed and longhaired disciples of Isidore Isou, the pope of lettrism and the creator of “*Traité de bave*” and “*Eternité*” [*sic*]! Furious at being refused the press credentials that they had no right to, the attractive young people wanted to lynch the Festival’s press officer.

With dignity, their victim has refused to press charges.

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<sup>92</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: this paragraph is read aloud by Serge Berna (Voice 3) in the film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (June 1952).

<sup>93</sup> In point of fact, the lettrists were *partisans* of *le cinéma discrèpant*, a phrase that one hears in Isou’s *Traité de bave et d’éternité*.

## “A stroll among the remnants of the old poetry”

During the lettrists’ sojourn at Cannes, Guy Debord began to record on magnetic tape what would later (in March 1953) become *Les Environs de Fresnes*,<sup>94</sup> a recording that was “dedicated to Serge Berna, of the Lettrist International, currently prisoner No. 2797 in the fort at Corneilles-en-Parisis.”

From this recording we excerpt the part[s] in which Berna and Debord take turns reading lines of verse by Apollinaire, Breton, Desnos, Éluard, Mallarmé and Michaux, as well as poems by Guillaume-Henri Michinaire and Paul-Henri Michuard.<sup>95</sup>

In April 1952, Serge Berna and Guy-Ernest Debord took a stroll among the remnants of the old poetry, by throwing its mechanisms out of gear, so that it is nothing more than equally unimportant responses and requests in the last acceptable dialogue.

From Guillaume-Henri Michinaire: *Tahavi of the Milky Ways*<sup>96</sup>

Tahavi goes to the Void. Tahavi, Tahavi<sup>97</sup> detests the Void. The Void is Tahavi’s horror.

Milky way O luminous sister

The white streams of Canaan

And the white bodies of lovers

But the Void came to Tahavi.

Dead swimmers, will we puffing and panting follow

Your course towards other nebulae?

The Enormous Veil he did not, did not, did not push it back. He could not push back the Enormous Veil. He couldn’t!

I miss those eyes of a whore

And beautiful like a panther

And beautiful like a panther

And beautiful like a panther

At 10 years old, he was 60. His parents appeared to him, appeared to him – *schienen seine Eltern als wie*<sup>98</sup> – to be children. At five years old, he got lost in the night of time.

Lover, your Florentine kisses

Had a bitter taste

That discouraged our [shared] destinies

Then he forgot himself in an ant. He forgot himself in a leaf. He forgot himself in the burial of childhood.

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<sup>94</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Guy Debord, *Enregistrements magnétiques* (1952-1961) (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).

<sup>95</sup> An Internet search produces no results for either Guillaume-Henri Michinaire or Paul-Henri Michuard, who appear to be inventions, nor are there any results for the works that are attributed to them.

<sup>96</sup> What follows is an interweaving of Guillaume Apollinaire, “La chanson du mal-aimé” (1913) and Henri Michaux, “Tahavi” (1949).

<sup>97</sup> Note that none of these repetitions of certain phrases appear in Michaux’s original.

<sup>98</sup> German in original (“His parents seemed like”), not in either text being interwoven.

Her gaze left a trail  
 Of stars in the trembling evenings  
 The sirens swam in her eyes  
 Tahavi did not find his bread. Tahavi did not find his father, Tahavi did not find  
 his father, Tahavi did not find his father in the tears of men.  
 And our bloody biting kisses  
 And our bloody biting kisses  
 And our bloody biting kisses  
 Made our fairy godmothers cry  
 Did not accept, did not accept, Tahavi. Did not accept, Tahavi. Having received,  
 did not keep.  
 Through the door, through the window, Tahavi, through the door, through the  
 window, rejected. He vomited.  
 But in truth I am waiting for her  
 With all my heart with all my soul  
 By strength of will, supported by the breath, by thought without breath, by his  
 demon, Tahavi rejected.  
 And on the bridge of Come-Back-to-Me  
 If that woman should ever return  
 I would tell her I am happy  
 Tahavi rejected!

From Paul-Henri Michaud: *L'Amoureuse repos dans le Malheur*<sup>99</sup>

She is standing, misfortune, on my eyelids, my great plowman  
 And her strands of hair, misfortune, are in mine, sit down  
 She has the form, rest yourself, of my hands, let's rest a little, you and I  
 She has the color, rest, of my eyes, you find me  
 She sinks down, you test me, in my shadow, you prove it to me  
 Like a stone, I am your ruin, on the sky, my great theater  
 She always has, my haven, open eyes, my hearth  
 And don't let me, my gold cellar, sleep, my future  
 Her dreams, my real mother, in broad daylight, my horizon  
 Make the suns, in your light, evaporate, in your breadth  
 Make me laugh, in your horror, cry and laugh, I abandon myself  
 Speak [without having anything to say]  
 (...) <sup>100</sup>

<sup>99</sup> What follows is an interweaving of Paul Éluard, "L'Amoureuse" (1926) and Henri Michaux "Repos dans le Malheur" (1938).

<sup>100</sup> Ellipsis by Jean-Louis Rançon.

From Paul-Henri Michuard: *Au Coeur de mon amour dans la nuit*<sup>101</sup>

In the night, a beautiful bird  
In the night, shows me the light  
I am united with the night, it is in its eyes  
In the limitless night, in plain sight  
At night, it sings – This will be for another planet – in the middle of the sun  
Mine  
The eyes of singing animals  
Night, and their songs  
Night of birth, anger or boredom  
Which fills me with my cry, have forbade me  
My corncocks, from getting out of this bed  
You who have invaded me, I will spend my life there  
Who makes a swell swell, dawn in countries  
Who makes swells all around, without gracefulness  
Who makes swells, takes the appearance  
Is very dense, of oblivion  
Moos and let a moved woman fall asleep  
Are the night, at dawn  
The night that lies head first  
Implacable night its fall illuminates it  
And its marching band, and its beach you know  
Its beach above, the shape of her head  
Its beach everywhere, here, everything darkens  
His beach drinks, the landscape is complete  
His weight is king, and everything bends under him, blood on the cheeks  
Under him, the masses diminish  
Under thinner than a thread, and flow into my heart  
Under him, with sleep  
Under the night, and who wants  
The night, to take my heart?  
Under him.

Obviously the above . . .

I have seen it covered with a cuirass, covered is the word, it was the pure sky<sup>102</sup>

Let's go my dear, we must have a title, a title, a title

*Couplets de la rue Tombeau*<sup>103</sup>

About which the grammarian of any language will have nothing to say<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> What follows is an interweaving of Paul Éluard, "Au Coeur de mon amour" (1926) and Henri Michaux, "Dans le nuit" (1938).

<sup>102</sup> A line from André Breton, "Preface aux *Lettres de Guerre* de Jacques Vaché" (1919) (note that the original says "covered was *not* the word").

<sup>103</sup> Reminiscent of the title of a poem written by Robert Desnos in 1943, "Couplets de la rue Saint-Martin," which is in fact quoted two lines later. As for "Tombeau," it is an allusion to the title of a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé (1897), the first and last lines of which are quoted in what follows.

<sup>104</sup> A line from Guillaume Apollinaire, "La Victoire" (1917).

Since André Flatard left it  
 We want new sounds new sounds new sounds<sup>105</sup>  
 When they drink a glass<sup>106</sup>  
 We want consonants without vowels  
 The ruins are situated on the banks of a meandering river<sup>107</sup>  
 Perfectly. Consonants that fart quietly  
 One by one, a harmonious and multiple agony  
 Imitate the sound of a spinning top *Vvoouuvvoouuvvoouu*  
 The blind people were limping away<sup>108</sup>  
 The aspirated scraping sound of spitting would also make a good consonant  
 Happy if it were enough, to make them love you<sup>109</sup>  
 Use the muffled sound of someone who eats without civility  
 A shallow stream slanders the death  
 Of various labial farts would also make your speeches stand out like trumpets  
 She, a naked dead woman in the mirror, still<sup>110</sup>  
 The mother of the concierge and the concierge will let everything go<sup>111</sup>  
 The black rock angry that the cold wind envelops it  
 If you are a man, you will accompany me this evening  
 To the other, in the burning breast of an ancient Amazon<sup>112</sup>  
 I would have savored slowly and all alone  
 During the long evenings  
 The Tokay.<sup>113</sup>  
 Badly silenced by the ink itself in Sibylline sobs<sup>114</sup>  
 So may hearts in Orkenise!<sup>115</sup>  
 The guards laughed and laughed  
 Tramps, the road is gray  
 Love is gray, O cart driver  
 As well as a joyous and tutelary torch<sup>116</sup>  
 On the Boulevard de Grenelle<sup>117</sup>  
 Workers and bosses  
 May-time trees  
 Rolls in this boredom vile flames as witnesses<sup>118</sup>

<sup>105</sup> This and several lines that follow (as far as “trumpets”) are from Guillaume Apollinaire, “La Victoire” (1917).

<sup>106</sup> A line from Robert Desnos, “Les Quatre sans cou” (1942).

<sup>107</sup> A line from Robert Desnos, “Deuil pour deuil” (1924).

<sup>108</sup> A line from Robert Desnos, “Fortunes” (1942).

<sup>109</sup> A line from Robert Desnos, “The Night of Loveless Nights” (1930).

<sup>110</sup> A line from Stéphane Mallarmé’s “Ses purs ongles très haut dédiant leur onyx” (1914).

<sup>111</sup> This line and the second line after it (“If you are a man”) are from Guillaume Apollinaire, “Lundi rue Christine” (1918).

<sup>112</sup> The last line of Stéphane Mallarmé, “Mes bouquins refermés sur le nom de Paphos” (1887).

<sup>113</sup> Tokay is form of wine. These lines are taken from Guillaume Apollinaire, “Dans le jardin d’Anna” (1925).

<sup>114</sup> This is the last line of Stéphane Mallarmé, “Le silence déjà funèbre d’une moiré” (1887).

<sup>115</sup> The next four lines are from an untitled poem (sometimes called “The Song of Orkenise” or “Through the Gates of Orkenise”) by Guillaume Apollinaire (1908).

<sup>116</sup> The last line of Stéphane Mallarmé, “La chevelure vol d’une flamme à l’extrême” (1914).

<sup>117</sup> These lines are from Guillaume Apollinaire, “Allons plus vite” (1925).

<sup>118</sup> A line from Stéphane Mallarmé, “Quand l’ombre menaçait de la fatale loi” (1883).



Love is dead between your (Serge Berna stammers).<sup>119</sup> Shit! Oh, shit!  
 Love is dead between your (he stammers again). What is . . . Oh but leave. . .  
 Love is dead between your (he stammers again). On no, I give up, go ahead.  
 The sepulcher of disavowal<sup>120</sup>  
 I have the eyes of a true common seal  
 Under a heavy marble slab that isolates it  
 No other fire is lit  
 Other than the dazzling console.  
 Published by Gallimard in 1945  
 The cry of the Glories that it stifles<sup>121</sup>  
 It is the festival of Saint-Olaf<sup>122</sup>  
 Me, I have your uncovered hair<sup>123</sup>  
 To bury my happy eyes  
 Gaspard . . . I think of Gaspard that certainly isn't  
 His real name<sup>124</sup>  
 In the splattering of impossible falls<sup>125</sup>  
 But I have the awareness of the different eternities of man and woman<sup>126</sup>  
 Climb the misty steps  
 We approach<sup>127</sup>  
 Two dissimilar animals, enemies, love each other with daggers drawn<sup>128</sup>  
 For just one kiss to hold her<sup>129</sup>  
 She, she held a scabbard in her hand  
 Flees a crowd of grain<sup>130</sup>  
 Flees the flame and flees the cold freshness  
 Stronger than the distant sky  
 (?)<sup>131</sup> had been bequeathed a sharp dagger by God  
 That the beauty of Man is much greater than Man himself  
 Your hope is alive<sup>132</sup>  
 Always<sup>133</sup>  
 We will go further without ever advancing  
 What do you want, night has fallen<sup>134</sup>

<sup>119</sup> Three interpolations by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>120</sup> The following lines (except for the one about the “the eyes of a true common seal,” which is from Guillaume Apollinaire, “Le phoque” [1914]), are from Stéphane Mallarmé, “Tout Orgueil fume-t-il du soir” (1899).

<sup>121</sup> The last line in Stéphane Mallarmé, “Quelle soie aux baumes de temps” (1885).

<sup>122</sup> The first line in Guillaume Apollinaire, “Fiord” (1914).

<sup>123</sup> Two more lines from Stéphane Mallarmé, “Quelle soie aux baumes de temps” (1885).

<sup>124</sup> A line from Guillaume Apollinaire, “Etoile” (1914).

<sup>125</sup> A line from Robert Desnos, “The Night of Loveless Nights” (1930).

<sup>126</sup> A line from Guillaume Apollinaire, “Onirocritique” (1909).

<sup>127</sup> Two lines from Paul Éluard, “Sans âge” (1936).

<sup>128</sup> In Guillaume Apollinaire, “Onirocritique” (1909), it merely says, “Two dissimilar animals love each other.”

<sup>129</sup> A line from Paul Éluard, “Poésie ininterrompue” (1946).

<sup>130</sup> Three lines from Paul Éluard, “Repos d’été” (1942-1943).

<sup>131</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>132</sup> Part of the last line of Paul Éluard, “Autograph poem, in honor of Gabriel Péri” (1944).

<sup>133</sup> Two lines from Guillaume Apollinaire, “Toujours” (1918).

<sup>134</sup> Second-to-last line in Paul Éluard, “Couvre-feu” (1945).

Where is, where is the madman, where is  
The life to find Victory<sup>135</sup>  
And by the power of a word<sup>136</sup>  
Oh, take me  
Knotted, rusty like a lantern<sup>137</sup>  
And jolting like lightening  
The quince keeps its flavor  
They say that Serge Berna is a low-life crook, a low-life crook, a *gouape*, [a]  
*gouape*<sup>138</sup>  
In search of new vegetation<sup>139</sup>  
Hum, it's ugly  
I know people of all sorts<sup>140</sup>  
They do not equal their destinies  
Their eyes are badly extinguished fires  
Their hearts move like their doors.

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<sup>135</sup> Last line in Guillaume Apollinaire, "Toujours" (1918).

<sup>136</sup> A line from Paul Éluard, "Liberté" (1945).

<sup>137</sup> Three lines from Paul Éluard, "Blason des fleurs et des fruits" (1942).

<sup>138</sup> Argot, borrowed from the Spanish *guapo*, a "tough guy."

<sup>139</sup> A line from Paul Éluard, "Salvadore Dali" (1930).

<sup>140</sup> Four of the last five lines of Guillaume Apollinaire, "Marizibill" (1913).

## Cafés and Bistros

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.<sup>141</sup>

### SONG OF THE POOR ACROBAT<sup>142</sup>

Berna had already been jail when he was in the LI [Lettrist International], also for theft, if I'm not mistaken. He was in the Draguignan prison,<sup>143</sup> where he'd written a very beautiful song:

When song brings  
Soft light  
To the edge of my pain  
Poor poor acrobat  
Winter will go away sounding the hour  
Of renewal without your joy  
Poor poor acrobat

At one time we sang it a great deal at Moineau. Yes, Berna was a bit of a crook, a bit of a thief, he hatched schemes, but he was very intelligent and also very cunning. He had a kind of a brilliant talent<sup>144</sup> for hatching schemes, inventing things

...  
Certainly a prince doesn't always know what goes on in his kingdom. Boris<sup>145</sup> himself recognizes that some territories escape his control: the *Rhumerie martiniquaise*,<sup>146</sup> for example, and nowhere does he mention the bistro, which at the beginning of the 1950s still kept alive the high tradition of *Germanopratine* cheating: the amazing Moineau on rue du Four, at which some older cave-dwellers, such as the painter Camille Bryen, the young lettrist generation (which had broken away from Isou, who was too sober and liked to go to bed early), and two or three aristocrats [*optimates*] from the Collège de Pataphysique mixed

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<sup>141</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: from *Visages de l'avant garde*, op. cit.

<sup>142</sup> In Tarot, *Le Bateleur* is The Magician; his card (the first in the deck) is in fact used as an illustration for this entry in *Écrits et Documents*. A *bateleur* can also be a street performer or "busker." It is translated as "buffoon" by Donald Nicholson-Smith in Jean-Michel Mension, *The Tribe* (San Francisco: City Lights, 2001), p. 75.

<sup>143</sup> Berna was in fact imprisoned at Fresnes in September 1951; his stint in Draguignan came later.

<sup>144</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Jean-Michel Mension, *La Tribu*, op. cit.

<sup>145</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Boris Vian, in his *Manuel de Saint-Germain-des-Près*.

<sup>146</sup> A Parisian bar established in 1932.

together in the nocturnal and alcoholic life of the defeated “Little Kingdom.” It is true that Boris mentions in particular the wine cellars (and Moineau didn’t have one) and their frenzy, even though at Moineau, at the end [of the night], limpness was very well maintained by the 15-year-old girls who preferred to let their dreams etherealize on the moleskins to the sound of soft guitars than to writhe under the effects of the trumpet.<sup>147</sup>

On the other hand, I knew [Camille] Bryen from my exhibition at Colette Allendy. I loved him very much. We went out together quite often, and so I think that he was the link between my generation and Duchamp’s. He was younger than the surrealists. But he knew Tristan Tzara, with whom Serge Berna played chess every evening (at the café Le Bouquet)<sup>148</sup> at the corner of rue des Ciseaux and rue du Four.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Noël Arnaud, *Les Vies parallèles de Boris Vian* (Paris: UGE, 1970).

<sup>148</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>149</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Raymond Hains, “L’Oeil photographique,” interview with Jacques Donguy, in Yan Ciret (dir.), *Figures de la négation: avant-gardes du dépassement de l’Art* (Paris Musées: Musée d’art moderne Saint-Étienne Métropole, 2004).

## Screening of the entirety of the film *Hurlements en Faveur de Sade*

Serge Berna recorded one of the voices (Voice 3) for Guy Debord's film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* [Howling in favor of Sade].

Voice 3: I will only respond in the presence of my lawyer. [...]

Voice 2 (Guy Debord):<sup>150</sup> And you will see that they will become famous later on. I will never be able to accept the scandalous and hardly believable existence of any police force. Many cathedrals have been erected in memory of Serge Berna.

Completed on 17 June 1952 and dedicated to Gil J Wolman (one of whose *Improvisations mégapneumes* can be heard at the beginning of the film), *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* – a film without images – alternates sequences of white screen during the short dialogues and sequences of black screen during the silences.

In his memoirs, *Une enfance laïque et républicaine*, Maurice Rajsfus recounts this screening – “defended by a group of ‘leftist lettrists’ and around 20 auxiliaries from Saint-Germain-des-Prés” – in which Serge Berna participated.

Comes now Guy-Ernest Debord, who announces the release of his film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*. This was supposed to be the cinematic event of the season, and the ciné-club of the Latin Quarter, in the framework of its program of avant-garde cinema, was tasked with publicizing this new advance in lettrist filmmaking. The hall of the Sociétés savants was filled from the orchestra pit to the balcony, and about 15 lettrists, full of derision, occupied the first few rows. Debord, whom I'd met during the afternoon, had asked me to be present, along with several comrades, at this soirée, which promised to be quite tumultuous. I was a lover of such adventures and it wasn't difficult for me to convince other connoisseurs of scandal to attend. At the appointed hour, there were many of us in the balcony to support, with our voices and our fists, if necessary, our lettrist friends, who were facing certain protest.

First act. Introduced as a Swiss professor of film studies, Serge Berna took the floor to present the work of the century: “Ladies and gentlemen, it is a profoundly erotic film that we are going to present to you this evening. An audacity that is unknown these days. A work that will go down the history of cinema: the cheese after the pear.<sup>151</sup> That's all I can say for the moment and I'll leave you to experience the surprise on your own.” Once the hall was darkened, an announcement informed the public that the reels hadn't arrived yet and that it would be necessary to wait a few minutes and the nightlights were turned on. After about 15 minutes, Debord, out of breath, finally arrived with the canisters of his film under his arms and speedily climbed the steps leading up to the projection booth. Darkness once again. The characteristic sound of the projector could be heard and, in the darkness, a monotonous voice enumerated, as if they were the opening credits, a few important dates in the history of cinema, with, among

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<sup>150</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>151</sup> In Donald Nicholson-Smith's translation of *The Tribe*, which includes this text by Rajsfus, this phrase is rendered as “the time of wine and walnuts” (p. 87).

others, the year of Guy-Ernest Debord's birth, 1932 (1931),<sup>152</sup> and the creation of *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, 1952.

Silence. The darkness was total and only the regular whirring of the projector could be heard. The arrival of the images could not be long in coming. This wasn't even a provocation, simply a mild jest. Lights. With the darkness, silence was established. People in the audience began to murmur, but their sounds were rapidly covered over by the soundtrack, which was made up of several sentences that had been more or less extracted straight from the Penal Code. Once again, silence and darkness for a dozen minutes or so, then a desperate voice was heard, as a reward: "I will only speak in the presence of my lawyer!" Followed by a new silent sequence. The jest had already gone on for at least 45 minutes. Protest began to spread throughout the hall. Invectives were launched from both sides. Responding to a spectator who was surprised by the absence of bawdy images, a lettrist proclaimed: "The eroticism must take place in the audience." The public let loose its rancor because it hadn't seen anything at all. No one imagined that the film's director would leave his audience – the screening cost money, after all – without showing it any images. Ultimately people began to suspect something, some kind of provocation. As excitement took grip of the audience, the lettrists and their friends bombarded the public and then the balcony with stink bombs and sneezing powder. The best equipped threw condoms full of water. Once the munitions were exhausted, sputum took the place of projectiles. No one had left. The screening had started at around 9 pm and, at 10:30 pm, the lights were finally turned back on amidst the invectives of an overexcited hall. The host took advantage of a moment of respite to announce the beginning of the discussion.

Ever serious, Serge Berna took the floor again and expanded upon his admiration for Guy-Ernest Debord and his work. An absolutely enraged spectator immediately demanded an explanation of the reasons that had pushed the film's director to title his film *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*. With a straight face, Berna riposted that he had misunderstood and that the film had been dedicated to a friend of Debord whose name was Ernest Sade and whose honorable profession was pimping whores on rue Nicolas-Flamel. After this treasure from Berna, the evening was ended in the midst of an indescribable disorder.

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<sup>152</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

## ***Les Jeux de l'amour et du hazard:* Fragments of an influential film-novel**

Serge Berna's "influential film-novel" borrows its title from Marivaux's prose comedy in three acts, *Le Jeu de l'amour et du hazard* [The Game of Love and Chance], which was staged for the first time in 1730.

Berna's work also bears a double title: *Les Jeux de l'amour et du hazard or La Contingence fatale* [The Games of Love and Chance or The Fatal Contingency]. Just like the photo-novel, the film-novel in the post-World War II years was a fashionable editorial production and, between 1952 and 1954, the Lettrist International intensively worked on "influential metagraphy," a form of collage that juxtaposed preexisting images and texts.

In June 1954, in the name of the Lettrist International, Gil J Wolman organized an exposition of 66 influential metagraphics by André-Frank Conord, Mohamed Dahou, Guy-Ernest Debord, Jacques Fillon, Gilles Ivain,<sup>153</sup> Patrick Straram and Wolman himself, titled "Avant la guerre," at la Galerie du Passage, passage Molière (3<sup>rd</sup> arrond.).

Berna's film-novel stages a love triangle: Frank, Elle and Serge, the bad guy who seduces Elle. The intrigue unfolds (perhaps in Argentina) through extracts from songs, poems, chivalric romances and theatrical pieces, which are illustrated principally by photographs of actresses and actors that have been clipped from press sources.

Preserved in Gil J Wolman's papers, this unpublished work can be dated 18 October 1952 at the latest, thanks to a drawing that Serge Berna clipped out of an American magazine published in Philadelphia, *The Saturday Evening Post*. When possible, we have indicated at the bottom of the pages the origin of the illustrations and the texts that accompany them.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> The pseudonym of Ivan Chtcheglov.

<sup>154</sup> Though *Les Jeux de l'amour et du hazard* takes up almost 70 pages in *Écrits et Documents* (one-third of the entire book), I have not reproduced it here. Printed in low-resolution black-and-white images, which scan very poorly, and annotated by handwritten phrases that are difficult to decipher, these "fragments" are merely the raw materials for a collage, not an actual collage. If my decision not to include them here suggests that the entirety of *Les Jeux de l'amour et du hazard* was added to the original French volume in order to "pad it out," so be it.

## The Lettrist International against Charlie Chaplin

On 29 October 1952, at the Ritz Hotel, Jean-Louis Brau and Gil J Wolman were able to enter the hall in which Charles Chaplin was holding a press conference and threw copies of the tract *Finis le pieds plats* [No More Flat Feet] at people in the name of the Lettrist International.

When they tried to enter the premises fraudulently through the Ritz's kitchen, Serge Berna and Guy Debord were arrested by the police, who took them for admirers.

“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.”<sup>155</sup>

### “No More Flat Feet”

Sub-Mack Sennett filmmaker, sub-Max Linder actor, the Stavisky<sup>156</sup> of the tears of abandoned single mothers and the little orphans of Auteuil,<sup>157</sup> you, Chaplin, are the swindler of feelings, the blackmailer of suffering.

Cinematography needed its Delly.<sup>158</sup> 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 Veuzit<sup>159</sup> with flat feet,<sup>160</sup> 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*.<sup>161</sup>

Go to bed, latent fascist,<sup>162</sup> make lots of money, be sociable (your groveling in front of little Elizabeth<sup>163</sup> was very successful), die soon, we will hold a first-class funeral service for you.

May your latest film truly be the last one.

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<sup>155</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: *Visages de l'avant-garde*, op. cit.

<sup>156</sup> The Stavisky Affair was a financial scandal in France in 1934, named after Alexandre Stavisky, who embezzled funds.

<sup>157</sup> See “The Auteuil Scandal” (above).

<sup>158</sup> A kind and noble person.

<sup>159</sup> The pseudonym of Alphonsine Zéphrine Vavasseur (1876-1952), the author of dozens of popular romance novels.

<sup>160</sup> A flatfoot is slang for a police officer; in French *pied plat* can also mean a yokel or country bumpkin.

<sup>161</sup> Chaplin's last film. English in original.

<sup>162</sup> *fascite larvé* (note the misspelling of “fascist” in the original French) has sometimes been mistranslated as “fascist insect.”

<sup>163</sup> Chaplin met Queen Elizabeth II at the Empire Theater in London, England on 27 October 1952.



The fires of the footlights have melted the makeup of the supposedly brilliant mime and we now only see an ominous<sup>164</sup> and self-interested old man.  
Go home Mister Chaplin.<sup>165</sup>

On 1 November 1952, in the pages of *Combat*, Jean-Isidore Isou, Lemaître Maurice and Gabriel Pomerand publicly distanced themselves from the action against Chaplin.

### “The lettrists disavow those who insulted Chaplin”

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<sup>166</sup> 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.<sup>167</sup>

### “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

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<sup>164</sup> *sinistre* can also be translated as “dreary” or “dull.”

<sup>165</sup> English in original.

<sup>166</sup> An affectionate French nickname for Charlie Chaplin.

<sup>167</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: this text was eventually published in *Internationale lettriste*, issue #1, November 1952

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*.

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

## The Conference at Aubervilliers

After the publication, at the end of November [1952], of the first issue of *Internationale lettriste*, in which the documents concerning the break with Isou were collected, the Lettrist International held its first and only conference on 7 December 1952, in Aubervilliers (Seine-Saint-Denis), where Jean-Louis Brau lived (40, rue des Noyers). The group adopted the following resolutions:<sup>168</sup>

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

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<sup>168</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: this document was torn up and stuffed into a bottle, which was thrown into the Saint-Denis canal. The next day, Jean-Louis Brau fished it out.

