

The Supersession and Realization of Art:

Guy Debord Between Art and Politics

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Abstract

This study takes as its subject the body of theory and criticism developed by Guy Debord during his years as the founder and only permanent member of the Situationist International (1957-1972), an artistic and political avant-garde based in Paris. Though scholarship about Debord and the SI has steadily grown in size and quality since the late 1980s, much of it until recently has been governed by a reductive opposition between the group's putative early "artistic" phase and later "revolutionary" orientation, that does little justice to both the historical development of the group and to the complexity of Debord's cultural criticism. This study will therefore focus on the trope of the "end of art" as resuscitated in Debord's work as a means of engaging with the dialectical relationship staged between the Western Marxist tradition and that of the European historical avant-gardes, especially Dadaism.

Résumé

Cette étude porte sur l'ensemble des théories et des critiques développées par Guy Debord comme fondateur et unique membre permanent de l'Internationale Situationniste (1957-1972), un groupe d'avant-garde artistique et politique basé à Paris. Bien que les recherches sur Debord et l'IS ont augmenté régulièrement en quantité et qualité depuis la fin des années 1980, la majorité de ces études ont été gouvernées par une opposition réductrice et putative entre la phase "artistique" originelle du groupe et son orientation "révolutionnaire" subséquente, qui ne fait justice ni au développement historique du groupe, ni à la complexité de la critique culturelle de Debord. Ce mémoire se concentre sur la problématique de la "fin de l'art" ressuscitée par l'œuvre de Debord afin d'engager une relation dialectique entre la tradition marxiste occidentale et celle des avant-gardes européennes, surtout le dadaïsme.

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Introduction and Literature Review

The Situationists In and Against Art and Politics

For us and for all those who are beginning to view this epoch in a demystified manner, there has been no more modern art anywhere at all—in precisely the same way that there has been no further formation of revolutionary politics anywhere at all—since the end of the 1930s. The current revival of both modern art and revolutionary politics can only be their *surpassing*, which is to say precisely the realization of what was their most fundamental demand.¹

This statement by Guy Debord (1931-1994), the founder and only permanent member of the Situationist International, written in 1963 as part of a programmatic text entitled “The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Politics or Art,” discloses the historical impasse which the Situationist project identified and attempted to supersede. The tiring out of the traditional avenues of revolutionary action, exemplified by the French Communist Party’s intolerable complicity with both Soviet State bureaucracy and the French Imperial project, paired with the institutionalization *as art* of avant-garde practices, led Debord early in the 1950s to diagnose the necessity of inventing new forms of resistance. The proposed model was not one of Sartrean “engaged” art practice, nor was it one of an aestheticized conception of politics; it was, rather, the perceived historical closure of such possibilities that formed the basis of the Situationist conception of art. Debord’s view was that both these models had been rendered historically unjustifiable by the concomitant failures of the artistic and revolutionary avant-gardes of the early twentieth century, failures that rendered the very conception of art as an activity separate from the praxis everyday life untenable. It is these historical closures, and the

¹ Debord, Guy. “The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Politics and Art,” in McDonough, Tom, Ed. *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004, 160.

means by which Debord attempted to negotiate