## *Internationale lettriste No. 2*

### “Manifesto”<sup>169</sup>

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,<sup>170</sup> 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 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.

Sarah Abouaf, Serge Berna, P.J. Berl , Jean-L. Brau, (Ren ) Leib , Midhou Dahou, Guy-Ernest Debord, Linda (Fryde), Fran oise Lejare, Jean-Michel Mension,  liane P pa , Gil J Wolman

### “Fragments of Research into New Forms of Behavior”<sup>171</sup>

The new generation will leave nothing to chance. – Gil J Wolman  
In any case, we won't get out of this alive. – Jean-Michel Mension  
The Lettrist International wants the death, slightly delayed, of the arts. – Serge Berna  
Deliberately beyond the limited interplay of forms, the new beauty will be that OF THE SITUATION. – Guy-Ernest Debord

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<sup>169</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Ran on: published in *Internationale lettriste* No. 2, recto, February 1953.

<sup>170</sup> *systematique* can also mean automatic.

<sup>171</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Ran on: published in *Internationale lettriste* No. 2, verso, February 1953.

## Manuscripts by Antonin Artaud, Found and Prefaced by Serge Berna

Released from prison on 12 May 1953, Serge Berna had only one idea in mind: to publish the manuscripts by Antonin Artaud that sometime before being incarcerated he'd found in an attic [in a house] on rue Visconti, which he succeeded in doing in less than a month.

Proclaiming "Manuscript found and prefaced by Serge Berna" at the top of the front cover, this 128-page-long volume, completed by the printer on 10 June 1953, was published by Éditions Arcanes, "Seers" collection, directed by Éric Losfeld.<sup>172</sup> It contained a preface, which we reprint below, and texts by Antonin Artaud: *Vie et mort de Satan le Feu*; writings from Mexico: *Le Mexique et la civilization*, *Nulle théogonie*, *Le Pays des rois mages*, and *Une race-principe: Notes, reflections, materials and fragments*. The book also featured reproductions of the original handwritten manuscripts of *Vie et morte de Satan le Feu* and *Pays des rois mages*.

### Preface

*It is the result of an extraordinary coincidence that these texts by Antonin Artaud were saved from destruction.*

It was last year. One morning I was accompanying a friend whose excellent profession was to scour cellars and attics for things that the tenants think are superfluous; we were on our way to rue Visconti.

A rag-and-bone man, you know, a dubious taxpayer but a solid drinker who in his life had known many more empty glasses than signs of respect from his fellow citizens.

But not penniless. He even had an old, thoroughly mended pickup truck with a very young driver in it who never said a word. He had parked his motorbike [on this particular day], two wheels on the sidewalk, in a recess of rue Visconti, which was quite narrow. The bike's caisson, the back side of which I could see, was leaning to one side: a wooden ass with chewed muscles, emasculated, by so many years of improper transportation, dazed by loose piles of paperwork, empty bottles of Vermots,<sup>173</sup> illustrated New Year's magazines, posters whose characters emerged from the optimism that typified the 1920s and that were damaged by being bounced up and down, a vamp's head with graphite eyes fluttered along one of these posters. I approached this museum and my eyes got lost in the Fayard-gray books, the sheets with typewritten balance sheets, typewritten additions, handwritten additions, beautiful balance sheets with neatly arranged figures, balance sheets in order but damaged from the rain of life on rue Visconti, faded papers covered with blue and black and red writing, rounded or nervous, everything arthritic, as if infiltrated by a thin gray mist.

Characters, figures – nothing very much in the end. I looked elsewhere.

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<sup>172</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: "Finally, during the production of a singular book I also met a strange young man who frequented the lettrist group, but who, it seemed to me, was more concerned with his own personal revolt than other aesthetic considerations: Serge Berna. In the trashcan [sic] of a building in which Antonin Artaud lived, he had found the manuscript of *Vie et mort de Satan le Feu*, which the poet had probably gotten rid of in a moment of depression. Berna wrote a vibrant, simmering preface – there was a singular fraternity between the two of them – and I published the book, which exhausted its press run in three months." Éric Losfeld, *Endetté comme une mule, ou La Passion d'éditer* (Paris: Belfond, 1979).

<sup>173</sup> A white wine.

The motor set into motion its worn-out connecting rods, and the old, low-slung lemon-galley sailed off, clumsily moving the train like a former boxer, deformed by the onerous occupation of porter, who moves away on the wharf with his shapeless load on his back. The baggage of an old family that came from the depths of the century[,] from the depths of Tarn.

“You will see,” the rag picker told me with a certain pride, “she will make me 10 years old again.” And he ran down a long alley on the left, pulling me by the sleeve. A real maze. I heard him say: “I’m going for a drink. If you want, you can go up there. Climb the stairs, turn left, then right, and you will see an open door: that’s where it is.”

The attic was to be cleaned out. I went vaguely to the left, then vaguely to the right, and in fact there was a partly opened door that led to a dark room with vaguely defined boundaries and beams that were lost in the confusion of a windowless attic. I entered. I turned around and bumped into a pile of unstable things, which sluggishly tumbled down with nighttime slowness. I got down to look at several pages that had fallen at my feet. They were arranged in a rosette-like shape that was astonishingly regular given the disorder of old age and death<sup>174</sup> that surrounded around it. Amidst the stale smell of rotting paper things, not torn, just water-damaged and covered with dust, those four or five pages had fallen into a neat ring. Those sheets had fallen just a bit further away than the overturned pile and had formed a white-gray circle whose center was dark and notched by the angles of the sheets.

Those pages were crammed with a broken-up writing, feverish from top to bottom, the characters of which overlapped, intertwined and developed in a whirling tangle.

Only one page was written with the diligence, the desire to be understood, which led me to pick it up first and read it. The title jumped out at me, the capital letters formed with a child’s meticulousness: THE COUNTRY OF THE WISE MEN.

“Wait a minute: those people had a country?”

I scanned the first sentence: “Where had I already heard that it wasn’t in Italy but in Mexico that pre-Renaissance painters had started using blue in their landscapes and the immense distances of the backgrounds with which their decorated their Nativity scenes?”

I was hooked. I couldn’t see well in that windowless gloom. I lit a match, then another.

With growing passion I read the long admirable sentences. At the bottom of the page, the text continued on another one. I picked up a second page. Immediately my eyes fell upon the bottom of it, drawn there by a signature. I made out Ant. . . and then said out loud: ANTONIN ARTAUD.

I picked up all of the fallen pages. All with the same writing. And the same signature. These were obviously manuscripts. There were five of those sheets. And so there were others. There had to be others, for sure.

Very quickly, I went through everything. I moved around, accidentally knocked things over, lit matches, lit a paper torch, moved a lot of stuff around, disturbed the rows of books, went from one jumble of papers to another, picked them up, hastily gathered them up and examined them. I slipped under a chest of drawers, dove into piles of soft things, struggled against the darkness, transformed myself into a truffle-hunting dog, putting the pages up to my nose or my nose down onto them. I piled up everything that could be found, near or far.

I was completely absorbed in this task when the image of the rag picker’s truck – starting up and then turning with difficulty at the end of rue Visconti and heading up rue Bonaparte – suddenly crossed my mind.

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<sup>174</sup> Antonin Artaud died on 4 March 1948, at the age of 52.

That old boat on the street, in the rain. Loaded with Artaud. Full of posters weighing down on Artaud, gray books in which the seals were nothing other, could not be anything other, than fragments by Artaud, written in his own hand on the back of insurance account statements.

I ran downstairs. I knew that a train would soon be coming into the gare de Lyon, if it were not there already. There was a device into which the rag pickers put the junk they had collected over the course of the day. If I could find my friend immediately, he could tell me: I could telephone him over there. But I didn't know his address. I tried all the local bistros and all the bars in all directions. No rag picker.

[At one place] there were two enormous tits in poplin above the cash register, a hairdresser's assistant, but no rag picker.

And that cart of his, which – God willing – won't fall to pieces again today at a bend in the road and throw to the asphalt a thick wad of gray paper that would burst open when it hit the ground, sending sheets everywhere, even as far as the doors of houses and the quays of the Seine.

When the rag picker returned, it was afternoon. He found me up there in the attic, still in the process of rummaging around in its smallest recesses. I told him what I'd found. "Artaud?" he said; "good, good."

The pickup truck had already discharged its contents in an immense whicker basket, and this whicker basket was half open at the bottom, and all of the cargo inside was in danger of falling out.

The following is what, sadly, has resulted from our efforts.

Nevertheless, what had been left up there will prove to be important.

The majority of the discovered texts are manuscripts, some of them typed up. In all, there's 43 pages (in commercial format) that can be divided into three parts after they've been sorted out. First of all, a group of pages that Artaud must have written while he was in Mexico in 1936. He gave lectures at the University of Mexico ("Surréalisme et Révolution," "L'Homme contre le Destin," "Le Théâtre et les Dieux," etc.). And so the text *Le Mexique et la civilisation*, which is one of the most important things in this treasure-trove, must be linked to one of those lectures – if not the definitive version of it, then at least an already developed one.

Of two other texts of comparable importance, only three typewritten pages of *Nulle théogonie* survived storage in that attic. And two pages (pages 7 and 8) of a letter. Other notes and texts are related to the articles that Artaud gave to *El Nacional*, a daily Mexican newspaper.

Finally, we were not unaware that, during his incursion into the heart of Mexico, Artaud wrote four texts, two of which are famous and have already been published: *La Montagne pleine de signes* and *La Danse du peyotl*. In that attic, I found the manuscript version of the former.

Concerning two other texts, *Le Pays des rois mages* and *Une race-principe*, only their titles and provenance were known. It was precisely the flyleaf of *Le Pays des rois mages* that I had first touched. Fortunately, I was able to locate all of its pages. The other text, *Une race-principe*, was also found up there, annotated by Artaud and typed up. The package, duly pinned, was lying under a kind of sideboard.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Footnote by Serge Berna: Armed with these texts, I ventured into Paris, happy with my discovery and expecting a favorable response, at the very least. But no. I was [inadvertently] threatening to topple over a complex of solidly installed interests that had its feet planted in money and its mouth behind various forms of religious, moral and literary expression. For almost 10 years now, family members, publishers and owners of manuscripts have exchanged threats, lawsuits and aggressive silences, which have sheltered, often under the most selfless formulations, a deeply embedded greed. The publishing houses are interested, but the family is opposed due to a religious and moral façade that is ready to collapse if you ever-so-slightly increase the percentages: a Pater Noster,

Then there were about 20 pages of reader's notes concerning Artaud's preoccupations at the time – astrology, alchemy, Eastern philosophy, pre-Platonic philosophy, Alexandrian philosophy, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, etc. – as well as reflections written on the run, in the midst of a conversation, not fully developed, but stamped with truth like a newspaper article, only better, because they were not oriented around a potential reader, overlapping other texts, written in the margins. Often a few words, an image, perhaps materials to be inserted into an ensemble. First drafts of letters,<sup>176</sup> as well, lists of names, etc.

In this intertwining of intellectual and essential preoccupations, the idea of traveling to Mexico was a consistent theme, around which he placed local addresses and things to do.

These “practical” notes were streaked over whole pages, parts of pages, abbreviated phrases that reveal what obsessed Artaud at these moments of his life. Certain words kept coming up: Magic, Myth, the Gods, Culture, Fire, Being, the Void.

These obsessions seemed to be centered around the death of the myth of the West, which left life collapsed upon itself and perhaps necessitated *another myth* for it to be revived. Perhaps we could seek it out in Mexico, at the summits of the scorching-hot mountains of a civilization that was brutally crushed by Spanish weapons, then poorly covered up by an army of Jesuits whose thirst for power had, when faced with the mute and contemptuous men of that land, diminished to the point of partially giving up evangelization and being content with dressing the ethnic background in rags.

All of these texts carried the same knowledge: the one that comes from experiencing the disintegration of European culture. “A civilization in which only the people who are called cultivated and who possess culture can participate, which a supposedly cautious idea, but one that anyone, on the other hand, can knock over if they are initiated into [the world of] books, is a civilization that has broken with its primitive sources of inspiration,” and, consequently, “there where material progress, where the conquest of a completely external perfection, in which neither our hearts nor our human bodies have managed to participate, there where everything is based upon and refined by amenities, on the *outside of all internal progress*, we can say that the true culture has ceased to develop” (*Le Mexique et la civilisation*).

Western man, divided, dispersed in a dualism that separates him in an endless process of division, that pulverizes him in the proliferation of opposites, the official sign of which is the split between the body and the soul – such a person needs a *fascinating* culture, of which the center and the parts would be transformed by a force whose figures would reproduce themselves at all levels and at every instant. Thus the inverse of a “civilization in which there is the body on one side and the spirit on the other (and which) soon risks seeing the links that unite these two

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10 percent; two Pater Nosters, 15 percent. I thought that I'd be able to manage everything by myself; I'd opened a subscription, because I had a strong desire to take a poke at the oh-so-pious world. But at the moment this was getting started, I had an accident that made me stay in my room for six months, so to speak, without going out. Then I found a publisher who was bold enough to publish it.

But previously, having brought these often illegible texts to a certain Paule Thévenin, who was well accustomed to Antonin Artaud's writings, she carefully copied them and, through the intermediary of a partner in crime who has vaguely connected with the publishing world (Barbezat), shamelessly published in a literary journal a portion of the texts that were under her indirect patronage. Without any suspicions about her or her motives, I'd left these texts with her and she quite simply *seized* them, thus committing a gross breach of trust. But my indignation was tranquilly met with the claim that those were the current morals of the “milieu,” that is to say, of Literature.

<sup>176</sup> Note by Serge Berna: Certain letters and dates placed on the corners of pages allow us to situate them quite exactly: between 1933 and 1935. For example, “Vous devez enfin prendre conscience,” 21 September 1933; “Jeudi soir avec André Derain,” 19 December 1935; etc. On the other hand, the texts from Mexico were written in 1936. With respect to the fragment *Vie et mort de Satan le Feu*, I have been unable to date it exactly (1934? 1935?).



dissimilar realities become unfastened” (*Le Mexique et la civilisation*). As opposed to a *hierarchy* that religion has imposed on mankind, whose two natures – God-man, Soul-body, Kingdom-world – are in perpetual conflict, indeed, always falsified in favor of those capitalized letters and in accordance with systematically self-interested reasons. “Stripping away the old divine spirit that desperately seeks to place itself *above things* in order to explain their formation, we must get to the roots of things and, before their bodies, their physical lives, are formed, feel the mysterious vibration of the numbers, whose secret rhythms explain the birth of reality.” In sum, to find the connection of the whole being to itself and to the laws of things, to live the law of the universe with all of one’s nerves and *to know* that unique law.

For Artaud, the means must be “magic.” That is to say, through a fervent intuition about or alongside things, “continuous communication from the inside to the outside, from the act to the thought, from the thing to the word, from matter to the spirit . . . a lethal<sup>177</sup> form of inspiration,” from which all veritable cultures are organized and that can be obtained again through a revolution of the spirit in favor of the ANALOGUE that has already illuminated the dawn of the Renaissance; through the symbols and works of the Hermetics; in the covered images of the poets and in the landscapes of the painters. To rediscover the urges of childhood that have shriveled up in the dryness of the analytical spirit, whose mechanical processes have ended up locking up the individual in a paltry specialization at the heart of which active respiration is reduced to the last few breaths.<sup>178</sup>

At this moment of Artaud’s life, the problems that he encountered were all marked by the same stamp: how to leave behind a “civilization” in which the magnetic connection between the two poles – religious faith and the spirit of disassociating analysis – has been broken? Due to this fact, the slightest European gesture is struck by madness, by *non-sense*. Logic gets bitten deep down and allows that there’s “relativity.” Faith increasingly abandons Thomist demonstrations and returns to the “absurd,” but along the way it loses the attractiveness that only has its driving force in a psychic structure that was strictly articulated in the French 17<sup>th</sup> century.

The demolition of this structure has been underway for some time; in it Nietzsche occupies a quite important place as a destructive force. The surrealists had the advantage of arriving at a spot in the destructive line where they were able to *group themselves together* so as to continue the undermining; they divided up the task and delegated to several people the responsibility for such an enterprise, which was still dangerous in 1920, but was quite quickly integrated into a “bourgeois” mindset (the publisher-bookstore-critic-buyer mechanism was transformed into a good rubber-cushioned machine that suppressed the violence at the right moments).

The Dadaists, quite consistent with themselves, continuously attacked everything they encountered with the enthusiasm of young pyromaniacs. The surrealists, for their part, were, on the whole, content with taking action and unleashing tons of dreams into the void that was thereby created. Their intention was, of course, to *refuse* the dominant reality, but also to replace it with something else: its reflection, which is always that reality seen upside-down.

Artaud had the fortitude or the imprudence to go much further: to explode the word itself. And under the surface of this poetic approach, there was a terrifying effort that led to such a liberation of his energies that the world in which he was immersed – always slow compared to

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<sup>177</sup> *foudroyante* can also mean “violent” and “sudden.”

<sup>178</sup> Note by Serge Berna: contemporary science is, perhaps, in the process of breaking the corset that is necessary for its growth. It tends to synthesize, not without problems and by relegating the spirit of “technical specialization,” the pride and joy of the Péladans of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the modest rank of a thing ready to be discovered.

the innovators – could come up with no other response than to ostracize him. To drive him crazy, because it lacked the *forms* that were necessary for him.

Thus, Artaud's quest for another myth within which Mankind would rise up against inevitability, "instead of submitting to it, will rebel against it and create [something new] as a function of this revolt," leads him toward the regrettable obligation to leave behind the god whom he had on hand and had to dismiss due to incompetence.

As for "God," which is the name given to a system of life and the knowledge of life, "He" has collapsed into a simulacrum incapable of fulfilling the function that has been attributed to "Him": to circulate in bodies (and not only in minds) the setting off from a center, which penetrates into thought as much as into action.

In the West, the current has not been flowing for some time, and yet the ecclesiastic machinery continues to revolve, a golden carousel that lacks neither organ nor barker.<sup>179</sup>

Due to this awareness of the fragility of myth, he held on to laughter, which was the only means of recovering for his own benefit and expressing the enormous agitation that causes the collapse of a system that until then had channeled this energy into a very well-structured web.

It never completely really left Artaud, that [capacity for] laughter, which descends in thin rivulets in the splendid hieratic quality of his sentences, which flows with a rapid suppleness in the stiffness of his cries.

"When the gods become effigies, it is because their symbolism was transitory and illusory."

It is the shards of this broken myth that put a jolt into Artaud's gait, in which laughter and trance are so intermixed that it is often impossible to separate one from the other.

This way of moving from the darkest anguish to the most volatile laughter and the traces produced by his poetry root Artaud in an easily locatable place in our own lives.

With "God" collapsed, man goes through a period of disequilibrium, deformed as he is by his old psychological foundations, and he's forced into an oppressive alternative: to become a God himself, pushing all extinguished laughter towards *self-divination*, or to be nothing more than a single laugh stretched out over a entire life.

To become "God" means nothing other than refusing the "natural" laws, because we know how far they are from being inevitable, and hardening one's own human head in order to smash through the ceiling, to make a hole in the bars of established things, and to seek beyond, on the other side.

"Faced with this idea of a pre-established universe  
man has never managed to establish  
his superiority over the empires of possibility."  
(*Le Théâtre de cruauté.*)

And above all the body, the body of each person, whose infirmity at the beginning and at the end appear normal. We die. Good. Everyone dies, there are no examples of guys who are not dead, and so we die and it is good. Serenity, a few pages from Montaigne<sup>180</sup> and the land of rest.

NO, NO.

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<sup>179</sup> Here Berna is quoting from his text "Concerning Notre-Dame," written in April 1950 (see above).

<sup>180</sup> Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592) was one of the most significant philosophers of the French Renaissance. See in particular his essay "*Que philosopher c'est apprendre à mourir*" [How philosophy is learning to die] (1572).

And Artaud says “No” to the law that results from the famous imbecility of the two-legged animal that lets itself die. Thus the question will be how not to die. For the moment, there is a man screaming his desire. Thus, I say again: *thus*, there is a way not to die.

The problems that are posed, whatever the manner in which they are posed, *must* be resolved sooner or later.

And some people, the refined sophisticates of library shelves say that Artaud, after all, well, you know Artaud . . .

After all *what?* Men of good taste, assholes coated with Turkish Delight, old “acquaintances” of Artaud who say that he died at the café du Dôme one day due to bad nerves, men of letters who crank out greenish lollypops for daydreaming young girls. You know, tranquil imbeciles who are happy to be in and around shit. Men of France, easy living, the juice of the climbing vine: it is of course better to avoid these environs, you might catch a few violent kicks in the balls.

But this guy was crazy! See for yourself, my dear: he was a poet but also a madman.

Yes, he was a lunatic. A lunatic. A LUNATIC.

#### *A LUNATIC*

Understood. And now it is time for all the voyeurs to go jerk off.

The new body, but new in a way that is impossible to conceive, because, if we try to do so, we will once again fall into the ignoble Being of existing things; this incredible body that he wants and that he doesn't have; this body about which he tries to speak, at the very least, fighting against the stalactite words of ancient shit, to say it again starting from the disorder in the depths of himself, which was like a man's hand slowly opening and white at the center of a swarm of serpents and rats; at the center of his struggle against the asp vipers that, in the heads of men, slide from one lobe to another towards Artaud's stomach, I see the light of what we could, in a banal fashion, call eternity.

The old woman on one occasion vomited carefully.

This man lived questions to such an extent . . . Questions about which the least we can say is that they are hardly resolved. The same questions that assail us today with undiminished violence.

And I, who must write a preface.

And so, either hold the handrail, let go of the handrail or invent . . .

Whatever the more or less clever frameworks in which we could try to catch<sup>181</sup> Artaud, he will always break out of those small, more or less intelligent webs and a hard, transparent core will fall out, at the center of which there is a voice that we aren't likely to forget.

And who can't see the ridiculousness of attempts at *appropriation* such as the ones that, today, result in sizeable fortunes?

“This situation in which A. finds himself, the determining factors of which we have seen, nonetheless is both experienced and directed by the poet himself and is a situation of acceptance as well as its opposite.” Philosophical enemas too intelligent to be honest. In any case, Artaud expressed a fundamental thing, linked to the very grain of consciousness: the merciless conflict that inhabits and constructs it; the confrontation between the fall into Being and the tearing away from oneself. This struggle between two opposed principles has, by turns, entered into the

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<sup>181</sup> *griller* can also mean “discredit” or “grill.”

antagonisms of the Male and Female principles, of God and Momo;<sup>182</sup> it is also entirely mobilized in the frenzied coupling of Being and Nothingness.<sup>183</sup>

Nevertheless, the step-by-step removal of all the accepted forms was accomplished slowly, before it reached a strange kind of equilibrium that resulted from the ever-increasing speed of the whirlwind of these two opposed states – possession by Being and split in two beyond Being.

In Mexico, Artaud counted on finding something, perhaps of a collective nature, to give a concrete shape to the dream of unity that he set against a reality made up of fragments and pieces.

“It is important to recognize what remains of ancient magic and ancient divination in modern rituals” (*Le Mexique et la civilization*) and to draw from them the foundations of a viable culture. Artaud thus once again found himself in his “integrated” period, in which he used terminology that at least implied an intellectual adherence to certain communal approaches, in particular, the possible reflection of the existing world, which some said could be effectuated by political means, while others said it would be impossible or undesirable by those means alone.

Artaud thought about places in the world, like Mexico, in which one could seek out certain lost secrets that [once found] could be transplanted, because, over there, flush with the ground, “the gods are getting ready to be reborn into an even more rapacious and concentrated life” (*Ibid*). In that soil, at the heart of things, one can find the fiery embers of a “devastated culture, I mean the Maya-Toltec culture” (*Ibid*).

We don’t exactly know what happened when Artaud pressed his ear upon this land of violence in order to hear its rumbling.

In any case, he came back shaken, having written magnificent texts: breathless. He said he’d been captivated over there by men with dark powers and that the two stab wounds he’d received on the boat resulted from that enchantment.

Judging from what he wrote and did afterwards, we must say that it was after his return from Mexico that *Artaud sped up the movement toward a place in himself that had previously frightened him*. Later on, in *Les Nouvelles Révélation de l’être* [1937], he wrote: “For a long time I have felt the Void. I have been cowardly like everyone I see because I know that the world doesn’t exist and I know HOW it doesn’t exist. What I have suffered from until now has been refusing the Void.”

And so, in the fragment *Vie et mort de Satan le Feu*,<sup>184</sup> he attacks “the anthropomorphic idea of Being (from the point of view of)<sup>185</sup> the resolution of antinomies, doubts, troubles, and problems by the disappearance of the notion of Being in which Satan appears elsewhere.” Here Satan is an “immense image” that indicates the *look* of the event that causes the disappearance of Being, whose true place in the scheme of things is finally restored to its real value, which is inessential in relation to Nothingness “because I draw something from nothing and not nothing from something” (*Ibid*).

After that, Artaud’s efforts were stubbornly coiled around the need that he had to go beyond the fixation with Being and all the ideas that derive from it. Which, even after the passage of twenty years, were still rooted in him, although, like old molars, they were looser now

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<sup>182</sup> *Momo* is a slang expression for an idiotic clown. See Artaud’s poem, *Artaud le Momo* (1947).

<sup>183</sup> An allusion to Jean-Paul Sartre, *L’Être et le néant* (1943).

<sup>184</sup> See *The Death of Satan and Other Mystical Writings*, trans. Alastair Hamilton and Victor Corti (London: Calder & Boyars, 1974).

<sup>185</sup> I do not know if this interpolation was made by Serge Berna or by Jean-Louis Rançon.

and, fortunately, decayed. According to Artaud, the idea of Being had been inculcated in him from the outside, and it was precisely in his obsession to leave that idea behind that his excitability and his prodigious *activity* were to be buried.

*It was as if the idea of being stopped cold – at the level of each cell, of each fiber – [meant that] a certain surge* that was necessary for them to continue to live. There were obstructive forces,<sup>186</sup> put into action a long time ago, which Artaud tried to convey through the concept of “magic.”

Torn between the old form of Being (a Saint-Jacques shell-concept from which the saint set sail) and that which we incorrectly call the “Nothingness” (which is only such in relation to the old form of Being), Artaud spent his time suffering, *devoured by a hardly mythical cancer*,<sup>187</sup> tied to a body from which he had to chase away unbearable pain, until it completely fell apart.

From whence comes this kind of jubilation that erupts at the end of life? A jubilation that we encounter deep down in his last texts: a movement that is quick and precise like the geometric patterns in ice flowers.

That is the sign, I believe, of profound health, acquired at a cost, moving slowly under the active, lively crabs of the death of Artaud.

He had a very clear<sup>188</sup> death. One day he decided to stop his struggle against the immense pressure pushing him towards death, put in danger by a man who tried to make the others understand that life and death depend upon each other only and not upon a “judgment of the unborn soul that is provoked by the first fishy odors of I-don’t-know-what Achaean or Mongol-Tibetan mythology.”

But perhaps our transition between the development of the concrete instruments<sup>189</sup> that will abolish death and the magical restriction that shuts out the brutal awareness of our current fate is unbearable. From a certain point of view, perhaps it is necessary to put to death or mentally disembowel useless heroes like Artaud, with whom the simple conservation of the species has, at the moment, nothing to do.

Artaud: especially not the Antichrist, “demonic” or any other theological nonsense.

On his path, which was marked by recoils and formidable regressions, he also encountered the “exit from the top,” the levitations with which the current elevators transport Camus,<sup>190</sup> Bataille<sup>191</sup> and others.

Like anyone who is thrown into a panic by pain, he managed to enhance<sup>192</sup> it. Pushed by billions of hands towards the brothels of the gods, the bordellos of souls, Chinese “houses,” Mexican “houses” with dubious Tarahumaras,<sup>193</sup> Hindu-Balinese boudoirs, X-rated movie

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<sup>186</sup> Note by Serge Berna: “The dualism of the soul and the body seems to have long been the result of philosophical operations that have social meanings and very precise politics . . .” (Pierre Mabile, *Initiation à la connaissance de l’homme*, 1949).

<sup>187</sup> Rectal cancer, from which he died.

<sup>188</sup> *claire* can also mean “bright” or “obvious.”

<sup>189</sup> Note by Serge Berna: If these things seem crazy to you, see the book by Edgar Morin, *L’Homme et la mort* (1951), in which this old question is considered with complete objectivity, from the historical, biological, anthropological, etc. angles, and endowed with a completely new meaning. According to a certain possibility . . .

<sup>190</sup> See Berna’s essay on Albert Camus, “How?” above.

<sup>191</sup> Georges Bataille (1897-1962) was a French librarian, author, poet, novelist and philosopher.

<sup>192</sup> *sublimier* can also mean “exalt” and “make sublime.”

<sup>193</sup> Indigenous people in Mexico among whom Artaud lived in 1936. He wrote about his experiences there in *Au pays des Tarahumaras* (Paris: éditions Fontaine, 1945).

theaters in the vicinity of the Piazza San Pietro, the assistant hunters<sup>194</sup> of which were none other than his own mother and sister.

Struggles, weariness, defeats, returns to his mother, recoveries, relapses.

What a life!

In this Catholic manner of approaching a corpse, of searching his pockets for a rosary bead that, by the way, never did anything but fall off the sleeve of the pious prospector into the hollow of the corpse's hand.

Artaud, like so many others, was plagued by Catholic fellatio. In fact, as soon as someone focuses attention on him in a certain area, the diastatic<sup>195</sup> organs of the Church are deployed against the subject in question. Already a few Fathers whose mission is literary criticism have managed to "recuperate" Artaud here and there. Will they always argue, equivocate or drool messily over this or that thing that he wrote? They will pick one of them up, turn it around, smell it, and pass it around as incense in order to reach unctuous conclusions. But we see that the remark in question is an adoration that is ignored, a sweet prayer under a rough exterior that our skillful fingers know how to open up.

The phrase that I propose for their shifty maneuvers is this: "If God exists, God is shit."<sup>196</sup> Which they examine carefully, which they turn around, which they hold up to their noses.

Deceivers, nervous about their own lies, which they want to inflict on everyone, with a red-hot poker, if necessary. The lying torsion of Being: turn your head upside-down in order to make the blood flow, then claim that it was the Good Lord who sent the blood to your head.

Pascal the crazy pendulum,<sup>197</sup> Kierkegaard the decapitated trout,<sup>198</sup> unscrew themselves in order to escape pure and simple death and their torpid remedies.

The "artists" are also threatened by A[rtaud]. They resemble priests in that they draw their subsistence and their glory from their *knack* for producing terror (see Malraux and the black crematory smoke that comes out of his nostrils along with great blasts of d'Annunzio).<sup>199</sup> Fertile ground for delirium, in which both the gourds of the Grand-Guignol and Shakespearean mandrakes are able to grow, both of which – indistinguishable at this level – pertain to *Anthony*,<sup>200</sup> *make me afraid of destiny*.

If we examine with a certain objectivity the big stupid bitch that is Death, we can see a certain possibility in it: one day it might well jump out of the body the way one, after careful selection, carefully expels a gob of morning mucus, which, in the night's dreams, was in our lungs no less than God was. It would only be necessary to cough up a good shot. At the same time Death and Art, a dreamy chain fattened on the pine nuts of failure.

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<sup>194</sup> The *rabatteur* drives the prey from its hiding place, so that the hunter may capture or kill it.

<sup>195</sup> Diastase converts starch into sugar.

<sup>196</sup> See Artaud, *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu* (1947): "Dieu est-il un être? S'il en est un, c'est de la merde" [Is God a being? If he is one, he is shit"].

<sup>197</sup> Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) was a French Catholic mathematician, philosopher and author. He wrote about death in *Pensées* (1670): "Being unable to cure death, wretchedness or ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things."

<sup>198</sup> Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) was a Danish philosopher. He wrote about death extensively in *Sygdommen til Døden* (The Sickness unto Death) (1849).

<sup>199</sup> André Malraux (1901-1976) was a French writer, anti-fascist, politician and adventurer, famous for *La Condition humaine*. Gabrielle d'Annunzio (1863-1938) was an Italian writer and ex-fascist, famous for *Il piacere* and *Le vergini delle rocce*. The latter was a big influence on the former.

<sup>200</sup> Apparently a reference to St. Anthony.

And it is possible that our generation spits death.<sup>201</sup>

And, for us, Artaud is a sarcastic cadaver, laughter without a carcass, even purer due to its being expelled out of the body of an old man dying from cancer; the astonishingly joyous laughter of someone who succeeded in finding within himself an intact source, out of the reach of the bombardments of shit, despite or because of the physical suffering that pushed that source to his center, the most central point of that icy rose window.

If we attack the shapeless bastion of shit-mist that is Christian hallucination from the *outside*, the people suffering from that hallucination won't care.

But, if a man – Artaud – manages to reach back to the very origins of the collective psychic mechanism, if he finds within himself the secret spur that allows him to move with lucidity through prohibited regions, and if he reveals their stupid and misleading flatness, well then, the danger is indeed great.

Then the psychiatrists become agitated. Then character disorders are systematically inflamed.

Character! Such bullshit. I know people who have disordered characters, who are truly imbalanced *backwards*, who have remained at fixed moments in the past, and, for them, time has stopped turning.

But in Artaud's head, the clock of the world advances at the same speed as the precise revolutions of the stars.

I remember seeing Artaud in a dream: he was spinning powerfully, a propeller in the stupid rain around people's heads. Making gaping holes in it. But they were always repairing, reweaving, their patient prayer rugs, imprisoning Artaud's face in the weft of obsession.

The lower part of this body is planted in the very texture of a world over-stretched by the cruel and gentle evolution of the world, and his rocky carcass crushes itself, each kneecap broken several times. They try to keep his head attached to his body with a thousand cords, each one of which is so thin that it looks like a mere suggestion.

## BEING IS SHIT

Also the word, which was marinated a long time in Being before passing through the mouth. Hence the *immediate* communication of Artaud's voice through cries and wheezing, of the voice delivered directly from its sources, before pollution by the conceptual ritual, which is the most powerful of the various means of exerting pressure, placed at the disposition of Being so as to crush Man.

Words, all of them filled up with smoke by Being, all of them *fucked in the ass* by Being, by the rotten scraps of Being, which enter you through the *fionnard* and come out of your mouth.

The surrealists, who knew well how far one must go to go too far, kept the word *full*. Rounded and full of shit. A sneaky egg that always re-germinates its connections to the whole logic and that must start to divide at any moment. Artaud experienced the muffled resistance of words to the attacks made by the surrealists, who only disassociated the *ligatures between* words and, at a low cost, rejoiced in the speed at which the images took the corner of a line of verse . . .

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<sup>201</sup> Note that there are two references in the main text to the same footnote by Serge Berna, which I repeat here: If these things seem crazy to you, see the book by Edgar Morin, *L'Homme et la mort* (1951), in which this old question is considered with complete objectivity, from the historical, biological, anthropological, etc. angles, and endowed with a completely new meaning. According to a certain possibility . . .

While all the others did the traditional round dance around the word, around Being, Artaud found the courage necessary to take

#### THE PLUNGE INTO THE VOID.

Artaud, a split man, was, in the fullest sense of the term, the EPITOME [*le TYPE*] of this period, which was successively agitated, then calm, and finally rose to the level of tornado-like violence. The epitome because he, in his flesh and in his nerves, sped up the “questions” that have become widespread in our era; because he posed them, not at the level of philosophical-verbal abundance, or in a hail of manifestoes, but because he *sweated* these questions into a few words that were, in themselves, determined to saw through the steering bar that might be called “God” or “Reality” – those shabby flowers of a state of mind that is in decline – in words upon which he wanted to confer an autonomous power, unmoored from the rotten continent, perhaps floating in the distance and forming other continents.

But [these were] still words, affected as they are by Being, threatening betrayal, vehicles of collective collapse, pickup trucks for old account statements. Artaud watched for them on street corners in order to divert them in favor of a burning world in which words would be changed in their very substance, reemerging in things loaded with new meanings, personal to such an extent that they lose all personality and are transformed into an abstraction of living fire.

For a long time, Artaud called “death” this whirlpool of Nothingness that appears across and through the bones of Being. “That rising of sewer bugs on the dead tree that I will never cease to be” (*L’Art et la Mort*). Then:

At a moment that is difficult to identify, he rushes outside of Being and looks at it with the eyes of a stranger, of a living suicide.

He looks at himself with the eyes of a stranger:

WE DON’T DIE BECAUSE WE MUST DIE  
WE DIE BECAUSE IT IS A FOLD<sup>202</sup> IN WHICH WE CONSTRAINED  
CONSCIOUSNESS  
ONE DAY  
NOT SO LONG AGO.

From now on, we are charred men. And Artaud struggled against the powers of the overwhelming past within each one of us[,] this old man convulsed by the necessity of withstanding the assaults by what still hasn’t been named.

He indicated to us the impossibility of accepting ourselves as we are, and his revolt, degree by degree, whirled around the very structures of life.

The fight was especially difficult for Artaud, more like a nightmare, because every word, every attempt to empty himself of the Being that *burst within him*, seemed to return against him and work in favor of Being.

And if we have less pain in our beings, this is because Artaud already did a good part of the scratching.

Traits<sup>203</sup> of acid have been precipitated by his obstinacy to create the void, and the marks and symbols he left on his pages are still swollen, damp with memory.

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<sup>202</sup> *pli* can also mean a “trick” or “layer.”

<sup>203</sup> *traits* can be translated as lines, strokes, traits, features, drops, mouthfuls, witticisms, and terms.



[Responses to the publication of the Artaud book]

“Suspected of deviation toward literature,” Serge Berna was excluded from the Lettrist International for “attachment to an outdated conduct” and “lack of intellectual rigor.”

RESPONSE OF THE LETTRIST INTERNATIONAL  
to the enquiry in issue #5 (September 1953) of the journal  
*La Carte d'après nature*, directed by René Magritte (Brussels),  
published in the special issue of January 1954.

“What does the word poetry mean to you?”

Poetry has exhausted its last formal prestige. Beyond aesthetics, it is ever-present in the power men have over their adventures. Poetry can be read on their faces. It is thus urgent to create new faces. Poetry is in the form of towns. Thus we will construct upheavals. The new beauty will be OF THE SITUATION, that is to say, *provisional* and actually experienced.

The latest aesthetic variations only interest us for the *influential* power that we can put into or discover within them. For us, poetry signifies nothing other than the elaboration of entirely new forms of behavior\* and the means of impassioning them.

\*Attachment to an outdated conduct is necessarily police-related. Therefore we have excluded Berna and Brau.

The Lettrist International  
(Mohamed Dahou, Henry de Béarn, Guy-Ernest Debord, Gilles Ivain, Gaëtan M. Langlais, Gil J Wolman)

Announcement by the Lettrist International, 10 March 1954<sup>204</sup>

Naturally, we have pursued, inside the Organization, the elimination of the “Old Guard”: after Isou, who’d become the author of light comedies [*vaudevilles*], and Berna, who’d made himself Artaud’s exegete, we have successively excluded, for their doctrinal deviations or their personal mediocrity, Mension, Brau (now part of an Indochinese expeditionary corps), Berlé, Langlais.

“Get out”<sup>205</sup>

Ever since November 1952, the Lettrist International has pursued the elimination of the “Old Guard”: (...) <sup>206</sup> Serge Berna. Lack of intellectual rigor. <sup>207</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: in Guy Debord, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard Quarto, 2006).

<sup>205</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: *Potlatch, bulletin d'information du groupe français de l'Internationale lettriste*, No. 2, 29 June 1954. [The author of this announcement was Gil J Wolman.]

<sup>206</sup> Ellipsis by Jean-Louis Rançon. The missing text is as follows: “A few of the excluded, with reasons: Isidore Goldstein, alias Jean-Isidore Isou: morally retrograde individual with limited ambitions. Moïse Bismuth, alias Maurice Lemaître: delayed infantilism, dementia praecox, plays the saint. Pomerans, alias Gabriel Pomerand:

Jean-Michel Mension, *The Tribe*<sup>208</sup>

Yes, he was excluded, but he totally didn't give a shit.

Jacques Villeglé<sup>209</sup>

Didn't some perfidious person say to him [Berna] in [19]53, as he approached a table in a smoky café on rue Xavier-Privas, "The Serge Bernas of the world swarm all over Artaud the martyr"? And he, hypersensitive, took out a menacing switchblade, then turned his back on the table.

Guy Debord<sup>210</sup>

Attached is Berna's judgment of me,<sup>211</sup> during the most tragic period of my strolling around the neighborhood.

It is quite curious. Slightly untrue. But this same Berna, then in prison, had written in a notebook, which was indiscreetly opened by Three Stars,<sup>212</sup> that we – him and I – were "in a struggle for influence [over the Lettrist International]." So it was with the Borgias – Venetians<sup>213</sup> – to whom their century opened up a theatre of operations commensurate with their diplomacy.

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fabricator, nullity." From Donald Nicholson-Smith's translation of *The Tribe*, p. 81, which renders the title "KICKED OUT."

<sup>207</sup> The remainder of this text is as follows: "Mension: merely decorative. Jean-Louis Brau: militarist deviation. Langlais: stupidity. Yvan Chtchegloff [*sic*], alias Gilles Ivain: mythomania, delusions of interpretation, lack of revolutionary consciousness. It is useless to revisit the dead. The automatic door closer will take care of them." From Donald Nicholson-Smith's translation of *The Tribe*, *ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> Page 95.

<sup>209</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Jacques Villeglé, *Cheminements, 1943-1959* (Saint-Julien-Molin-Molette: Jean-Pierre Huguet, publisher, 1999).

<sup>210</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: letter from Guy Debord to Ivan Chtcheglov dated 23 October 1953, in Guy Debord, *Le marquis de Sade a des yeux de fille* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2004).

<sup>211</sup> Not reproduced by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>212</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Jean-Louis Brau's nickname following the publication of the first issue of *Ur* in December 1950.

<sup>213</sup> Serge Berna was born in Venice.

## *EN MARGE*

At the beginning of 1955, Serge Berna published the first issue of the journal *En Marge. La revue des refus. Pour une nouvelle participation* (editorial: Serge Berna, B.P. 14, rue des Canettes, Paris 6<sup>th</sup> arrond.; offices: Galerie de la Huchette, 4, rue de la Huchette, Paris 5<sup>th</sup> arrond.), which contained three of his texts (“La Question,” “L’Accident prêtre-ouvrier,” and “Réflexions”), as well as contributions by François Dufrêne, Manuel Bridier, Henri Pastoureau, Gaston Criel, Sonia Lazareff, Franck Lecocq, Philippe de Coninck and Michel Tanourarn.<sup>214</sup>

### “The Question”<sup>215</sup>

The guiding ideas of this journal were formed at the end of the winter of 1954. At that time, the crisis was in full swing; the war in Indochina was on its last legs; the world’s odor was intolerable – striated by the howls of the American critics, to whom the muffled bullets that liquidated Beria<sup>216</sup> had BARELY finished responding.

And the détente reached in the summer seems to us to have been more much the result of the actions of several quick-witted men than something brought about by a radical transformation of the laws that govern human events.

Mendès France and his people have at least demonstrated that the immobility of anguish is surpassed when the causes of that anguish are aggravated. And the world was certainly in the process of bursting open when the hieratic wooded faces that govern our fate on the “international chessboard” began to become agitated.

That is to say, to know if the accelerated dance that is on offer to us today is something other than a pleasant diversion, the final jaunt of the moribund man who installs electrical power in the cellar of his house.

Or if the different remedies, [injected] through the epidermis of things, will act in depth.

That summer was one of hope, waiting to see if the winter and NATO might use those events to bring about an implacable resolution.

The fear of being disappointed. Too many times, over the course of several years, hope and disappointment have followed each other step by step.

The sick bodies of the Western nations recorded a spike of fever, of which you, Mr. Mendès France, have been the strange result.

A wonderful momentum has been foreseen; previously numb forces have emerged; you will have to tap into and direct them in the midst of the old obstacles.

And the deep hostility, more and more “covert,” that the men of both blocs feel for you is a criterion for us: the value of the experience, episodic or not, remains to be seen.

We must wager on it and, in one or two cases, to participate.

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<sup>214</sup> Berna also wrote brief introductions to the texts by François Dufrêne, Henri Pastoureau, Franck Lecocq and Philippe de Coninck (see below).

<sup>215</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: this opening text, attributed to the editorial board, was largely inspired by Isou’s theses on “Youth Uprising.” Serge Berna wrote it at the time that Pierre Mendès France was made the President of the Council of Ministers (18 June 1954 to 5 February 1955) in order to make peace in Indochina (the Geneva Accords of 21 July 1954), a few weeks after the defeat of the French Army at the Battle of Diên Biên Phu (7 May 1954).

<sup>216</sup> Lavrentiy Beria (1899-1953) was a long-serving chief of the Soviet secret police. He was executed in December 1953, several months after the coup d’état led by Nikita Khrushchev.

But what impedes participation is the fear of returning to the mechanisms of the past.

We must especially count on the *distrust* among the young people, who have for too long been *accustomed to bearing alone the cost of the sacrifices that must ritually reestablish the compromised balance of a circuit to which they only have mutilated access in their lives and in their energies.*<sup>217</sup>

This is a moment in which the political parties are engaged in a vast solicitation that hasn't produced great results;<sup>218</sup> in which the ecclesiastical hierarchy has beaten the foreheads of those young Christians who have dared to want to change the routine; in which university reforms have been reduced to the elongation (a year) of schooling in the principal branches of education.

It is high time that the young people, with their own problems, are considered – IN THEMSELVES – and not as a platform for some political agenda of which the impoverished goal is to increase, in favor of this or that clan, their shares of power and wealth, leaving the economic structure intact.

Therefore, the demographic spike during the war is beginning to push its head towards real life, and it isn't clear if the circuit has widened or gotten ready to absorb the newcomers into it.

The result has been a multiform crisis, the causes of which have escaped the conventional grids, which are not equipped to record the growing accumulation *in the margins* of life of a mass of free-floating energies that can't really enter into the "workplace," which the workers reach en masse at relatively high salaries.

The sickness of youth – that pathetic pasture of the Men of Letters – object of derision, of indignation, of "regrets," but always an *object* and never a subject, except during troubled periods, when it puts its very existence into peril because that is its only possible stake; never a subject, always the object of parents, prolonged schooling; object of waiting lines, of interminable apprenticeships.

There are few young people, and not only in France, who have not, at one time or another, come close to experiencing a kind of claustrophobia; who haven't felt their souls constrained by a straitjacket that is sometimes called "adolescence" and that is nothing other than foreknowledge of the long oppressive corridor, a labyrinth in which the harrowing rotundas are examinations, military service and uncertain employment, the improbable arrival of *tomorrow*, the day that perpetually flees, and then hatred and the dancing in front of the buffet and the cold crimes and the "runaways" faced with an intolerable fate.

The sclerosis of the circuit, that is to say, the impossibility of creating new goods, thus piles up masses of amorphous energies. And they become even more explosive as their number increases and they become more compressed. Since the beginning of the century, not a single "people manipulator" hasn't made youth his springboard: from Lenin to Nasser, by way of the classics, Hitler and Mussolini, all of them have succeeded thanks to a more or less "ideological" scaffolding, the permanent features of which, despite their dissimilarities, have been breaking the rigid appearance<sup>219</sup> of the circuit and supporting themselves upon the rejected forces in the

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<sup>217</sup> Footnote by Serge Berna: Thus installing a specific barrier of which the only utility is to delay as much as possible the entrance of young people into that circuit; accumulating in the process truly huge amounts of living energy that is wasted in a frightening way by war; that is used, in a "white" fashion, by letting it rot in the unemployment of an "education" that no longer convinces anyone.

<sup>218</sup> Footnote by Serge Berna: without mentioning the other "formations": even the Communist ideal seems repugnant to the youth.

<sup>219</sup> *allure* can also mean "gait" and "pace."

margins. And so, the injection of new men is done in a way that is more or less brutal, more or less abundant, and behind them the door closes quickly, leaving an unchanging number of young people in a state of crushed cancellation, which will accept any other kind of scaffolding, provided that it can stand, even for a brief moment, and at the cost of their lives.<sup>220</sup>

These days, the sickness of youth has a decipherable face: an apparently lifeless force, as if absent, but whose latent powers explode at the slightest fission in the “order.” Our “democratic” regimes do not count on it; they freeze up and claim to be regularly menaced by what they, in their ignorance, call “fascism” but they are, in fact, “threatened” by an internal DYNAMISM that they want to ignore and that is formed by the endemic agitation of these unemployed pariahs who are the youths of today.

As for the “nondemocratic” regimes, either on the Left or on the Right, they have counted the youth among their ranks, but have intermixed, crushed and utilized them for other ends. As the war slips further into the past and exceptional situations become increasingly improbable, life seems to get steadily worse: “production” does not increase at the same rate as the increases in the numbers of “newcomers.” Which further reinforces the parentheses between which the “dangerous” elements from the outside are locked up.

Every youth has the face of a criminal, or that of a slave, of someone who has given up.

Thus the current fashion is to be “tragic” J3.<sup>221</sup> People get scared and do not understand; they speak of monstrosities, of the war’s after-effects and other nonsense. They deplore the situation and refrain from reflecting on it. They do not know that, if juvenile criminality *predominates* in every country, this is surely because “crime” – action taken outside of social conventions – is perpetrated by those whom the social order excludes from the satisfaction of the needs that exist in a given society.<sup>222</sup>

I wonder if the current governments are taking account of the extent of this problem, and if they are, if they can (or if they want to) legitimately absorb those forces that rumble in the shadow of the uneconomical. In France, can this “assumption” be performed in the current economic structure, which the government can soften up or whip, but cannot break up and entirely rearrange?

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<sup>220</sup> Note by Serge Berna: the [recent] rise of Malenkov and the current leadership of Russia has allowed for a decompression that is translated into the literary plane by a flowering of plays in which the following themes gradually become a framework: there’s a family; an idealist grandfather with a goatee who is quite removed from business matters; a father who is a conscientious, successful and obedient civil servant. But here is the fly in the ointment, the disruptor of the collective serenity: the son. A slacker. He makes fun of the grandfather, who babbles, according to him. Shrugs his shoulders at the father’s doctrines and only thinks about having fun and making it big by any means necessary. No respect. It is thanks to this asshole that the drama arrives, a different drama from one play to another, but the drama always arrives through the son. If this theme has become very popular (the latest news says that the censor, alarmed, has banned this genre), it is because it corresponds to a certain affective reality and touches a nerve. Thus, the problem of the rivalry between the young and the old isn’t resolved in Russia, even though this question doesn’t depend upon the encirclement of Russia by the “imperialists.”

<sup>221</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: an abbreviation of *jeune 3<sup>e</sup> catégorie* [youth 3<sup>rd</sup> category], a designation that had appeared on rationing cards issued to people between the ages of 13 and 21 during the Second World War. In the press, this term designates juvenile delinquents, predecessors of the *blousons noirs* [literally the Black Jackets: leather-jacket wearing, motorcycle-riding hooligans].

<sup>222</sup> Note by Serge Berna: it has always been like this. Slaves in Rome, anarchist workers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, lumpen proletarians (intermittently unemployed), and Arabs attracted by promises but encountering closed doors have historically formed the [category of] “perverts.” No more perverse than the anarchists of 1860, those youths who explode are definitely “frustrated by the circuit.”

Such a change, not only in “distribution,” but also and especially in the *movement* of the economic circuit, is necessary to absorb those forces, but [if it were to do so] the team in power risks provoking an insurmountable resistance from those who are *embedded* in the existing order.

After the government has performed the necessary amputations, there will remain a second difficulty. To really modify the *structure* of the economic circuit, to make it expand and no longer turn upon itself, there must be a release of those energies, those millions of producers and buyers, who are still “virtual,” the existence of which manifests itself in a negative fashion; it is destructive if it isn’t regularly helped to be born.

“Creation” always takes place thanks to materials that are still unformed.<sup>223</sup> The plasticity and dynamism of the forces that accumulate in the margins of the circuit are available. If the circuit doesn’t come to them, now that a vague hope has been raised, it will be even more difficult for them to restore their angst and their existences.

We can greatly fortify the seawalls, and slow down the rotation of the entry gates, but there will remain the necessity of a brutal irruption, a dangerous-revolutionary rupture, black or red,<sup>224</sup> it doesn’t matter.

Today, after having been posed on the surface plate of the newspapers, the “youth” problem is a matter to be discussed by the parliamentarians.

We are watching the present without too many illusions, and we await the measures that will be taken concerning the introduction<sup>225</sup> (at least) of the youth into the “nation.”

How will we detect its own interests, how will we avoid it becoming a labor force or a helping hand?

Taking a position on *the current* aspect of this problem, which has very distant roots, we maintain that the governmental tendency to take up – *without any intermediaries* – the questions concerning the youth is the least-bad option.<sup>226</sup>

I would like to preserve, just as they are, the texts that are still imbued with last winter’s topicality. The return of these things, dressed in barely different forms, is to be feared: a return punctuated by hardly unexpected faces, whose odors of old people, panic, blood and the police invariably remain the same as they were years ago.

Underneath the current euphoria, prompted by a *single* human being, there remain unresolved problems that will only crumble with difficulty.

And “the mass of men who are still not integrated, the number of those who detach themselves without finding a few motivations for integration elsewhere, is quite considerable enough to speak of a need, to which this journal is addressed.”<sup>227</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Note that the French here is *in-formes*, not *informes*.

<sup>224</sup> That is to say, anarchist or Communist.

<sup>225</sup> *insertion* can also mean insertion, addition or integration.

<sup>226</sup> Note by Serge Berna: the way in which the “formations” of today’s youth oppose each other is symptomatic. *Éducation nationale* frowns upon the “expectations” of one of its ministers who troubles its autocracy, the fruits of which are, nevertheless, quite lamentable. The Catholic organizations speak of a simple “aspect of good general policy,” which seems to me to proceed from an impressive audacity, given the results of the recently unseated political clan! The Communists also speak of the “generality of the aspect,” which is natural (for them). In any case, it is strange how some (the Catholics) cry out “secularism” in order to prevent this “Ministry,” while others (the secularists) scream about “para-fascism.” Finally, and this is quite clear, each of these “organizations,” devoted to other goals than those of the youth itself, do not want their already quite small clientele to be wrested from them.

<sup>227</sup> Here the author is quoting from his “Announcement of the Founding of the Journal *En Marge*” (see above).

For as long as there is no coherent action undertaken that will tend to *thaw out* the circuit and launch into it the forces that macerate in the margins, we will maintain this position of pure criticism.

And finally, the fate of those forces will be the only measure [*carat*] of this ongoing experiment.

[Introductions to the texts by other authors published in *En Marge*]

**François Dufrêne**<sup>228</sup>

There is no style without there being fire somewhere.

Using the sound to open up the meaning means digging into the depths of the days of the week in order, perhaps, to find a Sunday. A real one.

Desires are too mobile for the blotting papers that display them.

Charm is dangerous when, performing its usual role, it covers over fear and emptiness.

The things to be said are always too massive and language is too flimsy and syntax is a surtax on which we *must* cheat.

In any case, I bring this hardly ordinary essay to the attention of the professors of literature: it makes a prose poem out of a “political” experience in order to attain the greatest objectivity.

**Henri Pastoureau**<sup>229</sup>

It is undeniable that surrealism occupied a dominant place in the “sensitivity” of a certain era. Its return after the war was *shorter* than its journey before it.

It is as difficult to support the “end” of surrealism as it is to support its “life.” From which we can conclude that it is premature to write the *history* of surrealism as long as it remains a survivor. Publications by the movement are not lacking, but they all have some flaws. Same with André Breton’s book, *Entretiens*, in which the events are quickly distorted and the silences are numerous and inevitable for a man who must confront his own legend. Same with [Maurice] Nadeau’s book *Histoire du surréalisme*,<sup>230</sup> the impartiality of which turns to insensitivity with respect to the actual *presence* of the movement.

Located somewhere between the objectivity of Nadeau and the passion of a man who speaks of his own life, Pastoureau’s texts appear to me to fill in the gaps. Not that Pastoureau is humorless or has the tranquility of History at his disposal, but that his long experience with the

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<sup>228</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Dufrêne’s text, “*Des pas dans la course*,” was drafted on 1 May 1954. In it, he publicly broke with the “Youth Uprising” group, both with its theses as well as its practices, and, in particular, with Marc O., who, with the help of Jean Cocteau (President of the Jury), presented his French-American film, *Closed Vision*, on the sidelines of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cannes Festival (25 March-9 April, 1954), two years after the lettrists distributed the tract *The End of French Cinema* [see above] at the 5<sup>th</sup> Cannes Festival (April-May 1952). The text of “*Des pas dans la course*” was reprinted in François Dufrêne, *Archi-Made* (Paris: École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 2005).

<sup>229</sup> Henri Pastoureau, “*À suivre: Petite contribution au dossier d’un écrivain à prétentions révolutionnaires (Paris, 5 mai 1932-12 février 1951)*.” He has also published in a single volume *Ma vie surréaliste* and *André Breton, les femmes et l’amour* (Paris: Maurice Nadeau, 1992).

<sup>230</sup> Originally published in 1945 and translated into English by Richard Howard as *A State of Mind: The History of Surrealism* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

surrealists, on the one hand (he was a member of the group for nearly 20 years), and, on the other hand, his caution where people and things are concerned, raises hopes for greater knowledge of the facts concerning this movement, which tried to roll the literary tendencies that were scattered throughout its era into a ball.

What is and what is not *stucco* can now appear clearly. Pastoureau puts the accent on certain political determinations that surrealism experienced and suffered through. The situation hasn't changed very much and this is what can bring us closer to surrealism, more than some of their "exquisite" games, the evocation of which makes us shrug our shoulders.

Pastoureau gives us a naked look at the experiences of our "fathers," so that we can know what to expect from them and where we stand.

### **Franck Lecocq**

In his forthcoming novel, *Le Carnaval des dupes*,<sup>231</sup> Franck Lecocq is passionate and pure as he grapples with the values of a society that he execrates.

He goes off to do his military service in occupied Germany and, in the train that takes him to "his Duty," he meets and develops a friendship with a young man whose conceptions astonish him.

### **Philippe de Corninck**<sup>232</sup>

Philippe de Corninck lived through the major turbulences of the 1940-1945 war.

Like all of us of this generation, he got a good *thrashing*. A hard thrashing for bodies that were too young. Those who were 20 years old in 1945 are quite comparable to certain fruits that the frost overtakes at the beginning of April.

They didn't necessarily die from it. But they were definitely different as a result. Too early or too late. From then on, adjustments were never made without particular deployments of energy. It is also possible that, for them, the gesture of writing is a way of staving off panic and that they only find a place for us in their imaginations, where they work at exorcising themselves and the past.

### **"The Worker-Priest Accident"**

Here Serge Berna presents an essay-document in which he dialogues with a former worker-priest, Pierre Grumel, an ex-member of a religious movement (1944-1954) that was condemned by the pope in 1954. From the exchanges with this seminarian, whom Serna had encountered in Saint-Germain-des-Prés and whom Wolman had also known since 1950, we reproduce the introductory text by Berna and his remarks,<sup>233</sup> which were collected in 1951 and then in 1953.

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<sup>231</sup> It appears that this book was never published.

<sup>232</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: author of the novel *La Mort d'un homme*. [Translator: It appears that this book was never published.]

<sup>233</sup> But not those of his interlocutor.



*L'Accident prêtre-ouvrier* is the title of a book in part written in collaboration with Pierre Grumel, a worker-priest.<sup>234</sup> Below I present several extracts from this book, which was drawn from conversations that were part of a series of reflections.

I have tried to reconstitute our conversations in 1951, when P. Grumel was a “believer” and tried to make the two ends of the link, the Christian end and the worker end, hold together. I followed Grumel’s personal approach with sympathy, but I remained *sure* that the worker mission is not viable.

The interviews from 1953, which concern the crisis of the P.-O. (an abbreviation accepted by worker-priests), resonate all the more loudly today because they are the echo of a collapse from which the French Church won’t easily recover.

The unfolding of the events and the adventure precipitated by these progressive Christian spirits are retraced in this book, and many people will be able to see themselves in Grumel’s story, which is motivated by a sincere faith that not only the priesthood, but also faith itself can be abandoned.

At the very least, I know that the areas from which “faith” arises are quite unexplored and that its laws are, for the moment, impossible to find. For these reasons, and in the spirit of research, I attempt to collect *in a corpus* testimonies concerning the “religious” manifestation, which isn’t interesting to me in and of itself, but which indicates the dark region between the conscious mind and the flesh, an area from which we will not fail to draw responses to unresolved things.

While reading, you will see the extent to which “logic” in this domain slips as soon as we dig a little below the conventional words and on which unstable terrains an attitude or a form of behavior that is always ready at this level to turn into its opposite is based.

Just as the aberrations (the illnesses) of the body indicate the strange possibilities or capacities that the body ignores in order to maintain its health, the aberrations of the mind permit clearer visions of our so-called normal condition. And so the conditions that our bodies and our minds create or put us in seem more and more intolerable; but illness can at least teach us how to *change* these conditions, how they can be moved towards something else.

Nevertheless, I am not one of those, quite numerous at this moment, who imagine that the current impotence of our reason and its instruments of knowledge is sufficient to justify a fall in the other direction – and this isn’t because the “wise man” knows little and can do even less, while the fool knows more and can do more.

*From the point of view of another awareness,*<sup>235</sup> I do not see a big difference between René Le Senne, moralist at the Sorbonne,<sup>236</sup> and Antonin Artaud, poet and dead madman. Nevertheless, the latter taught me more about the fringes of the mental mechanisms of contemporary people. And the “religious” impetus shows under which conditions we ignore the current rules, which, I repeat, are a bit limited, all the same.

All of Western thinking is formed thanks to an arduous battle against “transcendence.” But at the moment, thinking devours itself and seeks supersession.

What concerns me isn’t a question of regressing back to ancient “divine” forms, but the rigorous observation of the religious state of mind, which reveals strange possibilities.

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<sup>234</sup> It appears that this book was never published. As for Pierre Grumel, an Internet search doesn’t come up with anything; it might have been a pseudonym.

<sup>235</sup> *connaissance* can also mean knowledge or understanding.

<sup>236</sup> René Le Senne (1882-1954) was a French spiritualist philosopher and a professor at the Sorbonne.

The question of the P.O. is broached here on the level of its “social” impact (as agreed), and Christian or Marxist argumentation will unfold without any surprises. But as I wrote this book, what I knew became clearer and clearer: the question is of a different nature, which doesn’t exhaust the given solutions.

It was also to verify and adjust certain presentations of information that I have taken up the affair of the P.O.

Finally, I cannot let this occasion pass without highlighting something about the Roman Catholic Church: namely, the opportunity that was given to it to accomplish its first truly “Christian” act since the era of Diocletian<sup>237</sup> (integration into Roman temporal power).

It was a Freudian slip.

### Extracts from the “1951 Dialogues”

(...)<sup>238</sup>

Serge Berna: Anyway, the Roman [Catholic] concern for the workers, it seems to me, should be approached with caution and on several points.

First of all, industrial workers, on the average, are not stinking creatures whose language is composed of profanities and who drink cheap red wine to keep going all day long. They are not illiterate and brutal or half-witted “natives,” as they appear in the vaguely horrifying image of them presented by the bourgeoisie. And you [Pierre Grumel] know this better than I do because you are one of them. So then, why does the Church send you *on this mission* to them (to use its expression) as if it were dealing with a bunch of Indian headhunters?

These men whom the Church seems to think are losers who have so completely collapsed under the weight of machines (and are unresponsive) that it is urgent and necessary to lead them to the Good News; these men who, all the same, have brought forth from themselves an immense movement called Socialism. They have promoted the reorganization of *half of the world* and it does not seem that they will have to stop doing so any time soon.

Finally, it seems to me that the Church forces you to take responsibility for certain problems, which results in the core of your faith getting stripped bare little by little and then put to a harsh test.

A certain desire for the truth, which you clearly have, is at the origin of a contradiction that is richer than all the others. You already have made two parts: on the one side, you relegate your faith to a corner of your mind; on the other, you perform all of the material tasks of a worker. Later on, you rejected the connection between that mental attitude and that practice. For the moment, you are, as you say, [simply] “living” and, consequently, the question doesn’t get posed. But as soon as you pose the question, you catch sight of the discordance. I can easily surmise that the struggle is heated in order to maintain your own unity.

(...)

From that moment on, how can you assure your worker-comrades of your faithfulness?

(...)

If we are obligated to choose between obedience to the Church and a revolutionary commitment in the name of Mankind, you can’t obey the Church “despite it.” Or you will obey it

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<sup>237</sup> The Emperor of Rome from 284 to 305 C.E.

<sup>238</sup> Here and elsewhere in these worker-priest excerpts, the ellipses were inserted by Jean-Louis Rançon to indicate material that was not included.

and you will rid yourself of the commitments that you hold the closest to your heart, or you will disobey it.

All things considered, you risk being caught in the middle: half-revolutionary, half-Christian.

Of course your “faith” doesn’t prevent you from acting, but it is your mental attitude that makes you “traitors” to this world. You are *distracted* and the fact that you consider this life to be a stopover can only create unease for those for whom this gap between nothingness and death is EVERYTHING. Your gaze withers the movements of life and swallows them in a kind of indifference that removes their beating hearts. And the magical processes by which the various religions suppress the inevitability of death seem absolutely unacceptable to me. It is a poor solution to alleviate death by denying it. Disappearance has never been an excellent response to a given situation.

(...)

Our two ways of seeing things are diametrically opposed. You state that Christian salvation shouldn’t be related to this or that particular aspect of men’s lives, but it encompasses them all by transforming them. But me? I speak of a tangible death, of the dreadful and idiotic thing that is death. You? You respond to me by saying “eternal life.” I speak of skin and blood; you respond “grace and miracles.” We’re on different planes, really. A fact: death. And you envision this event as if it only exists in accordance with the supernatural “Event” that annihilates the first one while letting it exist. You drain the reality out of death when you affirm that it no longer exists, while granting that it does exist, but only as a “passage” to another world.

In “faith” we of course find a kind of domination of the parts by the whole. In it, human facts are reduced to indistinct cubes for a mosaic, the design of which is only partially revealed to us. At most we know that there is an order under which we must bend, an order to which people, things and events must conform; specks of dust for a bloc that encloses each particle in its center.

Thus death. It fits perfectly into the whole; it is integrated. And I can’t speak to you of death, Pierre, without you inevitably thinking of rejecting it, subordinated, to the *concealed* place that it holds in the Christian outlook.

But the gaze of the “non-believer” when cast upon the facts leads us to consider this problem in completely different ways.

An inversion takes place. There’s no longer a [central] system, there’s no longer a mysterious periphery that magnetizes the sands of the world for unknown purposes.

Something new is happening, as if each gearwheel of the famous “clock” has started ticking on its own.

But perhaps a face-to-face meeting with death is intolerable. And that an area in which a certain degree of solitude and anguish are attained certainly causes suicide.

The Christian religion – among others – thus plays a quite spectacular role: that of veiling fate, of “transfiguring” the fear that strikes the individual who thinks about his own death and changes it into its opposites: Glory and Beatitude.

### Extracts from the “1953 Dialogues”

It is the desire to “live” [according to] evangelical values, to behave like an “authentic Christian,” that has led you to criticize the Church and, finally, to disintegrate the faith within you.

As for me, whose role is that of “commentator,” I refer objectively to that which *appears*. For that, I only have at my disposal the appearance of the events in question and the things that you tell me. You know that, in 1951, we spoke to each other in a different language. Everything you told me then seemed like it came from a dream. We were speaking over our heads. These days, we understand each other better; you are closer to the meanings that I give to those sounds called words.

I remember that, two years ago, I said you were living in “poverty.” You responded: “Yes, poverty, but not as you understand it; poverty is a consequence of the possession of God.”

### “Reflections” (extracts)

Men, which is what we still are, have long oscillated between the *stupid, beastly* potency of pure *power* that is excluded from *knowledge* and the *divine* order of power included in knowledge.

And “sin” exists – not that debilitating shame spread by Christianity over all of humanity’s strengths, its riches and its sexuality – sin is the fate of the transgressors of the *laws that assuage pain or resolve problems*. One problem after the other, patiently resolved, accompanying each one with a burst of joy.

Joy is the total vision of the troubles surmounted by humanity.

And the worst sin is the deed of those who create pain or trouble, thus devastating the potential joy within themselves.

Sin is what decimates Joy.

As long as the bestial era lasts – the era of *the ignorance of ignorance*, the mountains and the animals will take it upon themselves to improve the balance between humanity and nature.

The human era, that of knowledge intertwined with ignorance, has called “god” that which makes the unknown retreat under the weight of humanity’s knowledge.

And “god” is the spur of joy when another *creation* makes humanity’s pain and difficulties give way.

.....

*god*

dazzling *kernel* at the center of man – rigid body of laws for Knowledge and Power[,] *possibility* embedded in the limbs of man – which exists only if we make it exist, coldly alive in the jellyfish of human meat

elusive *quality*: the energy of energy; a will of its own.

Men can only take notice and watch as it permeates every gesture.

(I know at what point “god” is a noise that *became* very unpleasant; one of the most annoying in our languages. Became loaded down with filth as the weakness of the priests progressed and was multiplied by the Wotanic hordes of the great steppes of the North unbroken in the East – animals buried along the very old sword of light; a sword of light-dust, each grain of which has asked a divine man (the creator) to make the difficult break with its animal nature and brought to him the long golden cord that another must spin later on.)

With each swarm of barbarians who descended upon Knowledge, it had to teach them to unlearn how to tear things apart and to learn how to create.

Good. Let's say that religion is a way of learning to sort out and organize reality. But reality crushes me, defeats me, steals from me the eternity to which people seem to have the right – if we judge what's possible according to the intensity of the desire.

The anguish of men needs priests. Born of fear, they have nevertheless been the admirable delegates of the divine portion. They have taken upon themselves what man has of the most haughty: against the fury of the world, which blindly carries both pain and joy, the Priest kept the calm gesture of one who is sure of what he knows and knows what he doesn't know.

What he guards is the dazzling evidence of the human life span – yet with “breath” held and perpetually threatened by the ices of stupidity (which is a frozen grimace at what is given), or frightening retreats, backwards falls; rebounding from a memory lapse, further down, towards another memory lapse until there's panic in the original swamp).

Priests with cautious hands holding the difficult “order,” fruit and lifeblood of human progress towards the divine, minimal patience like that of the salt suspended from the billions of drops of water necessary for the cliff.

.....

Men are ordered to live. But the secrets of the season and the land only let themselves be grasped through a thousand layers of ignorance and only yield their fruits parsimoniously. However, the men, being big strong lads,<sup>239</sup> generously multiplied the fruits in the wombs of their wives and yet could only feed themselves according to their intelligence. It was insufficient.

*From whence comes human sacrifice.*

The Priests, beyond their role as knowledge's watchmen, filled the most theatrical one with sacrificers. They made Malthusianism solemn.

The priests killed, because the stagnation of goods produced makes sacrifice indispensable.

Ritually, so as to elevate the level of the life of the collectivity. Equipped with the obsidian knife, using it following the rules and the rhythms that are as precise as those of the birth of the seasons one after the other.

Methodical *bloodletters* bargaining strongly<sup>240</sup> for their share of the Fire, paying strictly unavoidable tribute to the inhuman.

Priests whose humanity explodes when we compare them to the masters of the subsequent era, that of the Lords.

.....

Tragedy [occurs]:

When men who are interlocked make a high wall, face the world in order to reduce it and break it down into the lack of success and death.

When men turn against each other and bang their meat and their bones together, when they furiously cut each other's throats during the lulls between nuisances and deluges, it's a drama at best.

Moses, taught by Egypt, teaches the Ten Commandments to the Jews: the necessity of a creative action strictly controlled by the Priest-King in order to keep and acquire.

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<sup>239</sup> *gaillards* can also mean scammers or hustlers.

<sup>240</sup> *durement* can also mean nastily or wickedly.

But the Jewish priests kept the holy orders and prohibitions embedded in the Commandments poorly, because they placed their necks under Roman iron after having bowed down one day to the anger of their Kings.

The Kings tore the priests' political duties away from them. The priests only wanted to lock themselves into the past and be surrounded by calcified strips of cloth; to be statues facing backwards, mechanical holders of useless knowledge; they clothed themselves in a silicate of somnolence and servility.

The Kings thus cut out the power of knowledge with a crude blade. Specialists with limited power, they unmoored the *act* from the *revelation*. They distanced themselves from seriousness. And so Moses, a *Priest-King*, was cut in half one day.

So it was *simian*.

Sacrifice spread like brains from a broken skull.

Sacrifice began to beat the countryside. After having passed through the passionate hands of the conquering Jewish Kings, torn apart by the savage hands of the victors, sacrifice finally fell into the insane hands of the Neronians.

*It turned into a massacre.*

Little by little, we come to admit that the massacre was "eternal" and that it will last forever. Become crazy, sacrifice passes to the rank of cataclysm, natural event, ineluctable plague, which emerges in the heart of men, somehow or other.

The order of flood barriers, canal locks and canals that deifies the bestial force into something else will find itself crushed.

The priests spend their time making exegeses of exegesis. In addition, they remained bent on the ground and the people saw their faces slashed according to unknown necessities.

.....

When Jesus entered into his time, he only found priests who were paid wages or had their faces turned inconsolably towards the wall of lamentations. An appalling era of multiple, entangled gods; of crazy emperors killing the fate of men with an absurd sword, only obeying the law of the sword and its limitless thirst for blood.

For a long time, the sacred odor of the priest was that of *frozen* blood, of ritualistic killing *stopped* by the law.

The odor that accompanied Christ was that of spilled blood, of the Massacre of the Innocents – the irruption of the barbarians, of the Roman brute who has cracked the skull of the ancient religion. Into this network of bones, emptied of its substance by the sword, Jesus deposited a dream of wind. And raised the shadow of the law in it.

A young priest who rebelled against the powerlessness of the old priests to fulfill, not only the promises of happiness, but also their role as the regulators of murder.

Full of resentment, they twisted behind the petrified face of the Jewish law that hung on the bloodless neck of Israel and sent it back outside of the "world."

Jesus, facing the horrors of the "world," at that time multiplied to infinity, initiated therein a movement of escape, which went on to enjoy a long-lasting success.

.....

Jesus, the profound result of the defeat of the Jews by the barbarians. Jesus, the wife of Israel lying under the brutality of a century.

“Render unto Caesar . . .”; yet he knows that it isn’t necessary to collude; that if one renders this world unto Caesar, there’s nothing left but imagination. Faced with God, the new man can only be a lamentation: “have pity on us.” While ancient man was *assured* of his fate if he observed the law.

An astounding<sup>241</sup> renunciation of oneself and the men who came before: the accumulation of difficult gestures for creation is suddenly compromised in the sad orgy of a dream that strikes this world of inanity.

And so, the disappointment of the man faced with divine promises makes him split up the only lode of advancement that men have invented and maintained.

The double mental movement of Christ seems to me to be directly responsible for a madness that has lasted for 2,000 years: it breaks the golden thread (the thread of memory) around which the various desires are wound and so causes each one of them babble incoherently.

Deprived of rules and bodies, they rise to the heavens, disarticulated, without seriousness, like simple dreams.

For man, there is nothing left but shit and the blood that spurts from under the iron of the torturers and executioners, who are part of Caesar, indispensable for making the martyrs worthy of heaven. A world of cripples, goiters, rotting meat, and morose delights waiting for “Deliverance.”

That is the best trick. The ancients counted on eternal life for real, one day. “Eternity” is one of the most emotionally charged words that man has invented and perhaps, today, it has ended up corresponding to a necessity. Perhaps as long as man has not revealed his secret to the species, as long as the human being moves his immense caterpillar forward by means of reproduction and death, the things that glorify the sacrifice of what exists to what does not will have a deep resonance. Jesus confiscated this desire, perverted it from the bottom up (transferred it from the *genuinely* eternal body to the eternity of the “spirit”) and shot eternity up to the heavens along with everything else.

.....

Why, *why* don’t the Christians just commit suicide? Because it is prohibited? Not at all because it is a question of pushing men to surmount their defeats, but because suicide would still be a manifestation of human decision-making, of the human will to end it all.

Christianity has tried to demolish the core of desire that is in the nape of a man’s neck, which makes him struggle little by little against a fate that wants to see him fail and die. Christ wanted only a simple dream, crossed by feverish shivers, to continue to exist.

After the idiotic warriors had started rattling the bones, Moses was determined to empty from the inside the hard skeleton into which he’d infused his marrow.

The ideal of Jesus: a boneless man, and all that would remain of his former *dressing* would be meat that sinks to the bottom of a culpability that is as hysterical and capricious as the other side of Grace. The meat of idiotic slaves, for whom revolt is the work of the Devil, under the control of an unrecognizable “god,” arbitrary like a Roman governor, cruel due to mood swings, like Nero, thus endowed with qualities directly drawn from examples of the era.

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<sup>241</sup> *effarant* can also mean alarming or frightening.

Finally, Christ was able to deceive his world (the fact that he was “sincere,” and I believe that he was, going as far as losing his life down here, doesn’t change anything), because he claimed to be an adherent of JOY.

He brought the Good News.

In two stages: at first he captivated minds when he spoke about the misery of the world, about the permanence of the forms of that misery, stamping with the sigil of evil all that is of this world, putting the absent figure of death into each human gesture and then giving them the gift of Eternal Compensation.

Through his sacrifice, he confirmed the eternity of the massacre and, what’s more, he encouraged everyone to imitate him. *So as to maintain it*. Christ is the one who, in order to make his time acceptable to men, pushed them to sink into it by means of a sleepy inactivity, the concrete result of which is in fact regression to infancy, to the fetus, and, finally, to the amoeba, which is obviously eternal!

.....

The entire Christian mechanism rests upon this cessation of life: this era wants to *block* the passage of time. The things that appear at that very moment freeze up, the dark side, and they demand of us, stupidly, a *fixed* adherence.

We can say that the ancient methods did not lead to total joy and that only Christian joy remained – the only “truth,” composed of renunciations and images, the basis of which inclines itself according to the necessities of the moment (Virgin, Devil).

Christ was a swindler of joy, because he could only proceed by “holding on to a step once taken” (Rimbaud)<sup>242</sup> and by the rough quartering of reality by human application.

The Jews were right to reject this cowardice and to guard what they had. Bruised, covered with wounds and dismantled when it came to coherence, their priests preferred their difficult knowledge. Covered by waves of blood, perhaps stunned by the vacillation of minds introduced by Christ, they nevertheless managed to hold on thanks to the harsh and simple mechanism of their efforts to attain Joy.

Faced with the great rush of the child-men from the steppes, Jewish law had a much smaller chance of success than its monstrous daughter did. This law was inflexible concerning man’s animal nature and demanded constant purification. Faced with a flood of animal-men, it curled itself up in the Kabbalah.

We only know joy through scraps that have been drowned in the brine of sorrow. Christianity, incapable of drying out sorrow in *reality*, or of transforming men into ingots of joy, offers a beatitude that is as false as that of the narcotic that momentarily changes the body and “frees” the imagination, but leaves the user in the same pain-pleasure relationship as before (unless you take the drug to the point of death).

Christian joy is *smoke* obtained by making an impotent mental gesticulation against the impassive course of things.

.....

At that time, muscles and murderers moved into the heads of men. The core of the priesthood, eternally located in the head, was suddenly transferred to the “heart” by Christ. Thus

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<sup>242</sup> Artur Rimbaud, “Adieu,” *Une saison en enfer* (1873): “Point de cantiques : tenir le pas gagné.”



abandoning the longstanding work of ancient patience, which tried to form the tiny jewel of human knowledge.

The level of consciousness was reduced to “feelings,” plunged into the changing of moods and floundering in the serous fluids of goodness.

If the barbarians breached the stature of the men from the East, Jesus broke the backbone of the Old Testament, which was called *Justice*. Thus hypertrophying this small, soft and weak segment of *charity* and pushing men down into a definitive despair.

And so, this stale-smelling collection of “nations,” which then took its place on the field of history, saw nothing inconvenient in accepting a religion that gave free reign to its brutish nature. Their gloomy heads foresaw a “force” that frightened them, those bloodthirsty children, and Christianity offered a way to effortlessly win over the powerful “god” that the Jews had kept enclosed in a haughty rigor.

With the installation of Christianity at the center of political power, the long despicable period that is ours began. *Neither* the god of blood and a rage that is bestial but pure, *nor* the god of the spirit endowed with pride and knowledge – a kind of corrupt mixture took place, blood was contaminated by its opposite, and yet the “nations” advanced into history with their heads held high and their hands lowered.

In Rome, there’s a Pope<sup>243</sup> who has a *mug* that suits his true situation and who has on his head a noble tiara, the metal and symbols of which have been usurped by him, like a conquering and arrogant Scythian who greedily dresses himself in the linen of a conquered priest.

Everything in the West that has contributed to the advancement of mankind, no matter what the domain, has been done against Christianity. Everything that can be linked to the profound notion of “God” (priority of knowledge about and action upon this world) encounters the ferocious resistance of the Church.

Little by little, there develops the profound person, the Western “persona” that emerges from the lengthy Christian ballroom costume that is wrapped around the bodies of the wild-boar-men who have just left their forests behind: he is both Tartuffe and Ignatius.<sup>244</sup>

Under the Christian armor in which the active law, annoyed, finds itself, the massacre continues. The hidden face of Christ is not so much the face of Dionysus, the phallic and drunken god, but that of WOTAN,<sup>245</sup> the god of aggression, a totem of the killers of the race of forest-dwelling hunters, the god of pikes, a map of the vaults of the old West, the old undead god who recently took over Germany and who has now been prowling around American shores. And their conflict is only apparent because there is no *direct contact* between Wotan and Christ. They are complementary: one attacks, the other gives up; one is an executioner, the other is a victim; one enslaves, the other consoles.

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Christian justification is founded on the misfortunes of men. It needs the demoniac side to survive, and everything that tends to reduce the ring of shadows and iron placed around human destiny is its enemy.

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<sup>243</sup> Pope Pius XII (aka Eugenio Maria Giuseppe Giovanni Pacelli), whose controversial papacy lasted from 1939 to 1958.

<sup>244</sup> Tartuffe is a character (a religious hypocrite) in Molière’s *Tartuffe, ou l’Imposteur* (1664) and Ignatius is, no doubt, Ignatius of Antioch, one of the Apostolic Fathers.

<sup>245</sup> The principal pre-Christian deity of the Germanic peoples and the Norse god of wind and the dead.

The Christian priest is the product of two successive movements: despondency and daydreaming. There's a hypnotized subhuman rift between them. The priest's trade is reactivating the horror of death in order to send as many "souls" as possible into the turbulence of heavenly delirium.

If there is something that men are in the process of fixing, it is definitely the material poverty of the world. The damp platform of Christianity thus disintegrates: with the slow progress of the tool,<sup>246</sup> Charity clears out, because its reason for existing is absent. Our era, constructed, approaches the Unknown; it bargains with it, tricks and deceives it. And this is like the revenge of the men of the Old Testament, stubborn and unbowed.

During the last few centuries, we have seen the gradual collapse of the system of Christian justification due to the pressure of mankind's creative forces.

To go forward, the current world must violently reject Christianity. While the Church *reinforces* everything, the man of today *liquefies* everything into other things.

And the affair of the worker-priests is a sign, the concrete sign, of the true place of Christianity in a world that is liquefying its destiny.

.....

Their childhood matches all childhoods: weak, maimed in their desires, prey to arbitrariness. Then the "sons" jumped from their childhoods into religion, as is normal to do when the outcome is invisible, unbelievable, in a world still alienated by chance and massacres.

These priests' feet had scarcely touched the ground when childhood fell from their bodies like a skin made of dried-up words, and there appeared in them, in one go, the revolt of the singular ring of hours that rolls over gold and blood.

They discovered that the real sin was being sorrowful when there was a way to be otherwise.

They believed in a world that was hammered to the old rhythms of Saint Thomas, and they discovered that a thousand different mechanisms were possible.

They were sent to offer a honey-tongued language and those who were pagans needed a Renault 4CV instead.

.....

With their backbones broken by Christ, they approached tough guys – they offered a technique of resignation and supplication to men who could only diminish their hunger if they agreed to periodically relieve their hunger all together, in order to burst one or two sacks of gold among those who wall up their lives. At first the priests learned that their "charity" was inappropriate: the recipients [*les charit-ables*] didn't give a fuck. Good guys, the workers took the outstretched hands of the priests and taught them to close one finger after the other, until their fists were ritually opposed to the weight of weapons and extended periods of hunger. In the bodies of the Worker-Priests, we see the dismantling of the little tombs made of ice that serve as souls for Christians and, in their place, the rising up of contradictory men.

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The back-and-forth movement of Christianity that plunged the ancient world such as it was into the Christian "spirit" and its diastases is far from having been a *creation* on the religious

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<sup>246</sup> *l'instrument*: that is to say, technology.

plane. Quite simply, in the world on the verge of the Christian era, certain superficial facts changed directions in a way that made possible the overthrow of values. The Christian introversion, the Gospel, is only the other side of the Jewish face of the Old Testament.

Today, on the other hand, we can affirm that our era is pregnant with a radical modification, analogous to the one that saw cannibalism disappear at the brink of agriculture.

The concrete powers of men, their “mass action,” can be in a position to produce structural upheavals when certain necessities are dissolved. Thus the real solution to the problem of sacrifice lies in a much larger production at the center of a social organization that is focused upon production and not the formation of the cancers that are called “profits.”

Thus, real production is outside of the sacrificer-sacrificed couple, on which the Christians had simply shifted the emphasis.

Normally, the heart of Jesus would no longer have had any need to bleed for us. The matter requires a different organ than the heart: the head, and the arms, as well, for a little while longer. In any case, the machine, which is both the head and the arms at the same time.

The 1950s is a hazelnut that is threatened with being crushed between the high wall of human habits and material energy, that formidable pressure that risks exceeding the measures taken to contain it.

Born under the goad of the struggle to the death that has been “human coexistence,” the secret recipient of material violence can also disentangle the things needed for life and growth that . . . .

Now as ever, each word, each gesture, decides the meaning or direction of all of humanity. For all time.

In the combat of man against himself, the situation of the Christian is important: his religion, or at least its remnants, is the commander in chief of the nerves of the national “elites,” of the pack of nations that manipulate this overwhelming force.

A painter friend of mine, Jacques Moreau,<sup>247</sup> has produced a canvas that culminates in a cross on to which Jesus is holding tightly, his back turned to an energy-multiplying world, his arms wrapped around the Wood of Suffering and doesn’t at all want to start doing so.

The Christian thinker Gilson<sup>248</sup> says, “Christianity awaits man at the end of his happiness in order to console him.” Quite a shocking thing to say for someone who speaks in the name of an organization that has been opposed to the steps that have led men to constitute this ingenious network of happiness. And so this stick-in-the-wheel *degrades* the meaning of the word “happiness” solely because it doesn’t want to lose its position as consoler and seeks to remain at work, depending on the misfortune that’s on the other side of happiness.

The priests are obligated to come up with unprecedented justifications: at what speed will our era force the professional Christian to *follow the train* of misfortune, which gradually slips away? We find them everywhere that human action still fails, has failed again. Dislodged from one position, they retreat to another one. Therein they open their arms and sadden and upset men by denigrating what is *acquired* in the name of the Unknown. Poverty melting away in the hands of the priests, they are grouped together en masse before Mutuality and Death, from which we expect stability and a future.<sup>249</sup> Become the pimps of death, they.....

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<sup>247</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: also called Le Maréchal, a poet, painter and engraver.

<sup>248</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Étienne Gilson, a professor and Christian philosopher.

<sup>249</sup> Note by Serge Berna: the main panel at the “Semaine des intellectuels catholiques” conference was titled “L’homme est voué à mort” [Man is doomed to death]. [*Translator*: organized by the Centre catholique des

## The NEP, the Nouvelle École de Paris

In 1956, after abandoning the idea of publishing a second issue of his journal [*En Marge*], Serge Berna got into pictorial creation and, three years later, during the summer of 1959, in the Var, he exhibited his works under the emblem of the NEP, the Nouvelle École de Paris [the New School of Paris], a movement of which he was the initiator.

On Sunday, 16 August 1959, at the Salon des Arts de la Garde-Freinet, he rejoined his old lettrist comrades Jean-Louis Brau and Gil J Wolman for an exhibition titled *Nouvelle École de Paris: Berna, Brau, Wolman*, along with their guests, the painters Lotte Char, Papai Ilona and Jacques Jal.

Then, moving in stride, Serge Berna organized another exhibition of the NEP, held on Saturday 5 September 1959, at the Maison des Templiers in Grimaud – less than 10 kilometers from the Salon des Arts de la Garde-Freinet – in which his works, as well as those of Jean-Claude Charbonel, Michel Gribinski, Jacques Jal and Alain Gerbaud were displayed.

### [Press clippings]

*Nice-Matin*, 16 August 1959:

Strange paintings! Fantastic paintings! (the real intra-ritual, according to Serge Berna): poetic paintings! The NEP is to painting today what Guillaume Apollinaire was to poetry back then. [...]

Let's move on to the exhibiting members of the NEP.

Gil J Wolman, whose work [in ceramics] is characterized by very opulent material, delivered to the fire, which makes it similar to that of Bernard Palissy, the sublime potter of the Renaissance.

Jean-L. Brau paints like he lives: intensely. The baptism of painting, he says, is a question of a can-do attitude and a little luck. Afterwards: a great, full life, rich in promise and danger, opens before you.

And now, let's speak about the leader: Serge Berna.

His exhibitions in Algiers and Oran in 1957, then more recently in Forcalquier, have made a certain impact, as have his conferences on “the stages of modern painting,” the conclusion of which is always: “Pictorial art must be an amalgam of painting and poetry.”

He is deeply immersed in painting, religious. In some way a monk of this new order, he has insisted on submerging the old way of painting under water so as to drown everything in it that is not creative. The sea has been his greatest inspiration.

A “new school,” an unprecedented method:<sup>250</sup> the NEP's exhibitions are linked together in a series.

On 26 April 2021, in Paris, Michel Gribinski recalled the summer of his 16<sup>th</sup> year:

I knew Serge Berna in August 1959. I had just passed my second bac<sup>251</sup> and was on vacation in Saint-Tropez. I was looking at everything and everyone; I was not used to what I was

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intellectuels français, the conference held between 7 and 13 November 1954 had “Qu'est-ce que l'homme?” as its central theme; the one held between 8 and 14 November 1953 focused on “Monde Moderne Et Sens De Dieu.” And so I'm not sure if the author has made a mistake or not.]

<sup>250</sup> *formule* can also mean slogan or catchphrase.

seeing. I had fun. A guy was selling poems that he'd written on rolls of toilet paper by the meter; there were well-known actors; people were eating very greasy fries at the port after having danced at the Palmyre, where for the first time, I saw two girls kissing. That summer (or was it the following one?) I almost had an affair with Françoise Sagan.

Serge Berna was displaying his paintings in the wine cellar of a bistro; it was dark and not at all suitable for such an event. He'd used fishing nets to hang small abstract paintings. Behind the nets, casks; behind the casks, bottles. He'd opened a bottle by removing the cork with a screwdriver and told me he would pay for it later. I had been painting for a few years. We chatted, spoke about painting.

I never really knew. This open discussion was surely sincere on his part and yet also self-interested at the same time: I had pocket money and he had none. He was a big, skinny guy; I remember the belt holding up his pants: a leather strap with the end dangling down. He had obviously cut his own hair with a pair of scissors: he wasn't at all interested in his appearance and this didn't fail to give him a certain elegance. There was also something luminous about him; there was an inwardness, an intensity. One of his paintings pleased me, we spoke about it and then, at the end of the conversation, he proposed that I join the NEP group, the New School of Paris.

He said that he'd invented a technique that the members of the NEP had to adopt. It allowed paintings and "new" forms to be made very quickly. The "very quickly" part involved, without it being said, an underlying principle of provocation – to make art in the way that someone would absent-mindedly carry out any old task. It was a question of painting the flat surfaces of Panolac-brand wall panels. And here again the derision of poetry of the hygienic type wasn't far away: Panolac served to protect the walls above kitchen sinks, which were covered with varnish and, while it was still wet, pigments (diluted or not) were added to the turpentine. As these liquids dried, they did whatever they wanted or could do. The drops of turpentine, released from above, opened up holes in the varnish. Then Berna would spit on the painting, mixing his saliva with the varnish. Blowing hard on the mixture, he'd obtain things that looked like seabeds, jellyfish and ripples. The liquid would become solid and more or less kept its first appearance. It was instantaneous, spontaneous or activist painting, and the (naïve) idea of displaying the saliva imprisoned by the varnish seemed to be transgressive, with an anti-bourgeois touch. I believe that it was a particularly aggressive art, without anything new being said about it.

I was recruited at the age of 16 by an adult (Berna was more than 30 years old at the time) who seemed to believe in what he was doing: I enthusiastically joined the NEP. A New School of Paris: at least three different groups had used this name since the early 1920s. I only learned that much later, and I don't know if he knew it at the time, or if this was part of his game, which was serious and marginal – a game of appearances in which the explosion of the real, when it came, would be that much more violent. Berna never said anything to me about his past: Michel Mourre and the "Notre-Dame scandal," Debord and the other lettrists, or that he'd recently spent five or six months in prison for theft, I believe.

The expo took place in Grimaud, in an abandoned room that was dubbed "la maison des Templiers" [the House of the Templars], though it never welcomed any Knights Templars and belonged to an old lady whose name I can recall: Madame Lenoir. Berna could be charming, reserved and gently courteous (suddenly someone else), and he'd obtained the room from her. This old lady served us vervain liqueur in tiny glasses on embroidered doilies, and she carried on

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<sup>251</sup> *baccalaureate*, the French equivalent of a high school diploma.

banal conversation with this very tall, skinny and suddenly civil guy in a living room that smelled like mothballs. I widened my eyes; I was in a film. What Serge had told me about this welcome in the street was quite sincere – there was no more amused or critical distance at all: he was clearly grateful. But concerning the NEP and his invention of rapid pictorial execution, I am less sure about the integrity of a process that was more like a mixture of provocation, derision like that of the guy who sold poems by the meter, and genuine interest in an artistic creation that he wanted to be different. We pursued that difference quite far.

We dusted off the room, put up handwritten posters everywhere and returned to Saint-Tropez. Next morning, Serge came to pick me up and my mother offered him breakfast, which he devoured. She gave him a second helping of sandwiches. I realized then that he wasn't eating very often. He had an old 203 (Peugeot) that he filled with gasoline by siphoning it from cars parked in garages overnight.

Of the other members of the NEP, I only glimpsed Jacques Jal (a pseudonym?), about whom I knew nothing. I remember that he'd asked Serge, without looking at me, what use it served to include me – and this unfriendly and pertinent question stayed with me. But Serge Berna was in charge. Much later, I thought that his authority said something about what he was keeping quiet about, that he had done certain things, had lived certain lives. Jal seemed bored – boredom was in fashion then – and he didn't insist. He didn't come to the preview.

I had made two paintings, at great speed, naturally, and tried to act as indifferently toward them as I could. There was an article and photo in a local newspaper.<sup>252</sup>

Returning to Paris, I received several letters. Berna insisted: there had been expenses and he asked me to share them. My parents sent him the money and urged him not to write me again.

That's the end of my history with Serge Berna.

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<sup>252</sup> See press clipping above.

## Letters

### Letter to Albert Van Loock<sup>253</sup>

In 1951, Serge Berna was, without doubt, the first lettrist to meet the members of the surrealist group in Brussels: Marcel Mariën, René Magritte, and Paul Colinet. After a trip to that city, where he visited the bookstore run by Albert Van Loock – a book publisher and print seller, located on rue Saint-Jean 51, and a longtime friend of Marcel Mariën – Serge Berna, after returning to Paris, was arrested and jailed. From his cell, he wrote to Loock.

HDC<sup>254</sup> BERNA, Serge  
Number: 27.638  
1<sup>st</sup> Division  
Cell 126

7 September [1951]  
My friend Van Loock (*sic*)

A bad surprise awaited me in Paris.

I was arrested for an old affair (that of the Auteuil “scandal,” in which, it seems, I struck a police officer). At the same time, they brought down on my innocent head a pile of things that, for my part, I had unselfishly forgotten.

I set in motion all sorts of juridical mechanisms (appeals, objections, etc.), in order to halt the march of inevitability. This ended up as four or five months in prison.

I often think – there is nothing else to do – of my trip to Brussels and particularly of the welcome that I received at rue St. Jean. There’s a great distance between the tea at Mr. Look’s [*sic*] place and the so-called coffee here.

My friend, I hope that everything is to your liking and that you have finished the catalogues thanks to the efforts of Mariën, who, in several dreams I’ve had, appears in the ironically sharp features of the *Manneken-Pis*;<sup>255</sup> at his feet, moaning, Stupidity, personified by this bookseller, object of my hatred; moaning but eternal.

In jail, a letter from a friend is a very important event. I would be happy to receive, from time to time, a word from one of you. SEND ME KOENING’S ADDRESS,<sup>256</sup> which I have lost.

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<sup>253</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: this letter – in which we have corrected a few spelling errors – bears the stamp of the censor of the prison administration. Cf. Marcel Mariën collection at the Archives et Musée de la littérature A.S.B.L., Brussels, FSXLVII/84/2.

<sup>254</sup> *Homme de Droit Commun* (Man of Common Law).

<sup>255</sup> A famous bronze fountain sculpture located in central Brussels, depicting a naked little boy urinating into the fountain’s basin.

<sup>256</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: in December 1953, in Verviers (Belgium), the poet Théodore Koenig, along with Joseph Noiret and Désiré Viardot (Marcel Havrenne), founded the journal *Phantomas*, which issued from the journal *Temps mêlés*, directed by André Bavier.

By the way, I have not, for all that, abandoned the projects planned out with you for this winter. And so, in the short interval between my return and my incarceration, I began to lay the bases for a picaresque expedition to Flanders, with films, paintings, books etc. Only instead of making it happen at the end of this year, let's do it at the start of '52.

Anyway, see you soon (perhaps).

Best wishes to Mariën, Magritte and Colinet.  
Serge Berna

### Letter to Théodore Koenig<sup>257</sup>

1 October 1951  
My friend Koenig,

Your letter reached me at a critical moment . . . I was in the “hard” [part of the prison], in the dungeon,<sup>258</sup> thrown into the prison within the prison because I broke a table on which I took out my rage at being *arbitrarily* detained by throwing it out a window on the first floor.

Arbitrarily, and this had been brought to the attention of the court. They have no basis for incarcerating me, other than the fact that I do not have a *truly* fixed residence (I live in a hotel). Then I broke a table by more or less aiming at the skull of the warden of the Fresnes prison, who had, in response to my questions, elegantly sent me off to the Prosecutor's office.

I was then, from time to time, forced into the dungeon by a fire hose. (Illegible word.)<sup>259</sup> And to make my blood circulate, a beating for which the guards would join together in groups of half a dozen.

I was like a madman . . . But deep down, not sad at all, I screamed with joy, and each time they came to “take” me in my steel cage, the guards left feathers<sup>260</sup> there.

It was after one of these furious sessions of “the bear and the trappers” that they gave me your letter and the poet<sup>261</sup> had a hard time, with one black eye and the other (illegible word)<sup>262</sup> yellow and violet, deciphering his friend's missive.

Nevertheless, I got myself out of there easily after having done six days more than normal *because*<sup>263</sup> of a 3,000-franc fine that I could not pay.

By the way, I was sentenced by the Correctional Court of Paris to 10 days in prison and a fine of 10,000-francs for the story of Auteuil and the violent mob.

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<sup>257</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Archives et Musée de la littérature A.S.B.L., Brussels, ML/4854/56.

<sup>258</sup> The French word used here, *cachot*, also means “solitary confinement.”

<sup>259</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>260</sup> In French slang, police officers are *poulet* (“chickens”).

<sup>261</sup> Serge Berna himself.

<sup>262</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>263</sup> Italicized English in original.



They convicted me despite a brilliant “pro domo” plea in which I took a tumble like I’ve rarely done in my life, which has been so rich with occasions of this kind. In an all-inclusive way I treated my judges like they were idiots.

But the costs that I must pay amount to 60,000 francs. It is for this reason that I’m collecting whatever money is possible. I also ask you to send me any possible funds that come from sales of *Ur*. This is a very serious matter for me because if I do not pay, it’s back to prison.

Be insistent with Toussaint, to whom I have sent a brief so that he can bring me the dough (illegible word).<sup>264</sup> I hope that he will not be too much of a bastard or a businessman. My friend, at this critical moment, I am counting on you. I know you will do what is necessary.

We are planning to burst into Brussels around Christmas or before it. This will be decided in a month or so. And I’m in the process of perverting all the possible painters.

Moreover, we will be coming with *three* films – each one more stunning<sup>265</sup> than the last.

I will write again when I have set the date.

And great will be my pleasure to see you again, safe and sound after the terrible accident in which you invested foreign diplomacy.

Caress for me the little wild cat that serves as your wife.

(signature)<sup>266</sup>

(HDC = Man of Common Law)

Answer me

SB – ~~Poste Restante~~

~~Bureau de poste~~

~~de Rue Danton~~

~~Paris VI~~

Café Mabillon 174, boulevard St.-Germain<sup>267</sup>

Paris VI

### Letters from the Fort de Corneilles-en-Parisis<sup>268</sup>

Arrested at his hotel (13, rue Guisarde, Paris, 6<sup>th</sup> arrond.) on 26 December 1952 in order to serve a prison term for the theft of a book in 1949, Serge Berna was at first incarcerated at Fresnes, then transferred to the Fort de Corneilles-en-Parisis (Val-d’Oise), used as a prison between 1948 and 1956.

At the beginning of his incarceration, Serge Berna wrote letters to Gil J Wolman<sup>269</sup> in which he broached the subjects of the circumstances of his arrest, the conditions of his detention,

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<sup>264</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>265</sup> *ahurissants* can also mean “appalling.”

<sup>266</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon: SERGE BERNA.

<sup>267</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: the Mabillon was in fact at 164, boulevard St.-Germain.

<sup>268</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Built between 1874 and 1877, this fort is constructed on a small hill overlooking the Seine, 17 kilometers downstream and northwest of Paris.

news about the Lettrist International, his plans for publications and the future of the manuscripts by Antonin Artaud that he'd discovered in 1952.

The letters bearing the censor's stamp appended by the penitentiary administration are indicated by a bullet point that precedes the date.<sup>270</sup> We have corrected an orthography that is quite loose but sometimes quite revealing: Berna did not write [*écrit*]; he systematically *écrit*, as if writing was a cry [*un cri*], like his first poem. We have kept certain graphic quirks, indicated by (*sic*),<sup>271</sup> when they have seemed remarkable or deliberate to us. The words that are set in italics correspond to the words that he underlined in his letters.

11 January 1953

My friend Jil [*sic*]

(in the margin with an arrow pointing in the direction of the beginning)<sup>272</sup>

Letter that was returned to me

I have already sent you two letters and I'm astounded at not receiving a reply. Nevertheless, I think that these first two letters did not reach you for different reasons. I will come back to this later.

Here is a summary of the film of the situation. 26 December [1952]. Hung over, eight o'clock in the morning, a detective knocks at the door of No. 13 rue Guisarde, I open it, confident thanks to the unshakeable innocence that is my charm. Like a herald (*sic*),<sup>273</sup> he unfolds a dirty parchment and reads it to me with hieratism: I must go to prison for six months. I keep telling him that the Lettrist International has its headquarters in the personal residence of Monsignor Baylot,<sup>274</sup> but, surly, he doesn't want to hear anything from me. At first I believed there'd been a mistake – regrettable, of course – but solvable at the level of the Deputy Public Prosecutor of the secular 4<sup>th</sup> Republic. But in an incomprehensible fashion, I was colliding with a terrible obstinacy to send me to the shadows. Thus I arrived at Fresnes by familiar roads and found several friends there. (Here a phrase was blacked out by the penitentiary's censor.)<sup>275</sup> The detective's first job was to transfer me here, to Cormeilles-en-Parisi, in an old fort. This was a fortunate inspiration on his part, because the prison in which I now find myself is – in comparison to Fresnes – a veritable holiday resort. Listening to the radio almost every evening, pleasant personnel and a very understanding warden. I'm not joking, here there is a spirit that is unexpected in a prison and, in its inevitably barbed-wire framework, life is rendered tolerable for all that. Thus I suppose that the first two letters have been retained at Fresnes and haven't been sent to me

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<sup>269</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: All the letters from Serge Berna to Gil J Wolman are preserved in the Gil J Wolman Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, GEN MSS 969, b.1.f. 17-18.

<sup>270</sup> Since all but two of these letters (the one that is dated 9 February [1953] and begins "My Dear J," and the one that is dated 1 March [1953] and begins "My Dear J") bear the stamp in question, I have dispensed with these bullet points.

<sup>271</sup> To distinguish my interpolations from those of Jean-Louis Rançon, the former will continue to be marked [*sic*], while the latter will be marked (*sic*), as elsewhere.

<sup>272</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>273</sup> *héraut* misspelled *hérault*.

<sup>274</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Jean Baylot, the Prefect of Police in Paris from 1951 to 1954.

<sup>275</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

because of my departure. Whatever the circumstance, I ask you for two urgent things:

1). Go by my hotel and store my things at your place, or, failing that, at least my manuscripts.<sup>276</sup> The note that I attach to this letter will serve you where the landlady is concerned and, moreover, I will write to her directly on Monday or Tuesday.

2). Go by Pierre Garçon's place and ask him to hand over to you personally the 40,000 francs that he owes me. I alerted him to your arrival when I sent you my first letter, I will write to him again today. Keep this money on your person and send it to me when the need for it arises. (This second point was crossed out by Serge Berna himself.)<sup>277</sup>

3). If you can grab the linen and things at my landlady's place, you will be able to send me a linen parcel (exclusively linen and clothing, no food, which must be sent in a separate package . . .) with 2 shirts, the big socks, the "training"<sup>278</sup> pants and you can also include a pair of size 44 basketball socks and a warm sweater, which you can buy with the 40,000 francs.

Excuse me for tasking you with all these things, but I find that I am completely alone. I wrote [*écri*] (*sic*) to you from Fresnes to please be silent about my arrest, because I still hoped to get out of there at the time. But at present I fear that this won't happen soon. I must "serve" the sentence of six months suspended that was allotted to me in 1949 for the theft of a book. As I did a month of preventive detention last year at Fresnes, there only remain five more months. I will get out in May. The merry month of May. And carrying great literary productions, those that only flourish in the shadows. Essays, poems, hair-brushing songs, etc. etc. I recommend that you encourage people like Debor (*sic*), Brau, etc. to write to me and notify me of the stages in the slow exit of the LI and also outcome of the family drama<sup>279</sup> that we were given the opportunity to witness.

I thank you in advance, and I hope to get news from you soon.

Serge Berna

Room 8 No. 2797

FORT DE CORMEILLES-EN-PARISI

Seine and Oise (address written twice by Serge Berna)

PS/ (three-and-a-half lines blacked out by the penitentiary's censor)

PS/ Go by Mrs. Moineau's place and ask her to give you (a) the briefcase that contains my manuscripts (phrase crossed out by Serge Berna)<sup>280</sup> and (b) my correspondence that you can send to me.

2) Are you able to buy a second-hand sleeping bag or a sheet?

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<sup>276</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: this is how Wolman was able to preserve among his papers Berna's influential film-novel *Les Jeux de l'amour et du hazard*.

<sup>277</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>278</sup> English in original.

<sup>279</sup> The Lettrist International's separation from Isidore Isou.

<sup>280</sup> Interpolations by Jean-Louis Rançon.

27 January [1953]  
My friend G[il] J [Wolman]

No wonder that you complain about my stubborn silence in the only letter that I have received from you. Indeed, with great perseverance I sent mine to 286, rue Saint-Denis.<sup>281</sup> Perseverance because, receiving your laconic note, I thought that you had received one of the three letters (I have already you sent a fourth one) that I've sent you since my arrest.

The lack of response depressed me a little, because I thought that, having sent me the money and a response, you had received both of my letters at least. Today the mystery of the thing was revealed to me by the postal administration, which sent me *one of the letters addressed to you with the note "unknown at 286, rue St. Denis"* and for good reason. In the transfer from Fresnes to Cormeilles-en-Parisi (my new prison, see explanation on the other sheet), I lost my list of addresses and my memory deceived me concerning the number of your house. Which means that you received my first letter but not the following ones, which, perhaps, will be returned to me as well. But I hope that at present we can establish normal communications between us. In any case, I can confirm receipt of your letter dated the 13<sup>th</sup> [January 1953] and the money order for 3,000 francs. Concerning the two money orders for 20,000 francs, the best thing would be for Mrs. Moineau to receive them and give them to you, along with the rest of the 7,500, for safekeeping. If she can't receive them, tell me and I will deal directly with the postal service.

For the rest, see the other sheet.

I shake your hand.

Serge (signature behind a drawing of bars)<sup>282</sup>

P.S. Your "pictogram" letterhead (here an arrow pointing to his signature behind bars)<sup>283</sup> has had great success in the barracks and was unanimously adopted. Creator!

P.S. 1) The address of Paule the Sweet<sup>284</sup> can be found in the telephone book, her husband is a doctor. If there are several names like that, remember that he lives close to the Porte de Charenton.<sup>285</sup>

2) A bedroom would be of great usefulness!

3) I see in the margins of this letter just received "I love Serge." Of course, but *who* exactly had the need to let me know this? And what about the other illegible signatures?

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<sup>281</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Wolman lived at 216, rue Saint-Denis, Paris, 2d arrond., the headquarters of the family knitwear factory Tricomonde.

<sup>282</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>283</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>284</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Paule Thévenin, wife of Dr. Yves Thévenin, lived at 33, rue Gabrielle in Charleton-le-Pont (Val-de-Marne): in possession of many unpublished manuscripts by her friend Antonin Artaud, who died on 4 March 1948, she would publish his *Oeuvres complètes* through Gallimard, despite the opposition of the rights holders.

<sup>285</sup> Footnote by Serge Berna: Don't do anything concerning Bhifutin (?) without warning me first.

[Here there appears the name “Serge” with either a sun or flowers at the top of the letter “S.”]

Very important.

With these words I lift the moral ban weighing on my journal-notebooks. Thus can you go ahead and read them if you want, and if you have already done so, then let your remorse disappear.

Especially because “intimate” journals always manage to not be so. They inevitably come under an Eye, if not, we wouldn’t write them.

1 February 43 (*sic*)

My friend G[il] J [Wolman]

I write you between two coughing fits and a dive into the tumultuous river of a malign fever. On the one hand, a handkerchief covered with humors; on the other, I hold the burning iron of my sincere repentance. I will never do it again, I ask for forgiveness from God and the bookstores of rue Bonaparte.

Thus I’m in a full moral crisis, which I fear will be transformed into a chronic asthma such as sin. The day is spring-like and I find myself behind the Bars. I’m also taking refuge in reading Sadoul (the history of cinema), Nietzsche, Montherlant – as you can see the fort’s library is good, but small. I have already made the rounds. The problem is that it is difficult to “concentrate” when in a room full of 20 men.

I have learned from Guy that the LI has half collapsed and that the director has fled to North Africa. I am furious (in a manner of speaking) that my text etc. All the same, it is appalling: what was it that caused Brau’s breakdown? Perhaps the constant struggle against the lack of money? But Brau is so versatile that it is possible that he will not leave, etc.

Concerning the publication of Artaud’s manuscripts, this is how things stand: a popular bookstore, Loric (rue Bonaparte), purchased them from me at a very good price. They paid me a part of it and, using the rest of it, were to have published a volume or some of the texts with the note “published in Ottawa.” When they learned that I am in prison, they recoiled and terminated their engagement. With the result that they possess part of the texts (corresponding to the sum that they paid me) and I possess the remainder. I wrote to them a little over a month ago and they refused to continue to envision even the possibility of publishing it. It is aggravating.

And so, for the moment, it is goodbye Artaud.

I believe that you are in the process of working on an “oeuvre” and that doing so is the “least bad” thing in life; for my part, every day I add a few pages to this or that, but I don’t have my heart set on anything yet.

I found a way of getting an 8-day suspended sentence in “solitary confinement” for refusing to go to the washroom on a day of passive revolt and stubborn sleep. An idiotic world in which they still put guys “in a corner” when they do not wash. Nevertheless, the discipline here is much less rigorous than in

the other prisons, which suffer from being in a moment of “transition” between the old “coercive” penitentiary system and the new tendencies towards salvation through work-is-freedom. Thus I’ve fallen into an ancient zone that sometimes has progressive moments.

My friend Gil, I await news from you.

Serge (behind a drawing of bars)<sup>286</sup>

P.S. Provide me with clarifications concerning the 40,000 francs addressed to Moineau. In case you haven’t received my last two letters, let me say that:

- a) if Moineau can get the money, let her give it to you and keep it for me;
- b) if she can’t get to it, let me know, I will write the post office.

Merci,  
S.

Paris (*sic*)  
9 February [1953]

My dear [Gil] J [Wolman],

My sojourn in the countryside went according to the plan that was provided by the destiny written in the stars. By the way, I now have the right to tattoo on my left breast the word “Fatalitasse”<sup>287</sup> as a result of punishment dished out these past few days following an appearance before the “Courtroom” (the prison’s tribunal), where I was sentenced to 8 days (suspended sentence) in a correctional cell “All shame swallowed.” Reason: refusing to wash and go to the bathroom. My existentialist past seriously marred my defense without taking account of certain unfavorable indications in my dossier concerning my previous “criminal” behavior. In fact, *you will remember that, in 1951, in Fresnes, I was subjected to mistreatment* (fire hoses and other brutalities) and that, upon my release, there was a press campaign including, among others, that article in *Franc-Tireur*, titled “Arbitrariness and torture being used in the Fresnes prison in 1951,” which Altmann had pushed through.<sup>288</sup> The fact that these customs (fire hoses, etc.) were abolished at the beginning of 1952 indicates to me that my article had influence to a certain extent . . .

*Nothing comparable to Fresnes here*, of course, but there prevails a strange nervousness in the superstructures due to the imbalance within the general penitentiary regime, which oscillates between a future centered upon reeducation

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<sup>286</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>287</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: “Fatalitas!” [Destiny!] was the customary exclamation of the prisoner Chéri-Bibi, an unjustly condemned hero in a serialized novel by Gaston Leroux.

<sup>288</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Georges Altmann, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Franc-Tireur* (1941-1957). The article appeared on 9 October 1951 under the title “Arbitrary detention and revolting brutality: are these methods democratic?” [Translator: see above.]

and a purely coercive past. In what concerns me personally, it is understood that I only had to get up on time . . .

And so it is a man sent to the corner who thanks you for having made those famous “gestures” and who is very relieved that his papers are in a safe place. Concerning your money order, which was sent on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, it hasn’t reached me. It is true that the prison only receives them twice a week (Thursday and Sunday) and that I might get it tomorrow. If not, it will have been sent back to you due to an error in the account number. But this would surprise me because I told everyone. In any case, I hope that you have written your return address clearly.

I also await the package with the large sweater in it. Upon receipt and within the authorized limits as to time (scholastic style), I will let you know.

Give me ample information about your lettrist performance at Tabou and clarifications on the subject of the interview by the *New York Herald*.

Concerning Artaud, I have written to Debor (*sic*) that the publisher and bookseller, who had purchased a portion of the manuscripts, having learned of the misfortune that has come down upon me, let me know that, given the uncertain conditions surrounding this story, it would better to postpone publication *sine die*.<sup>289</sup>

But I will cut this short. Hello to everyone and I salute you heartily.

Serge

P.S. I believe that there exist publications that are concerned with the penitentiary question and that could furnish me with certain details that could make a connection between my juridical-theoretical knowledge and my concrete penitentiary experience. Inquire at the Bibliothèque nationale – one of these days such information will be useful for the “intelligent” brochure that I will publish when I get out. Then my sojourn here will at least be good for something.

Paris (*sic*)

9 February [1953]

My friend [Gil] J [Wolman],

A brief note in haste. I’ve waited for the 3,000-franc money order, which hasn’t arrived yet, and I’d like to determine the precise date it was sent (your letter was posted on 4 February and you wrote me that the money order had been sent the day before, that is to say, on the 3<sup>rd</sup>), so that I can ask in “the right place.”

The laundry package has also not arrived.

Let me know if you haven’t heard back from Henri [de Béarn].

Also, I have decided to “work.” I’m a barely specialized laborer at the radio workshop and all day long I take apart mine detectors, which is work of pure destruction in which I can vent my aggressiveness and earn 200 francs per

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<sup>289</sup> Latin for “indefinitely.”

day. A strictly futurist, collectivist and productionist schedule. Radio Luxembourg in the evening, *football*<sup>290</sup> on Sundays.

A galley slave, in the manner of René Clair, that's what I am, with something Courtelinesque overall.<sup>291</sup>

At night, I fall into the sleep of the just man who has accomplished his daily labor.

Serge<sup>292</sup>

Friday<sup>293</sup>

My friend [Gil] J [Wolman],

The fact that you have been informed in the “neighborhood” about the procedure to follow for the sending of packages is absolutely admirable. All roads towards prison pass through Rome or its branch offices. Notice that the agreement between the State and the Holy See concerning the nonreciprocal, one-way direction of packages only applies to the Fresnes prison. Then observe my astonishment when, at the counter, they call out to me: “BOERNA, package from the Catholic relief service!!”

For a split second I thought that you had founded a “Christian Lettrist Youth” organization with Debor (*sic*) as secretary general, and that you'd become buddies with Schuman.<sup>294</sup> But I soon realized that it was nothing of the sort when I was told that one of the books sent by you had been provisionally held back because the title had the word “love” in it. Stop sending me indecencies, I want what's austere, I prohibit you from exceeding the reasonable limits established by Rétif de La Bretonne<sup>295</sup> and, among the moderns – here I execrate a contemporary wretch – B-Lemaître<sup>296</sup> (two interrogative words blacked out by the censor).<sup>297</sup>

Following the last letter that I wrote to you, I made an honorable atonement: if I have been punished, this isn't because I have an existentialist background, but because I quite simply remained in bed, and I was objectively condemned by a board of directors that, in the [current] difficult penitentiary situation, is in the avant-garde.

Thus,

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<sup>290</sup> English in original.

<sup>291</sup> René Clair, real name René Chomette (1898-1981), was a surrealist filmmaker; Georges Courteline, real name Georges Victor Marcel Moinaux (1858-1929), was a satirist, dramatist and novelist.

<sup>292</sup> This name is surrounded by what looks like a chain; to the right, there are tools (one of which is clearly a bolt cutter) that can be used to break it.

<sup>293</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon: 13 or 20 February 1953.

<sup>294</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Robert Schuman, a Christian-Democratic politician, was declared venerable by the Pope in 2021. [Translator: on 8 January 1953, roughly one month before this letter was written, Schuman was forced to resign his position as the Minister of Foreign Affairs because of his handling of the situation in Morocco.]

<sup>295</sup> A French novelist (1734-1806) who wrote about sexual fetishes, prostitution and perversion.

<sup>296</sup> Maurice B. Lemaître (1926-2018), a lettrist painter, filmmaker and poet.

<sup>297</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.



Imagine my surprise when, inclining on a (11 lines blacked out by the censor; a few floating words left behind: *l'on nous, Passe, soir, celui-là*).<sup>298</sup> [words missing] a meeting concerning the manuscripts (a line and a half concerning Artaud blacked out by the censor). I can assure you that it shocked me to see, wandering among the milling machines, the flat-nose pliers and the snow on the window panes, this guy whose books I love and whom I agreed to meet. (A half-line blacked out) and this was very good (a line and a half blacked out) on the (one line blacked out) pilot-prison.” They tell me that it would be (two-and-a-half lines blacked out by the censor).

In any case, let's return to my reality and your kindness. The sweater has adapted itself perfectly to my “mechanisms” (shoulders) and I suspect that it comes straight from rue St-Denis. In fact, the money order for 3,000 francs has arrived. I COMMAND YOU to take 1,000 francs for yourself and, one of these evenings, convert that money into alcoholic beverages. Deb. (Debord)<sup>299</sup> and you. Understood. And to write me in a state of drunkenness (re-read the next day, all the same).

Tell me what you “think.”

Serge Berna

P.S. Are there no letters for me at Madame Moineau's place?

2. If someone demands the typewriter, say that you don't know where it is, which is in fact true. But tell me in what spirit that demand is made.

3. As you see, there is no “curse.”

P.S. 2. My barracks room is now No. 8.

22 February [1953]

My friend [Gil] J [Wolman],

Just received your letter of the 18<sup>th</sup>, the one in which you explain in detail your aversion to “furnishing details” when the facts or events themselves are quite unbearable . . . I have also received the requested telegraphic money order.

To respond to the question about whether anything is needed here at Cormeilles, I assure you that I now find myself (I believe) provided with all the necessary items, which are very few. The prison takes care of the basic indispensable supplies. Thus, my last letter was chiseled according to extra-artistic ideals and – the man in charge of the darkness has never seen it – the effect was extremely avant-garde. This is what opens perspectives on the ulterior motives of the aforementioned new taste: the reintroduction of affective-moral barriers into the general sensibility – so as to recreate a new *constriction*, because they seem to have discovered a psychological law that wants “unconditional liberation” to be accompanied by a deliquescence of the dynamism. All

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<sup>298</sup> All (interpolations) in this paragraph are by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>299</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

“liberation” movements since the Renaissance end up in Heidegger – free for death.

So there we are.

Imagine my life, and envy me, man of liberty: I am guaranteed by the great walls put up against noxious idleness, they have slowly forced us to take our meals at regular hours, I change my boxer shorts weekly. Drunkenness is scrupulously kept at a distance thanks to insensible precautions. And finally, by my daily labor, I earn nine to 10 thousand [francs] per month. It is honest work and I am determined to dismantle automatic altimeters in a workshop that is ventilated and provided with bathrooms – what do I have to complain about? Metaphysics? Not even that, because I sleep with her<sup>300</sup> every night. You have under your eyes the writing of a happy and active man who wants to play football (*sic*) every morning from 11 to 11:30.

Nevertheless, in my spare time I write a few poems in the orthodox style, the most recently created, in a deadly rhythm, and I study its brand-new system of notation in a life that is full, healthy and respectful of the laws.

~~Last Thursday~~ Yesterday, a clergyman whose job is to show films in the prison – the most recent one was *La Symphonie pastorale*,<sup>301</sup> which is extraordinary – that is to say, since I am currently immersed in Nietzsche’s *The Will to Power*, I saw it from the perspective of the book, which is that of Gide.<sup>302</sup> It is a film full of ulterior motives (although a little old-fashioned). In fact, why not propose that the clergyman screen *L’Anticoncept*?<sup>303</sup> As it happens, he needs films that make one think about the future. Debor (*sic*) should not be angry with me if I do not write to him, because additional letters are rarely permitted.

Nocturnal side (escape, dreams, the imaginary, etc.)

Address as before, but ~~room~~ workshop No. 5.

In *Les Environs des Fresnes* (1952-1953), Guy Debord reads from and comments upon an extract from a letter written in prison by Serge Berna, blacked out by the censor:

February 1953. Serge Berna writes to us:

Record of the metaphysical police.

Debord, a moralist by necessity, knows this; ashamed that necessity has the ignoble character of the necessary; scheming, otherwise he loses; weak, sad and fickle in the face of things, like a child facing his nightmare. Debord gets up in the morning and says: “Today, I will not kill myself.”

This communication from Serge Berna was censored because of its lack of apologetic value.

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<sup>300</sup> In French, the gender of the word *métaphysique* is female.

<sup>301</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: a film by Jean Delannoy (1946).

<sup>302</sup> See André Gide, *Lettres à Angèle* (1898-1900) and *L’immoraliste* (1902).

<sup>303</sup> A lettrist film by Gil J Wolman (1951), banned by the censors the following year.

1 March [1953]  
My dear [Gil] J [Wolman],

A short time. March. The Daisies. I'm sick of it. Even though the treatment is excellent, etc. The splendid weather this Sunday morning beribboned with "azure" has made me feel "gloomy" [*noir*]. The ambiance of the barracks has exhausted all of my reserves of sociability and I need to make an effort not to curl up in a ball at every sound. This afternoon the collectively shared radio discharged the screams of the crowds in France's stadiums into my ears. I have put some absorbent cotton into them. Nevertheless, I almost became enraged. But, as these broadcasts please the majority of the little rogues, I simply doubled the quantity of the cotton.

How's life treating you? I would like to have a little information . . . During an hour-and-a-half-long break, I watched a *televised* broadcast (because the prison took up a collection and purchased a television set) in which there was a mediocre film and "a televised news report" about the Six Jours,<sup>304</sup> the modern equivalent of circus games, and my word! After this week's isolation, this waterspout of yelling, accordion songs, pedaling gladiators, stars who came out to ham it up, busybody-style gossiping and sandwiches idealized by Art produced a strange shock. A canned free-for-all. To think that they will soon rebroadcast a show from l'Alhambra<sup>305</sup> fills me with vague recollections. In any case, the irruption of the external world into the monastic and severe refuge that is this prison's concept produced a singular mixture in my soul. The effects on the mass are considerable. In the mind of the prisoner, there are incitements to human dignity and a way for him not to feel divorced from the community, as one says. For these transparent and reasonable reasons, I will ask, towards the middle of the month, to "go down" into isolation in order to complete certain written works.

But I do not know if you have divined that I am curious about two things: the structural lines of the events that interest us, literary and otherwise; and your own person. I await with a patience doubled by a doubled impatience, that of – I will not continue on this theme.

My parents, my noble progenitors, have seized the opportunity created by the "theft" that led me to "fall" into prison to deluge me with acrimonious letters that do me wrong and that I deal with as best as I can. It is quite difficult to defend one's own childhood. Me, who am only armored by wooden planks.

I trust that you, in the company of D[ebord], have drunk the thousand francs, for which I am indebted to you in all kinds of ways and of which I cannot think of a better use.

I am very uneasy about the adventures of the paintings displayed in Metz this past Christmas. Can you provide some clarifications on this subject concerning your paintings and those of the others?

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<sup>304</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: the Six Jours de Paris, a track cycling race that was held at the Vélodrome d'hiver, rue Nélaton, 15<sup>th</sup> arrond.

<sup>305</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Alhambra, an auditorium formerly located at 50, rue de Malte, 11<sup>th</sup> arrond., destroyed in 1967.

Thus I was very happy to learn that D's<sup>306</sup> three-dimensional psychology is moving forward with great strides. No wrong steps.<sup>307</sup> Of course, in large part; in any case, there must be some kind of mechanism that is triggered in certain circumstances and that pushes the most destructive clerics [*hic*] towards constructing a beautiful system. Admiration for borderline cases such as Vaché<sup>308</sup> becomes simple stylistic choices. But how does this serialization of obstacles take place? You partially know, you who are in an intermediate zone between no and yes.

I shake your hands where this nerve-racking question is concerned.  
Serge Berna

March [1953]  
My friend [Gil] J [Wolman],

I've just finished a letter to Guy [Debord]. And I'm out of breath from the effort.

One thing first and so much the worse if it appears "discourteous."

I do not love women who are beyond their childhood years. This is because of my infantilism, etc.

As "spring" came, I greeted the girls whom I could adore. My niece, yet another child, and I urge you to transmit my greetings to the cousin (?) who I saw at your place last winter and whose cherry-red goat-like aspect struck me profoundly. I tell you that she has taken a place in my nocturnal dreams (those without seminal emissions) in which I start a round dance of children and again think about the golden age.

In exchange, here's what I can teach you: every morning the radio beguiles us with the broadcast "A Year of Songs." Now hear this wonderful news. (I use the terms in which I described this news to Guy.) A singer whispered her charm. "The love that you want, here it is, etc." Suddenly, a thunderstorm over a beach on the edge of the Marne. Frenetic screaming, a cage for wild animals set on fire, a bunch of hysterical-maniacal crises. Slightly muffled amazement; two elements can be distinguished: a few mouths spitting acid at the face of "the artist of death" pushing the inarticulate ones, compact like a ball of red pins; and at a few registers the very voice of Gil J Wolman himself spitting into the unheard the high-pitched strings that were pulled from several cats tortured in his chest. A mess. My neighbors stopped spitting on the ground, picking their feet, talking about becoming honest again. They were dejected, and while I was almost choking with joy and trying to communicate it to the others, they became nervous, physiologically ill at ease, disoriented. All day I confronted their taunts. Often I banged on the table to impose silence. I quarreled with several of them, counted the real ones.

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<sup>306</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Guy Debord's *Essai de psychologie tridimensionnelle*, a work mentioned in *Ion* (April 1952). [Translator: this work was never published and doesn't seem to have been preserved.]

<sup>307</sup> *Pas de clerics*. Can also be translated as "no clerics" or "no clerks."

<sup>308</sup> Jacques Vaché (1895-1919) was a writer and designer.

That is what happened in concrete terms. The singer, in order to showcase the muffling of her passionate and captivating voice, found nothing better than making use of the Wolmanian choir as a foil. She sang in a sappy way to be soothing and suddenly the choir made a dissonant irruption. She let it go on for a moment, then shushed them by laughing and started her syrup flowing again. It must have been a montage made with the aide of discs of the soundtrack of Isou's film.<sup>309</sup> Nevertheless, it was funny to hear your voice dripping from the loudspeakers and tearing apart the walls. The bars were amusingly sawed through. There you go. Another thing. I am enraged to have read in *Arts* that Nadeau's literary review *Les Lettres nouvelles* has published "two previously unpublished chapters of *Voyage au pays des Tarahumaras*."<sup>310</sup> That bitch Théve<sup>311</sup> really owned that S. asshole.<sup>312</sup> I almost went crazy reading that article.

I trust that you have received my last letter and that there is a chance that I will receive one from you in response either today or tomorrow.

My friend J, after having the pleasure of hearing you "visually," I would like to have that of seeing you for real.

(This letter ends with a rebus.)<sup>313</sup>

Sunday (8, 15 or 22 March [1953])  
My friend [Gil J Wolman],

I have been without news from you for a certain time; I hope that this is independent of your will and that your health is habitually good.

I have received a long letter from Debor (*sic*), who has recounted to me, in slightly ironic terms, his desperate journey since Christmas, which has led him to Cannes and its beautiful summer. As you certainly know, he has withdrawn into a total solitude cut off from alcohol. He also wrote me that [Jean-Louis] Brau "has done everything to make us believe that he has left for Algeria." For my part, the sudden arrival of beautiful days increases the density of the bars with a double luminosity that, though impalpable, is nevertheless very heavy.

Yesterday I resolved (and tomorrow will begin) to only work in the workshop for a half-day and to devote myself deeply to the works that will make me become eternal. Assembly-line work, *true* assembly-line work, strangely coincides with my decision to devote myself to intellectual endeavors, because the first month of work at the workshop in which I live served as fine-tuning for a

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<sup>309</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: In 1950, along with Wolman [and several others], Serge Berna had participated in the recording onto discs of the lettrist choir for the soundtrack of Isidore Isou's film *Traité de bave et d'éternité* (1951).

<sup>310</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Under the title *D'un voyage au pays des Tarahumaras*, the texts by Antonin Artaud published in March 1953 in the first issue of *Lettres nouvelles* were presented as "the second and third chapters of the *Voyage au pays Tarahumaras*, which will be published by Éditions de l'Arbalète," directed by Marc Barbezat. These two texts, *Le Pays des rois mages* and *Une race-principe*, were among the manuscripts that Serge Berna had found and showed to Paule Thévenin. Éditions de l'Arbalète published *Les Tarahumaras* in November 1955.

<sup>311</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Paule Thévenin.

<sup>312</sup> Presumably the author of the article in *Arts*.

<sup>313</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon. [Translator: I have been unable to reproduce or decode this rebus here.]

serious subsequent start, with well-timed, economic and productive movements at the maximum.

Who will speak the poetry of an electricity meter dismantled piece by piece? Certainly not me. Although there is an empty and enviable place for it in lyric poetry and would enjoy the support of the “experts.” Instead, I have been left searching for strange rhythms of this type, which possess an astonishing power of incantation:

(1) TCHIBETAAK TCHIBETAAK (2) TCHIBETAK (3) TAK TAK  
hence: 1-2-3-3 (more and more rapidly)

As you see, I have not wasted my time.

Additionally, if you read the newspapers, you will know that, in the Assembly, they are seriously discussing the articles of the law of *amnesty*, for policies and common rights. The political interests have cavorted there in a typical fashion and it is strange that this partisan struggle may or may not have repercussions for the imminent liberation of your faithful servant.<sup>314</sup> One last thing: I would like it if you could send to me by telegraphic money order the sum of 8,000 francs, if possible as soon as you receive this letter – I am broke.

This evening, before the lights are turned off, I will write a letter to the exile in Cannes<sup>315</sup> and try to beguile that delicate child with a few images.

I shake your hand.

Serge (signature accompanied by a drawing of the sun shining through the bars)<sup>316</sup>

Cormeilles, etc.

Saturday the 28<sup>th</sup>/Sunday the 29<sup>th</sup> (March)<sup>317</sup> [1953]

My friend [Gil] J [Wolman],

So you aren't dead. News from you came out of the blue. Reported missing by Moineau.<sup>318</sup> Weeks passed. Perhaps you were in Holland, in the places at which “the sea regains its ancient rights” (*France-Soir*).

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<sup>314</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: the Law of Amnesty (6 August 1953) concerns violations of common law committed before 1 January 1951: it was applicable to Serge Berna (who had pre-empted the call-up of the class of 1944) under Article 29, paragraph 6, which concerns common law crimes committed by active volunteers in the war of 39-45, notably his involvement in the Auteuil scandal of 18 June 1950.

<sup>315</sup> Guy Debord.

<sup>316</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon. [Translator: this drawing was not reproduced by Rançon.]

<sup>317</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

<sup>318</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: On 28 March 1953, “an evening waiting for drunkenness,” Jean-Michel Mension, writing from “Moineau Palace,” addressed a general delivery letter to Gil J Wolman and Jean-Louis Brau, who were then in Algiers. (This letter would be returned to its sender.) It said in part: “Perhaps amnesty will be granted to Berna in a few days. [...] Would like to have the exact address of Serge B. He was written to Madame Moineau, wants money but no address?” A letter bearing several seals of the Lettrist International [was] also written by the

And then that strange, illegible letter from Africa.<sup>319</sup> Incidentally, is the African continent in the middle of spring? Lucky you (this written automatically like “How is your Aunt?”). Up here, in the areas surrounding Paris, moss is growing between the bars and we are going to change our blankets, which urgently need it. Where is the North African unrest? Still the reign of the tasseled brute?

As I have the time, I’m going to rest a little from having written this whole page. Good night. *The next day*: clear weather, slightly cloudy towards the south. Strange – towards the south, as Breton A<sup>320</sup> says = the weakened poor people who have covered the forestage for so long and who have been named rationalists only see chance and meteorological law, while this morning the Saint-Jacques Tower, it seemed to me, turned a bit in a direction that never ceases to intrigue me: towards the SOUTH.

(I have decided to say *nothing* in this letter.)

Thus I wonder about the current contours of Lemaître Maurice [*sic*], you should give me some news about him. Above all, take good care. Tell me what happened. I want to know. By the way, tell me if you have drunk the 1,000 francs, this excellent usage of which I recommended to you. Hello Zette. Who is Zette? Zette is not Monique and is not a rocking chair. It is time to have ambition: we will not have conferences in Belgium or elsewhere. I will write my book at Saint-James in Scotland under the influence of Anjou. The radio . . . I will publish a collection of *Poésie sans Mouvement Brownien* ETC.

Serge (signature behind a drawing of prison bars)

### IMPORTANT

SVP<sup>321</sup> immediately send 3,000 francs to Madame Michèle ESDAY. Édition[s] Corrèa (put the address, which I don’t know).  
*It is very important.*

P.S. Have a workout.<sup>322</sup>  
Three times.  
Ex 1 to 2

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lettrists who remained in Paris (Midhou Dahou, P. J. Berlé, and Éliane Pápaï) after Guy Debord’s departure for Cannes. Gil J Wolman Papers, Beinecke Library, Yale University. GEN MSS 969, b. 4, f. 100.

<sup>319</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Raçon: Wolman had gone to Algeria with Jean-Louis Brau and Françoise Lejare at the end of February [1953]. He would only return to Paris at the beginning of May.

<sup>320</sup> André Breton.

<sup>321</sup> *Si vous plait* (if you please).

<sup>322</sup> Next to this phrase are three hand-drawn stick figures, which bend over until the last one reaches a yoga-like pose (“downward-facing dog”).

Cormeilles, 12 April [1953]  
My dear Guy [Debord]<sup>323</sup>

I have just returned from an exhausting game of shuffleboard: confronting each other were the teams of the first and second floors. The first team won because they were the strongest. The second will do better the . . . etc. (I do not believe so, as I will be the captain of the first team of the first floor). My pen was hardly in my hand when the old song of the penal colony<sup>324</sup> started resonating off the walls: “My friend, where are you (*repeat*) in prison and the heavens above.” It’s true that the song is about someone condemned to death and not a champion of shuffleboard [played] on hard ground who gets out on 12 May – in principle. When it comes down to it, we do not have the right, faced with the requirements of art, to enter prison with the prospect of getting out of it. But the Absolute is so simple and easy, it would be enough to ~~so~~ machinate [*machiner*] Feltin in a public square. I think about it a lot. A scandal in the chapter – I have refined myself, I no longer accept, neither for my friends nor for me, small mediocre affairs in the style of the one at rue d’Ulm.<sup>325</sup>

I am thrilled by the fact that you envision making a film. Bravo. Bravo. Energy for heaven’s sake. So what!

For my part, at the workshop, I have been appointed to a position that I can’t say is important, yet . . . I’m the one who helps the one who sorts the screws. Having experienced a kind of certain exhaustion that results from this intellectual labor – count it and *write it down* and weigh it and write it down – I envision another function, one that is more primitive and wholesome: burning coil on a grill in the prison courtyard so as to extract the copper that is well hidden within the fortunately quite flammable enamel casing. Thus, a slightly vestal wise man, (and of course) slightly Vulcan with lumps of sun and soot – a beautiful ambivalence – in my short but virile hair. During the afternoon I build my eternity by resting from the morning’s weariness, and I accumulate internal materials thanks to the most idiotic books in the library, you can’t imagine how much I’m learning about how it isn’t necessary to write. And furthermore, and furthermore, I will tell you that I prefer to read the bad books rather than the so-called good ones, because the good ones are *never* good, while the bad ones allow one to believe that there might be some excellent ones. There are not enough bad books. This is what at one point made me focus on ugly and stupid women.

Your idea about the lack of a Witness really interests me. The eye of Cain is no longer in the Tomb because there is no more Cain, no more Tomb and no more Eye (I do not think much about the blue-toned partridge that this letter

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<sup>323</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: this letter carried two seals of the prison administration’s censor. Fonds Guy Debord, Département des manuscrits, BnF, NAF 28603.

<sup>324</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: “La Complainte du corsaire” [The Corsair’s Lament], words by Henri Contet, music by André Grassi, 1946. “Where are you, comrade, where are you? In prison and the heavens above. What are you doing, comrade, what are you doing? A corsair is always a hanged man!”

<sup>325</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: the tape recording *Histoire de l’Internationale lettriste* (December 1956) relates the following for the year 1952: “Sabotage of the Congress of Young Poetry, assembled at the Pedagogical Museum on rue d’Ulm. The deployment of many police forces against the lettrists causes the withdrawal of a great number of the participants.”



hangs). Note that this isn't so tragic; above all, the absence of a witness abolishes false testimony. And the true, it is true: but finally what is this need for black and white? Say hello to [Jean-Louis] Brau, to his immoralist house, if you happen to see that tortuous character who is so faithful to the teachings of I<sup>326</sup> that he loses himself in the secret drawers and ulterior motives advocated by Jean-the-Neurotic.

As for J,<sup>327</sup> he no longer picks up his pen, to such an extent that, up until I received your letter, I thought that he'd perished in a North African thunderstorm. The wind and the sand have lost much of their poetry ever since I read the *Reader's Digest*<sup>328</sup> article that reported on Saharan road projects and the collection of wind-turbine energy between Algiers and Chad. I hope you have a great career in tape recording,<sup>329</sup> my dear it is *necessary* to put it on the airwaves. In fact, it is a shame that my song<sup>330</sup> has not enjoyed the popularity that it is deserves. I will make sure it becomes otherwise in the near future. And there's the radio station that drips out Alhambra's Sunday program. Recollection . . . Fundamentally, it is always possible to replace the Witness with spectators. Paying ones, of course. I give you the emotion, you give me the dough. The problem remains unsolved (after the decline of the Maquereau).<sup>331</sup> The public or the artists (previously both were whores): who will be the other's pimp? [André] Breton, he remains half-dear, half-fish, half-kitten. I send you my regards with this modest "play on words."

Serge

Anti-Cormeilles-les-Sombres  
18 April [1953]<sup>332</sup>

My dear dead man,<sup>333</sup>

It is with inexpressible (ineffable?) regret that I've come to learn about your death, which fortunately occurred in the best possible conditions (in a state of drunkenness, on payday, your pen clenched in a distant pocket). That was a

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<sup>326</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Jean-Isidore Isou.

<sup>327</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Gil J Wolman.

<sup>328</sup> English in original.

<sup>329</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: *Les Environs de Fresnes*. [Translator: Guy Debord, "Les environs de Fresnes" (1952-1953), in Debord, *Enregistrements magnétiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010).]

<sup>330</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: the "Chanson du pauvre bateleur" [Song of the Poor Acrobat], which Serge Berna sang for *Les Environs de Fresnes* in April 1952, during the recording of a poem [allegedly] by Paul-Henri Michuard, "Au Coeur de mon amour dans la nuit," and which, in March 1953, Guy Debord replaced with the phrase "This will be for another planet."

<sup>331</sup> *Maquereau* (mackerel) is both the name of a bar or restaurant (many are currently in existence), and slang for "pimp."

<sup>332</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: this last letter to Gil J Wolman, who'd left for a trip to Algeria, begins with a drawing of a funeral wreath. [Translator: not reproduced here.]

<sup>333</sup> Of course, Wolman was not dead; Berna was just making a rather morbid joke about the fact that his friend hadn't written to him in a while.

hard blow. Penniless in the flower of the age, of an age full of youth and promise, at the threshold of a maturity of mind that was rich in fruits (those same flowers of youth). The very day of your death, by chance and in a dream, I passed by 216, rue St Denis. I entered a nearby bistro to reflect on things. There I positively heard the weeping of the Machine with which you<sup>334</sup> had knitted. This inhuman machine was so attached to you that it cried.<sup>335</sup>

It sounded like this, more or less: TchouK OuK TchouK tchouK OuK. The street was full of lamentations on the subject of the great dead filmmaker for whom the centuries had laid the foundations of the walls of the corridors of the Metro, which, in 1951, was named after you. Honest women and those not so honest scattered the ashes of their Gauloises on their gray heads of wailing grief, those were the cigarettes that he preferred despite a celebrity that would have permitted him to smoke Craven “A.”<sup>336</sup> But he was so simple. Some in the newsrooms said that it was absinthe that killed him, like all the “artists.” The psychologists spoke of a suppressed Adlerian complex. But no one in fact knew what higher reason presided over his death. Some in the entourage spoke of a slow suicide, which is nonsense because everyone commits it, as if it wasn’t precisely the case that poets *make manifest* what is hidden by the obvious. Other people said that he kept bad company . . . If he had changed his tune a little before falling into the false arms of the green Grim Reaper, he could’ve gotten away with it. But people only think about getting away to anywhere that they can go wandering all over the map, ahuéadia.<sup>337</sup>

He made ends meet, the extremes were his: he definitively got away, without any clumsy or crude movements.

He has been in Heaven; he is in the Hindu Herb Section of Heaven.

He is tasked with adding soundtracks to cyclones . . .

Goodbye, I will sacrifice three priests in your honor.

Serge (signature behind a drawing of prison bars)<sup>338</sup>

[Letters after getting out of prison]

S.B.

Impasse de la Brasserie

avenue Sidi-Chami

Oran (Alg)<sup>339</sup>

1 January 1954

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<sup>334</sup> Correcting what I take to be a mistake: the word “*Il*” (He or It).

<sup>335</sup> Knitter was in fact one of Wolman’s many occupations.

<sup>336</sup> Gauloises (France) are cheap cigarettes; Craven “A” (England) is better quality and more expensive.

<sup>337</sup> *à hue et à dia*, literally to go left and right at the same time; *ahuéadia* turns the phrase into a single nonsensical word.

<sup>338</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon:

<sup>339</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: in December 1953, Serge Berna traveled to Algeria, where he gave talks “about everything” in Algiers, Tlemcen and Oran.

My friend W[olman],

It will not be said that I have only written to you by legal accident.

Let's proceed in order.

a) congratulations on your marriage to Violette.<sup>340</sup>

It seems that I know your wife. At least by sight. Upon my return to Paris, I will come and make sure.

b) congratulations on your (half-completed) film project – *Qu'on m'amène ce mec*.<sup>341</sup>

A crude film?<sup>342</sup> A still image of Peter Chaney? Mass murder with a clac-clac soundtrack? In which we are Johnny with the Producers<sup>343</sup> gang[?]

Do you need a helping hand, old man?

Tips: a) from different sides, b) on behalf of Waffen-Korea-Brahu,<sup>344</sup> who kept alive, in a military fashion, the dreams that he lugged along the boulevards in the form of a small hammer that he kept in his briefcase.

I saw him on 1 November [1953]: he was expecting stupendous sums to arrive the next day – a sign-up bonus.

I saw him on 20 December: he was expecting, etc., see above.

The Zak Zak Machine takes him on a strange path.

Brau is a stranger to himself. One could not do better. This puts a lump in my throat.

Saw Isidore several times. He'd like to re-indoctrinate me. While walking, he placed himself a half-meter behind me and talked and talked. At the end of the B[oulevard] St Germain, he asked me if I'd like to go see X for him.

Has not changed.

His passions are boring, like all passions.

I'm in Algeria, giving a "conference" on everything in Oran. Have seen the intelligentsia. Not funny or odd. All passionate.

That lot, the enthusiasts, are as anachronistic as one-speed bicycles.

Conferences in Algiers and Tlemcen. If you send me the details (titles, possibilities), I will speak about *your* films. In this way, prepared ground.

Serge. Happy New Year.

Upon [his release from jail and] his return to Paris, Serge Berna went to Saint-Germain-des-Prés and found lodging at 14, rue des Canettes, at the hotel Alsace et Lorraine, which, since

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<sup>340</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Wolman married Violette Brassart on 19 December 1953.

<sup>341</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: In *Internationale lettriste* No. 3 (August 1953), two films by Wolman, *Faut m'avoir ce mec* and *Oraison funèbre*, are said to be in the process of being made, but they were never completed.

<sup>342</sup> *Film en langue verte?* literally a film in a green tongue.

<sup>343</sup> English in original.

<sup>344</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Excluded from the Lettrist International, Jean-Louis Brau joined the Indochinese Expeditionary Corps and embarked at Marseille on 15 April 1954. [Translator: In the words of Gil J Wolman, who wrote the text that announced this exclusion, Brau was excluded for "military deviation." See "À la Porte" ("Get Out"), *Potlatch* #2, 29 June 1954, above.]

the death of [Marcel] Proust, was the home of his governess, Céleste Albaret, and his wife, Odilon.

Soon after, Berna decided to launch a journal titled *En Marge* and, in June [1954], reestablished contact with his Belgian friends, first Albert Van Loock, the bookseller who had welcomed him to Brussels in 1951, and then with the surrealists Marcel Mariën and René Magritte, whom he invited to collaborate on the journal.<sup>345</sup>

[June 1954]

My friend V[an] L[oock],

Not dead, but not knowing how I survived the accumulation of varied circumstances since 1951, I write to you.

Do you still have long hair? Are you still doing a little business at that damned bookstore? Is your wife still quiet?

In any case, I thank you *again* for your hospitality back then.

And the town advances by small steps?

For my part, I'm "launching" a journal. I'm don't have a treacherous penny, but I'm launching it anyway. On credit. With a resplendent table of contents of young names in young literature, politics, etc. I have the feeling it will be successful.

Please send the enclosed sheet<sup>346</sup> to Magritte and Mariën (I've lost the address of the former).

What are the possibilities for subscriptions over there? If you can get them, there will be 15% for you. Tell me if this warms the cockles of your heart and I will send you the subscription vouchers.

After all, life is beautiful. Perhaps I will take a turn towards your capital one of these months.

To me, guys like you are all too rare.

Serge, 14, rue des Canettes, Paris VI

Announcement of the Founding of the Journal *En Marge*

Sir,

Madame,

We have the honor of informing you about the forthcoming publication of a Journal, the object of which might interest you.

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<sup>345</sup> Serge Berna also tried to contact Guy Debord. [Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: "An individual calling himself Serge Berna has been telephoning my place for a long time, exaggeratedly insisting on meeting me to set up a rendezvous 'with respect to a journal.' These people are incredibly naïve. Yes." Postscript to an unpublished letter from Guy Debord to Gil J Wolman dated 13 October 1955.] Note that in 1959, and then again in 1978, when Debord made films that concerned or mentioned his years in the Lettrist International – *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps* [On the Passage of Several People Through a Rather Brief Period of Time] and *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni* [We spin round in the night and are consumed by fire] – Serge Berna was not mentioned or pictured.

<sup>346</sup> See the text that follows this one. [Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: both of these letters are preserved in the Marcel Mariën collection at the Archives et Musée de la littérature A.S.B.L., Brussels. FSXLVII/84/1 and FSXLVI/84/3.]

This Journal, of which the title is “EN MARGE,” reveals its intention in its subtitle: “Journal of Refusal. For a new participation.”

It will group together a sum of testimonies that will facilitate understanding of the increasingly marked loss of interest in the different forms of collective attraction that stud our modern lives.

Because the mass of men who “detach themselves” without finding a few motivations for integration elsewhere is quite considerable enough to speak of a need, to which this journal is addressed.

Each issue of this journal will concern a center of precise interest (for example, politics and its founding principles – avant-garde literature – Religion – the political parties – money, etc.) and will welcome the testimony of REVENANTS.

Which will prevent others from making the same mistake, or at least warn them about it. . . .

And then, from the close study of the most diverse reasons for refusal, there will emerge a collective line, a law of NO that will auger, if not an immediate and positive response, then at least a more lively awareness of the things that create the obscure pressures of passion or of the interests that, day by day, tend to increase their weight, pulling “solid” heads along with them. Thus, it seems good to us to support the increasingly difficult attitude that consists in maintaining a margin and enlarging it, a margin that is each day crushed between the two blocks that nonsense thickens day after day.

In order, we’d like to have: your sympathy – your collaboration – your attention.

For the “EN MARGE” journal,

Serge Berna  
14 rue des Canettes  
Paris VI

Friday,<sup>347</sup> 27 June 1954  
Dear Mariën and Magritte,<sup>348</sup>

Despite the passage of time, I have retained the most vivid memories of Brussels and you two.

I travel a great deal – along the two or three streets of Saint-Germain-des-Prés – and sometimes I have had to interrupt my itineraries to go to prison to pay off old “debts” to society.

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<sup>347</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: 27 June 1954 was in fact a Sunday.

<sup>348</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: We don’t know if Mariën and/or Magritte responded to this letter, but it is certain that they didn’t send any texts for publication in Berna’s journal. Mariën’s indirect response to his invitation was, perhaps, the publication in January 1955 (the moment at which Berna published the first issue of *En Marge*), in issue No. 4 of his own journal, *Les Lèvres nues*, of a text that related the story of the Notre-Dame scandal. [Translator: see “The Way of the Cross,” above.]

These days I am mostly sedentary. I even have a fixed residence. Consequently I, too, have a journal. I want it to be *extraordinary*.

With my friends, we have founded "*En Marge.*" *Journal of Refusal*.

There were immediate reactions from all sides. And you will see the text by Pastoureau<sup>349</sup> (a surrealist from 1935 to 1950) concerning his adventures with Breton!

And so I have reunited the separate parties so that they can state the reasons for their differences. A Communist. A worker-priest. A combatant in Indo-China. An ex-member of the RPF.<sup>350</sup> A former delivery-tricycle rider. A formerly religious person, etc.<sup>351</sup>

The choices were limited by the double imperative of "lived experiences" and "talent" for exposition.

I think that in Belgium things are not different from what they are here and that there is much to say on the subject of the Luna-Parks over there . . .

I also think that you could, with your friends, honor us with your collaboration.

The length of the texts would be up to you. The only requirement is that they should be extremely centered on the "question" on the other side of this sheet.<sup>352</sup>

Finally, circumstances are pressing upon me and I must have these texts by next Sunday (time needed for delivery included). The composition is already in progress.

Perhaps that is too soon. But I hope not.

Very sincerely I repeat *my friendly greetings* to you.

Serge Berna  
14 Rue des Canettes  
Paris VI

Serge Berna also solicited the participation of the writer Hervé Bazin, who, in 1946, had created a mimeographed journal of poetry, *La Coquille*. His group met every month in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, on the first floor of the Café de la Mairie, 8, place Saint-Sulpice, Paris, 6<sup>th</sup> arrond. Eight issues of this journal were published between 1946 and 1948. That same year

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<sup>349</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Henri Pastoureau, who opposed André Breton in the Carrouges affair (February 1951), which was named after the Catholic writer whom Breton welcomed into the surrealist group.

<sup>350</sup> *Rassemblement du Peuple Français* (Rally of the French People), founded by Charles de Gaulle in 1947.

<sup>351</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: We can measure the distance between Serge Berna's project and the approach of his former comrades in the Lettrist International, who published the first issue of their bulletin *Potlatch* several days earlier, on Tuesday, 22 June 1954. See *Potlatch, 1954-1957* (Paris: Éditions Gérard Lebovici, 1985) and *Guy Debord presents Potlatch (1954-1957)* (Paris: Gallimard "folio" edition, 1996). [Translator: this distance between Berna and his former comrades became immense in 1957, when the Lettrist International became part of the Situationist International.]

<sup>352</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: letter written on the other side of the announcement of the founding of the journal *En Marge*. At the end of that announcement, Serge Berna added a handwritten note: "Participants in the Journal: R. Grenier (disgusted journalist), M. Eschoz, author of *Monstres* (former nun), Charles d'Aragon (ex-MRP), Louis Vallon (ex-RPF), Bridier (ex-Trotskyist), P. Grumel (ex-P.O.) Philippe de Sirey (combatant in Indochina), author of *Opération Garlin* (?), Pastoureau (ex-surrealist), Dufréne (former "political" lettrist), etc. etc."

[1948], Hervé Bazin became a celebrity with the publication of his mostly autobiographical novel, *Vipère au poing*, by Grasset.

Tuesday, 28 June 1954<sup>353</sup>  
Monsieur Bazin,

It is possible that this journal might interest you, and that it might please you to collaborate in its first issue. You would be in familiar territory (Pichon, Cathelin, Chaumeley,<sup>354</sup> etc.).

On the telephone, I more or less explained to you what it's about. Rather less than more, because we there were about 30 of us talking on that line. On the other side you'll find what will illuminate your lantern.<sup>355</sup>

Cathelin and I would love to have you in our first issue.

If it suits you. But then you would have to send me your text by next Monday at the latest, because the composition has already started.

Sincerely yours,  
Serge Berna

After the publication of *Hygiène des lettres I. Premières notions* in 1952, Étiemble<sup>356</sup> came out with *Hygiène des lettres II. Littérature dégagée, 1942-1953*,<sup>357</sup> both published by Gallimard, the latter of which assembled the literary criticism he'd published in several different journals and which he presented this way in his Preface:

I say it bluntly and right away: this second volume of the *Hygiène des lettres* is worth even less than the first one: in it I write about wartime collaborators, Stalin, the colonies and those who speak of God. What can I do? "Impose silence on religion and the government, and I will have nothing more to say." Dear Diderot!

All my hopes: to deal with religion, without appealing to any God, whether personified or not; politics, without dazzling myself with either the eye of Moscow or that of Washington; the wartime collaborators, without any concern other than that of the values in the name of which we have refused their system; colonialism, without forgetting that the France of cops and racists cannot make us forget the France of the Institut Pasteur, which trained Mohamed Dib, Tran Duc Thao, Césaire, Senghor, and Rabearivelo.

I will assuredly be reproached for my title: the beautiful souls, especially, for whom all literature that isn't useless is "committed" (that is to say, dirty and

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<sup>353</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: 28 June 1954 was in fact a Monday.

<sup>354</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Jean-Charles Pichon, Jean Cathelin and Jean Chaumely, with whom Hervé Bazin had friendly literary relationships.

<sup>355</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: letter written on the other side of the announcement of the founding of the journal *En Marge*. Bazin Collection, Bibliothèque universitaire d'Angers, R. 740 307.

<sup>356</sup> René Étiemble (1909-2002) was a writer, university professor and proponent of comparative literature.

<sup>357</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: deeply interested in this book, Serge Berna reacted to it by writing to Étiemble in order to propose to him that he write something for the forthcoming issue of his journal.

crude); also the simpletons, who imagine that Jean-Paul Sartre alone created political commitment and received commitments.

Paris, Friday, 25 March 1955

Dear Sir [Étiemble],<sup>358</sup>

I have just read your *Littérature dégagée*. It is a good rinse for the dirty mouths of those who concerns themselves with the curriculum first and *then* with the talent.

Who would have thought that “morality” with tired hips would live again in our literature and in this way?

A pastor (Gide) chased it away and then it returned, in heavy shoes, through the crusaders on the Left.

Absolutely in agreement with you concerning the novel-novel. The fact that X is or is not a vegetarian has hardly any importance unless we are a salad.

Bernanos<sup>359</sup> = a great *novelist*.

S. de Beauvoir = Good Mentality

(for example)

At first,

then I write-cry out [*écri*] to you to communicate to you that your mindset perfectly meshes with the spirit of the journal *En Marge*, which I am sending to you. Our means are slight, but great is our will not to get mixed up in anything that is happening right now. The dialectics that have been served up to us lack appeal. Thus, the guiding idea of this journal is that there is no possible director.

And as we know all too well the content of the waltzes presented to us, we’ve thought that, by collecting those who have had enough of the same circuits, we can arrive at a certain understanding of the collective delights that surround us.

Thus, in the first issue one can find testimonies collected hot-off-the-press during a transition.

– There is the surrealist Pastoureau, who turns red

– There is the lettrist Dufrière, who has become a Trotskyist

– There is the worker-priest Grumel, who runs from one faith to another

There is the nutty niece of P. Lazareff,<sup>360</sup> who wants “ordinary” wisdom.

And finally, a former assassin.

Excellent company, among whom you might be pleased to be, because your tastes – unless I am mistaken – are identical to mine: you only support people who are in uncertain situations.

I will publish a second issue on the perennial theme of “detachment.” We would be sorry if we couldn’t have you. “Free” spirits are very rare, one by one

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<sup>358</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: it seems that Serge Berna did not receive any response to his letter and, in any case, in Étiemble’s papers (Département des manuscrits, BnF, NAF 28279, corr. b . 4.) there’s no carbon copy of a letter in response or a contribution to his journal. Moreover, the planned second issue of *En Marge* never appeared, the first one having not achieved its anticipated success.

<sup>359</sup> Georges Bernanos (1888-1948) was a French novelist and soldier.

<sup>360</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Pierre Lazareff, the editor-in-chief of the daily newspaper *France-Soir*, whose press run at the time was one million copies.



they become ashamed before the mass of conversions that weigh upon them under the form of “History” – that vague anecdote.

And I can assure that this double condition – to be “in the margins” and to write for a still-unknown journal [–] rarefies your choice.

I am sending you the program’s prospectus and the evidence. If they suit you, give us something[,] we would be very happy.

I send friendly greetings to your spirit.

Serge Berna  
14 rue des Canettes – Paris VI

P.S. If “yes” for the text, could you get it to me before 15 April?

At a time when he was sleeping in a Renault Dauphine, rented in Marseille in May 1959, Serge Berna was arrested in Saint-Tropez on 17 November 1959. He was accused of attempted theft and the theft of clothing, linen and gasoline from [unattended] cars in parking lots, crimes that were allegedly committed in October and November 1959. Interrogated by the gendarmes of Saint-Tropez about his possession of a rubber hose and two jerry cans of gasoline, Berna said, “they are part of the panoply of the perfect handyman.”

He was accused of having stolen silverware and 12 bottles of champagne from a villa in Saint-Tropez; two of the bottles were given to a car mechanic as payment for repairs.

He was accused of dining-and-dashing at the hotel La Caravelle in Aix-en-Provence (29, boulevard du Roi-René), which he’d left on 3 May 1959, declaring that that he would return the next day to pay his bill, leaving a suitcase, a hat and two paintings as a guarantee.

And finally, he was reproached for having passed bad checks in Marseille, Gardanne and Bandol, between April and July 1959.

Incarcerated at Draguignan on 19 November 1959, the High Court of that town sentenced him on 7 December 1960 to 30 months of imprisonment. He was acquitted of breach-of-trust charges in the renting of the Renault Dauphine.<sup>361</sup>

Serge Berna appealed his sentence on 22 December [1960]. Sick at the time, he could only address the court on 9 February 1961; his trial was postponed.

On 23 March 1961, the Fifth Correctional Chamber of the Appeals Court in Aix-en-Provence, taking into account attenuating circumstances and his past military service, reduced his sentence to 24 months of imprisonment.

Transferred from Aix-en-Provence to Marseille, he was incarcerated in Baumettes Prison on 6 April 1961. Two weeks later, he wrote a letter to André Breton, who had given testimony in his favor at his sentencing appeal.

Marseille les Baumettes  
19 April 1961  
Dear Monsieur Breton,<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: Archives départementales du Var, 1565 W 73.

<sup>362</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: this letter carries two seals of the penitentiary administration, André Breton Collection, Bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucer, BRT C Sup 75. The accompanying envelope carries the following, written in pencil: “Serge Berna 19 April 1961 must see.”

It is my constantly disappointed hope of being able to write to you as a free man that has delayed this letter, in which I want to express to you my recognition of your intervention in my favor, by responding as you did.

It is not without great disgust that I have learned of the unpleasantness you experienced when the examining magistrate told me that he'd sent you the letters rogatory. I was deeply troubled, seeing [in my mind's eye] the policeman ringing the doorbell of the great poet, and it was my doing.

I only recently learned the exact terms of your declaration, when I filed an appeal at Aix-en-Provence – my attorney, having read the entirety of your letter to the court, which acted as if it was wondering if surrealism could be . . . “taken seriously.” And this in 1961! I arranged for them to learn that, all the same, surrealism had shaped André Masson. This detail obligated the court to take a step back: Masson being the glory of Aix.

It remains no less true that your report concerning me did me a lot of good.

But there was a background to those proceedings. Which I cannot talk about here. If you are curious, Mr. Dechezelles<sup>363</sup> can bring you up to date: there was a quite hilarious aspect.

Finally, the other aspect isn't very funny: condemned to 30 months of prison at Draguignan, the Court of Appeal reduced the penalty to 24 months, but kept the charges against me in place, based upon suppositions, none of which stand up to the slightest examination.

That is why, given a choice between acceptance of a year-long sentence – which would have allowed me to ask for a pardon, which could have gotten me out soon because they are almost automatically granted – and attempting to quash the verdict – I have chosen the latter solution because it isn't a “pardon” that I want, but *Justice*.

The real struggle that I have fought for the last two years (I was imprisoned in November 1959) has galvanized me and allowed me to cope.

The Baumettes prison is clean and, in comparison with the veritable cesspools at Aix and Draguignan, it is a relative kind of paradise. But they cram three of you into cells that were designed for only one person. Overcrowding is even more formidable when it is the result of chance.

I'm trying to work on some kind of project, and I am putting the finishing touches on an *Aesthetics*,<sup>364</sup> which I've been polishing for quite a long time.

What is remarkable in prison: the long immobility and the prolonged head-to-head confrontation with the words that one writes allows one to return to certain energy sources that return to those words – it has been a long time since my poetic “vein” was buried and certain days, there it is, once more . . .

That vein was especially covered over by intense pictorial activity, which has absorbed the majority of my time since 1956. I arrived there by putting certain aesthetic theories into practice: abstract art having gone beyond its ascending

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<sup>363</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: the anti-colonialist attorney Yves Dechezelles, who André Breton knew ever since their shared participation in the *Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire* (1947-1948), had defended Serge Berna during the trial of those accused of perpetrating the Notre-Dame scandal.

<sup>364</sup> *L'Esthétique du scandale*, begun in October 1950 [never completed].

curve and started devoting itself to repetition, the only means of finding new forms was to deliberately leave behind the material structure of painting and systematically replace its frame, coating and traditional pictorial MATTER. Once this principle was found, a hitherto unseen mass of forms and colors was infinite.

I organized trial exhibitions in Algiers and Saint-Tropez, and I was preparing to come to Paris when I was arrested . . .

Not only have I lost time, but also the acronym NEP (Nouvelle École de Paris), under which, with some other young painters,<sup>365</sup> we organized an exhibition in Saint-Tropez – an acronym that has recently been used by a collective exhibition in St-Rémy-en-Provence . . .

Well! Those who only know how to imitate will not go far in any way.

But it is contact with Paris and what is going on there that I miss the most.

And, from a distance, I perceive that what has really *existed* these last few years is the presence of surrealism, as if a very old current passes through you, without another baton having been revealed.

For some you are the only man and writer who meets the requirements, not easy at a time when everything is diverted from the essential.

Please accept my affectionate respect.

Serge Berna

Maison d'arrêt des BAUMETTES  
213 chemin de MORGIUO  
Marseille Mazargues

P.S. I have lost track of my old friend Jacques MARECHAL. I believe that you know him.<sup>366</sup> He is a painter of the highest caliber and has been my best friend. Could you communicate my desire to renew contact? I don't know how or where to meet up with him. I thank you in advance.

As he mentions in this letter, Serge Berna filed an appeal to quash the verdict on 28 March 1961, an appeal that was rejected on 7 June. Sentenced to two years in prison, he served the totality of his penalty.

On Sunday, 19 November 1961, at 8 o'clock in the morning, the doors of the Baumettes jail opened so as to allow him to leave. Serge Berna was 37 years old at the time, and he was free.

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<sup>365</sup> See elsewhere in this volume.

<sup>366</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: On 17 November 1961, André Breton had presented an exhibition of works by Jacques Moreau, known as Le Maréchal [the Marshal], at the galerie Raymond Cordier (27, rue Guénégaud, Paris, 6<sup>th</sup> arrond.). A text and two accompanying paintings were reproduced in *La Surréalisme et la peinture* (1965).

## Postscript

After 19 November 1961, despite multiple inquiries and after having followed several leads that quickly vanished, we know nothing more about Serge Berna, except for the testimony of Jacques Villeglé, who knew the lettrists when they gave performances at la Maison des Lettres, rue Fèrou, October 1950:<sup>367</sup>

(In 1993, his friend Raymond)<sup>368</sup> Hains also told him that he had encountered an old friend of Serge Berna at La Bohème, Montmartre's brewery – the fellow who had an English accent and wore riding breeches to la Choje gauloise in 1947. He explained to him that Berna had lost his mind and wanted to exhibit his works at la galerie Riquelme on rue de l'Échaudé, where he'd taken out his switchblade and threatened the gallery owner, who had refused to exhibit them. He said that [Charles de] Gaulle was dead and had been replaced by a "toupee," which was believed by many heads of state. Jacques had not crossed paths with Serge Berna since the very end of the 1960s, imagining that his lettrist comrade must have been shut away in an asylum at the beginning of the 1970s. Jacques thought that the anecdote was true because, in 1953, having made a bad verbal joke, he was also threatened with a switchblade.

At the moment in which we publish this book, hospital information concerning patients in the 1970s is not freely available because it is covered by medical confidentiality laws. Such information can only be divulged 120 years after the birth of the patient, or 25 years after his or her death. Thus we have not been able to determine if what Jacques Villeglé imagined about the fate of Serge Berna is true, but we fear that it is.

In 2024, Serge Berna would have been 100 years old. We doubt that he lived until then without reappearing, but, for all that, we have not been able to discover any other writing, document or testimony [than those included herein], or even the date of a possible death in the currently accessible registers and, to this day, we do not know what happened to him or what became of him.

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<sup>367</sup> Note by Jean-Louis Rançon: biography by Odile Felgine, published in *Jacques Villeglé* (Sint-Martens-Latem: Linda & Guy Pieters Éditions, 2007).

<sup>368</sup> Interpolation by Jean-Louis Rançon.

## Chronological Reference Points

### 1924

**13 June.** Serge Berna, son of Alma (Lina) Salani and Adrien Berna, born in Venice, Italy.

### 1944

In Metz, Serge Berna preempts the call-up of the 1944 class and serves as a volunteer during the war.

### 1945

**30 April.** Publication in Paris and Algiers by Éditions de la revue Fontaine of André Breton's *Situation du surréalisme entre les deux guerres*, a speech to the French students at Yale University (New Haven, Connecticut) made on 10 December 1942. "With all due respect to a few impatient gravediggers, I claim to know more than they do about what surrealism's final hour could mean: the birth of a [new,] more emancipatory movement. My best friends and I, by the same dynamic force that we continue to place above all else, would be honored to immediately mock such a movement. We must believe that it has not yet come into existence."

**23 August.** Isidore Isou, born in Romania in 1925, arrives in Paris, bringing with him a poetry of the letter, which he calls lettrism. He meets Gabriel Pomerand, born in Paris in 1925, with whom he shares his conceptions of a new poetry and a new music.

### 1946

**8 January.** First lettrist manifestation, in the galley of the Sociétés savantes (8, rue Danton, Paris, 6<sup>th</sup> arrond.). It is a fiasco: the world of letters not having judged it good to follow Isou's insolent invitations to come to the event. Only the young residents of an orphanage attend, accompanied by their authoritarian director.

**21 January.** Determined to make themselves heard, the lettrists heckle the performance of a work by Tristan Tzara, *La Fuite*, at the théâtre du Vieux-Colombier ("Dada is dead! Make way for Lettrism!"). This interruption, related by *Combat*, launches the lettrists publicly.

**25 May.** After five years of exile in the United States, André Breton returns to France. Isidore Isou doesn't cease to try to rally him to lettrism, presented as a more emancipatory movement than surrealism, which is considered to be a poetic and literary reaction to Dadaist subversion.

**June.** Publication of the first and only issue of *La Dictature lettriste*, the notebook of a new artistic regime, "the only contemporary artistic avant-garde movement." Isidore Isou presents in it the "poetic and musical principles of the lettrist movement."

**14 November.** Second lettrist manifestation, in the galley of the Société de Géographie (184, boulevard Saint-Germain, Paris 6<sup>th</sup> arrond.). Gabriel Pomerand discourses "On the historical necessity of lettrism."

### 1947

**March.** The Merz Dadaist Kurt Schwitters writes to Gabrielson, an art collector in Goteborg: "there is still another thing: there are imitators, the *lettrists* in Paris, for example, who copy the

*Ursonate* by Hausmann and I, without even mentioning us, we who made that work 25 years before them, and with better reasons to do so.”

**25 April.** Publication of *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nouvelle musique*, by Isidore Isou, who sends a copy to André Breton with this dedication: “For André Breton, with the certainty that he will know how to tear away the layers of intrigue, woven by imbeciles, so as to reach that decisive ‘crucial encounter’ between significant people. With the hope that he will be able to make out, between the lines of this book, all of the sympathy and esteem (carefully chosen and weighed terms) that I have for his essential activity.”

**21 June.** The polemic with the old Dadaists concerning the radical novelty of the poetry of the letter claimed by the lettrists intensifies, while the *zaoum* poet Iliazd (Ilia Zdanevitch) contests their primacy in onomatopoeic poetry. In the gallery of the Société de Géographie, Camille Bryen presides over Iliazd’s presentation “Après nous, le lettrisme,” in which he presents the phonetic poems of the Russian futurists and Dadaists. Gabriel Pomerand responds to him and the presentation ends in the throwing of chairs (Bryen is injured).

**October.** In issue #62 of the journal *Fontaine*, under the title “Instances de la poésie en 1947,” its director, Max-Pol Fouchet, accords a preponderant place to lettrism, considered to be the only post-war poetic school. Isidore Isou publishes “Qu’est-ce que le lettrisme?” in it. Both former Dadaists and surrealists are scandalized.

## 1948

**6 June.** Publication of the brochure “Réflexions sur André Breton,” written by Isidore Isou, which makes public the break between lettrism and surrealism after one last attempt at a union.

## 1949

Serge Berna is condemned to six months in prison (suspended sentence) for the theft of a book.

**June.** In response to Isou’s lettrism, which claims to have invented the poetry of the letter, Iliazd publishes *Poésie de mots inconnus*, an anthology (1910-1948) of the phonetic poetry of the Russian futurists, the *zaoum* poets and the Dadaists in Zurich, Paris and Berlin.

**Autumn.** In Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Serge Berna (who lives in the attic at 16, de la rue Xavier-Pivas, Paris, 5<sup>th</sup> arrond.), founds the Loser’s Club with several other people.

## 1950

Publication of the Isidore Isou’s *Soulèvement de la jeunesse. Tome I: le problème*.

**20 February.** Berna publishes the poem “Cri” in the journal *Janus*, the monthly bilingual notebook of Young French and American Poetry (no. 1, March 1953). His friend, the poet Jacques Moreau (who became the painter and engraver known as La Maréchal), also publishes his 3<sup>rd</sup> *Poème pendant la vie* in its pages.

**16 March.** In the company of the members of the Losers’ Club, Serge Berna invites “good-for-nothings, the worthless, the idlers, [and] the barflies” to a Great Meeting of the Losers in the hall of the Sociétés savantes.

**9 April.** Along with Michel Mourre and several others, Berna organizes a scandal at Notre-Dame where, in the course of Easter Holy Mass, the death of God is proclaimed from the pulpit.

**21 April.** The Losers’ Club challenges journalists to respond to a questionnaire in order to prove “the good faith of some of its critics” following the Notre-Dame scandal. Serge Berna writes “À propos de Notre-Dame,” a text that will be preserved by Henry de Béarn.

**19 May.** Henry de Béarn is arrested for having tried to obtain 25 kilos of plastic explosives in order to blow up the Eiffel Tower, a “disgusting mass of old, rusty iron” and a “negative symbol.” Released from custody on 27 May. On the 29<sup>th</sup>, the examining magistrate, having concluded that it was all a joke, drops the charges.

**15 June.** Briefly detained after a psychiatric expert portrayed him as crazy, Michel Mourre is sentenced to six days in prison (suspended sentence) and a fine of 2,000 francs for “disturbing the exercise of worship.” Defended by the attorney Yves Dechezelles, Serge Berna is ordered to pay a fine of 2,000 francs for his complicity.

**18 June.** Scandal at the Auteuil orphanage: during a ceremony, Serge Berna intervenes with four accomplices (including the lettrists Albert-Jules Legros and Gil J Wolman) against the bad treatment inflicted upon the orphanage’s young residents. He is arrested following a brawl. Jailed under a committal order on 20 June, he is released on the 24th.

**9 October.** Serge Berna is sentenced by default judgment to four months of prison and a 6,000-franc fine for striking a police officer during the Auteuil scandal.

**14-23 October.** Along with Jean-Louis Brau, Bu Bugajer, François Dufrêne, Ghislain (Desnoyers de Marbaix), Jean-Isidore Isou, Albert Jules Legros, Maurice Lemaître, Matricon, Nonosse (Michel Smolianov), Pac Pacco, Gabriel Pomerand and Gil J Wolman, Serge Berna participates in lettrist performances at The Royal Odéon, La Rose rouge and la Maison des Lettres.

**November.** Jean-Louis Brau and Gil J Wolman join Maurice Lemaître, Lips and Gabriel Pomerand on the editorial committee of the first and only issue of *Front de la jeunesse* (editor-in-chief: Gabriel Pomerand, 12, rue Suger, Paris 6<sup>th</sup> arrond.)

**9 December.** “Lettrist audition: the only music-poetry possible,” a performance staged at La Rose rouge, with Serge Berna, Jean-Louis Brau, François Dufrêne, Jean-Isidore Isou, Albert-Jules Legros, Maurice Lemaître, Gabriel Pomerand and Gil J Wolman.

**16 December.** During a round of conferences on lettrism, Serge Berna is arrested in Béziers on a theft charge. In a communiqué, the lettrists Jean-L. Brau, Louis Gros, J. Isidore Isou, A.-Jules Legros, Maurice Lemaître, CP-Matricon, and Gil J Wolman take up his defense. Two days later, Claude-Pierre Matricon distances himself from this support.

**30 December.** Publication of the first issue of the review *Ur. Cahiers pour un dictat culturel* (editor-in-chief: Maurice Lemaître). Serge Berna publishes a lettrist poem in it titled “Du léger décalage qu’il y a entre le Tam du Coeur et son écho aux tempes” and a text on scandal and his aesthetics, “Un nommé Serge Berna, né à . . .”

## 1951

**8 January.** Publication of *Malgré le blasphème* by the redeemed sinner Michel Mourre.

**10 February.** In Paris, the surrealist group starts a subscription to support Serge Berna, who lacks tobacco in the prison in la Midi, into which he was thrown for having stolen “a suitcase containing money.”

**20 April.** In Cannes, screening of an unfinished version of Jean-Isidore Isou’s *Traité de bave et d’éternité* on the sidelines of the Fourth International Film Festival and with the support of Jean Cocteau. Along with Brau, Lemaître, Marc,O and Wolman, Serge Berna is a member of the lettrist choir that helped recorded the film’s soundtrack. Guy Debord joins the lettrist group.

**7 September.** Upon his return from a trip to Brussels, where he stayed with the bookseller Albert Van Loock and met the Belgian surrealists Marcel Mariën, René Magritte, and Paul Colinet, as well as Théodore Koenig, Serge Berna is arrested and incarcerated at Fresnes.

**21 September.** Having opposed the judgment of 9 October 1950, Serge Berna is tried again. Defended by the attorney Yves Jouffa, his penalty is reduced to 10 days in prison and a 10,000-franc fine.

**25 September.** Gil J Wolman completes his film *L'Anticoncept*, in which the only image is a white circle on a black background.

**9 October.** The daily newspaper *Franc-Tireur* publishes an article on the abuse Serge Berna suffered while in detention at Fresnes.

## 1952

**25 January-7 February.** Isou's *Traité de bave et d'éternité* is screened at the Studio de l'Étoile (14, rue Troyon, Paris, 17<sup>th</sup> arrond.). Tract by the lettrist committee: *Le cinéma en crève*.

**11 February.** The first screening of *L'Anticoncept* on a weather balloon at the ciné-club d'Avant-garde du musée de l'homme unleashes a battle between the lettrists and members of the audience.

**25 February.** In response to an enquiry about revolt following the publication of Albert Camus' *L'Homme révolté* in November 1951, the testimony of Serge Berna is published in the first issue of the notebooks of *Le Soleil noir. Positions*.

**April.** Publication of the first and only issue of *Ion*, special issue on the cinema (editor-in-chief: Marc-Gilbert Guillaumin (Marc,O)), by the entirety of the lettrist group. Serge Berna publishes "Jusqu'à l'os" in it.

**2 April.** The Commission de contrôle of the Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée prohibits the screening of *L'Anticoncept*, judged to be "non commercial."

**23 April-10 May.** The lettrists disrupt the Fifth International Film Festival at Cannes and distribute copies of the tract *Fini le cinéma français*. A dozen lettrists are arrested. Working with Serge Berna, Guy Debord begins to record what in March 1953 would become *Les Environs de Fresnes*.

**June.** The lettrist movement splits into three groups: an "externalist" group, which publishes the first issue of *Soulèvement de la Jeunesse* (editor-in-chief: Yolande du Luart; political director: Marc,O; 18, rue Germain-Pilon, Paris, 18<sup>th</sup> arrond.); the Lettrist International, organization of the lettrist left founded by Guy Debord and Gil J Wolman, who are joined by Serge Berna and Jean-Louis Brau; and the group of "aesthetic lettrists," Isidore Isou, Maurice Lemaître, and Gabriel Pomerand.

**17 June.** Guy Debord completes *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*, a film without images. Voices by Gil J Wolman, Serge Berna, Barbara Rosenthal, Jean-Isidore Isou and Debord himself. The film's first screening on 30 June at the ciné-club d'Avant-garde du musée de l'Homme is interrupted almost immediately.

**13 October.** Complete [uninterrupted] screening of *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* in the gallery of the Sociétés savantes. Serge Berna, in the role of a "Swiss professor of filmology," takes part. Poster-tract *La Nuit du Cinéma*.

**18 October.** Work on *Les Jeux de l'amour et du hasard*, an unpublished "influential film-novel" by Serge Berna.

**29 October.** At the hôtel Ritz, the Lettrist International hurls copies of the tract *Finis les pieds plats* during a press conference by Charles Chaplin, on a promotional tour for his film *Limelight* (*Les Feux de la rampe*).

**1 November.** In the pages of *Combat*, Isidore Isou, Maurice Lemaître and Gabriel Pomerand publicly distance themselves from the action against Chaplin.



**2 November.** The Lettrist International break with Isidore Isou. Publication at the end of November of the first issue of *Internationale lettriste*, which assembles the documents that are relevant to this break, and includes Guy-Ernest Debord's text "Mort d'un commis voyageur" and Gil J Wolman's illustration *HHHHHH Un home saoul en veut deux*.

**15 November:** René Magritte, who published the first issue of his journal *La Carte d'après nature* in Brussels in October 1952, sends a copy of the tract *Finis les pieds plats* to Marcel Mariën, telling him: "I have received a visit from the signers of the attached manifesto (except Berna, who remained in Paris), with which, I think, you will be in agreement, as am I. I'd planned to publish it in an issue of *La Carte d'après nature*, but I believe that irritating problems would come up, too tiresome for me. I have learned that Isou has distanced himself from this declaration, which confirms the idea that I had about it with the little information available to me."

**December.** Serge Berna approaches a bookstore on the rue Bonaparte in order to sell and publish in Ottawa (a fiction intended to elude the lawful rights holders) manuscripts by Antonin Artaud that he'd discovered in an attic on rue Visconti (Paris, 6<sup>th</sup> arrond.)

**7 December.** In Aubervilliers, the Lettrist International holds its first and only conference.

**26 December.** Arrested at his hotel (13, rue Guisarde, Paris, 6<sup>th</sup> arrond.), Serge Berna is incarcerated at Fresnes, then detained in the fort at Cormeilles-en-Parisi, in order to serve his sentence for the theft of a book in 1949.

## 1953

**January.** Guy Debord writes "Ne travaillez jamais" on a wall on rue de Seine in Saint-Germain-des-Prés as a testimony to the particular way of life that tried to assert itself there.

**19 February.** Publication of *Internationale lettriste* #2. Drafting of *Visages de l'avant-garde*, a history of the lettrist movement from 1945 to 1953.

**March.** Guy Debord completes the recording of *Les Environs de Fresnes* and dedicates it to "Serge Berna, of the Lettrist International, currently detainee #2797 in the fort at Cormeilles-en-Parisi."

**12 May.** Serge Berna is freed.

**10 June.** Serge Berna writes a preface for *Vie et mort de Satan le Feu* and *Textes mexicains pour un nouveau mythe*, which are previously unpublished manuscripts by Antonin Artaud. This return to literature – of a surrealist tonality, moreover – causes him to be excluded by the Lettrist International.

**17 June.** On the day of an insurrection in East Berlin, Guy Debord meets Ivan Chtchetglov (Gilles Ivain), a friend of Henry de Béarn, then in Caracas, Venezuela.

**August.** *Internationale lettriste* #3 is published. The printer refused to compose a short text by Debord, "Scandaleux Droit de se survivre," about the patricide Violette Nozières, who, in February 1953, twenty years after being sentenced to death, demanded her rehabilitation. This issue would appear with a blank space in the location where Debord's text was supposed to appear.

**End of December.** Serge Berna travels to Algeria, where he gives lectures "about everything."

## 1954

**1 January.** In Oran, Berna writes to Wolman the last letter that the latter will keep in his archives.

**10 March.** Having appealed his conviction for the Auteuil scandal (18 June 1950), Serge Berna is judged anew by default. The Court of Appeals confirms the judgment of 21 September 1951, but this penalty is nullified by the Amnesty Law of 6 August 1953, which covers crimes committed before 1 January 1951 by people who volunteered during the Second World War.

**April.** Publication of the first issue of *Les Lèvres nues* (editor: Marcel Mariën, 28, rue du Pépin, Brussels; administration: Jane Graverol, 55, rue de la Concorde, Verviers).

**June.** Serge Berna lodges at the hôtel d'Alsace et Lorraine (14, rue des Canettes, Paris, 6<sup>th</sup> arrond.) and plans to start a journal titled *En Marge*. Issue #4 of *Internationale lettriste* is published. Publication of a special issue of *La Carte d'après nature*, in which the Lettrist International responds to the question, "La pensée nous éclaire-t-elle, et nos actes, avec la même indifférence que le soleil, ou quel est notre espoir et quelle est sa valeur?"

**11 June-7 July.** "Avant la guerre," exhibition of 66 influential metagraphics organized by Gil J Wolman in the name of the Lettrist International at the Galerie du Passage, passage Molière, Paris, 3<sup>rd</sup> arrond. This gallery, also called the Double Doute, was in fact the sewing shop of Wolman's mother, refitted for the occasion, according to Charlotte Wolman.

**22 June.** Publication of the first issue of *Potlatch*, *bulletin d'information du groupe français de l'Internationale lettriste*.

**27-28 June.** Serge Berna invites Marcel Mariën and René Magritte to collaborate with him on his forthcoming journal *En Marge*. The next day, he seeks out the collaboration of Hervé Bazin.

**7 August.** At the invitation of the surrealists from the journal *Medium*, the Lettrist International meets them with the idea that the two groups could engage in the collective sabotage of the ceremonies celebrating the centenary of Rimbaud in Charleville (20 October 1954). This encounter leads to the publication of the tract *Ça commence bien!* in September. The wording of this tract is contested by the surrealists. The Lettrist International responds on 7 October with the tract *Et ça finit mal*, to which the surrealists reply on 13 October with the tract *Familiers du Grand Truc*.

**17 August.** *Potlatch* #9-10-11 published. In accordance with their text "En attendant la fermeture des églises" [Waiting for the churches to be closed], the members of the Lettrist International suppress the word "Saint" in their correspondence and in their conversations.

**2 November.** In Paris, [the Belgian poet] Paul Nougé meets Guy Debord and invites the members of the Lettrist International to participate in the production of the journal *Les Lèvres nues*. The lettrists enthusiastically accept.

**8 November.** The first contact of the Lettrist International with the Danish painter Asger Jorn, a co-founder of Surréalisme révolutionnaire (1947-1948), COBRA (an international group of experimental artists, 1948-1951), and the Mouvement international pour un Bauhaus imaginiste (1953-1957).

## 1955

**January.** Serge Berna publishes the first (and only) issue of the journal *En Marge*. *La revue des refus. Pour une nouvelle participation*. In issue #4 of *Les Lèvres nues*, Marcel Mariën publishes an account of the Notre-Dame scandal (9 April 1950) thanks to the information provided to him by Serge Berna during his stay in Brussels in 1951.

**25 March.** Serge Berna seeks the participation of Étiemble in a second issue of his journal *En Marge*.

**May.** A sticker published by the Lettrist International, *Construisez vous-mêmes une petite situation sans avenir*, is affixed to the walls of Paris, “principally in psychogeographically favorable places.”

**September.** Publication of Guy Debord’s “Introduction à une critique de la géographie urbaine” in the sixth issue of *Les Lèvres nues*. The Lettrist International continues to collaborate with this journal until November 1956 (#9).

**9 September.** Publication of *Potlatch* #22, which includes Debord and Wolman’s “Pourquoi le lettrisme?”

**13 October.** Publication of *Potlatch* #23.

**December.** Publication of *Les Lèvres nues* #7, which includes Guy Debord’s scenario for *Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (previously unpublished) and “Grand fête de nuit,” as well as Michèle Bernstein’s “Refus de discuter.”

## 1956

**May.** Publication of *Les Lèvres nues* #8, which includes Debord and Wolman’s “Mode d’emploi du détournement.”

**2-8 September.** In answer to the appeal from the Mouvement international pour un Bauhaus imaginiste, the Alba Congress (held in Italy) brings together representatives from avant-garde factions from eight different nations, including the Lettrist International [represented by Gil J Wolman], in order to lay the foundations for a new, united organization.

**November.** Publication of *Les Lèvres nues* #9, which includes Debord’s “Théorie de la dérive” and “Deux comptes rendus de dérive.” Wolman publishes *J’ecris propre* (a detoured narrative).

**6 December.** “Histoire de l’Internationale lettriste,” a tape-recorded reading by Guy Debord presented at the café Au Tonneau d’or, rue Montagne-Geneviève, the headquarters of the Lettrist International.

## 1957

**13 January.** Guy Debord breaks with Gil J Wolman, who is excluded from the Lettrist International. Wolman objects: “The one doesn’t exclude the other.”

**May.** Publication of Asger Jorn’s *Fin de Copenhague*, with Guy Debord acting as “technical advisor for détournement,” by le Bauhaus imaginiste in Copenhagen. Each one of the 200 copies that is printed has a different cover, all cut from a printer’s flan. Le Bauhaus imaginiste in Copenhagen also publishes two maps by Debord: *The Naked City* and *Guide psychogéographique de Paris, Discours sur les passions de l’amour*.

**June.** Publication of Guy Debord’s *Rapport sur la construction des situations et sur les conditions de l’organisation et de action de la tendance situationniste internationale*, which is presented to the members of the Lettrist International, the Mouvement international pour un Bauhaus imaginiste, and the London Psychogeographical Committee, three groups that would come together as the Situationist International at the conference at Cosio d’Arroscia (Imperia, Italy), on 27-28 July 1957.

## 1958

**June.** First issue of the journal *Internationale situationniste* (director: G.-E. Debord; editorial headquarters: 32, rue Montagne-Geneviève, Paris, 5<sup>th</sup> arrond., which was the location of the café Au Tonneau d’or, run by Charles Guglielmetti).

**July.** Publication by the Situationist International of Asger Jorn's book *Pour la forme. Ébauche d'une méthodologie des arts*.

**18 November.** During a conference-debate presided over by Noël Arnaud, Guy Debord responds to the question, "Le surréalisme est-il mort ou vivant?" with tape-recorded remarks and then, in person, accompanied by a guitarist.

**December.** Publication by the Situationist International in Copenhagen of Guy Debord's *Mémoires*, a work entirely composed of prefabricated elements, with supporting structures by Asger Jorn. Its "silent" [wordless] cover is made of sandpaper.

## 1959

**End of April-mid-July.** Serge Berna travels in the Midi, Marseille, Aix-en-Provence, Gardanne, and Bandol, where he lives from hand to mouth.

**16 August.** In the Var, at La Garde-Freinet, Serge Berna displays his paintings with those of Jean-Louis Brau and Gil J Wolman under the banner of the Nouvelle École de Paris (NEP). He also presents his works in the wine cellar of a bistro in Saint-Tropez, where he meets Michel Gribinski.

**5 September 1959.** In Grimaud, a new exhibition of the NEP, in which Serge Berna displays previously unseen works along with paintings by Jean-Claude Charbonel and Michel Gribinski.

**17 September.** Facing a variety of charges, Serge Berna is arrested in Saint-Tropez.

**19 November.** He is incarcerated at Draguignan.

## 1960

**7 December.** While in Draguignan, he is sentenced to 30 months in prison.

## 1961

**23 March.** In Aix-en-Provence, his penalty is reduced on appeal to 24 months.

**5 April.** He is transferred to and locked up in Marseille, at the Baumettes (prisoner number 21605).

**19 April.** He writes to André Breton, who had testified in his defense during the appeal of his sentence.

**19 November.** In Marseille, Serge Berna is released from prison at 8 AM.

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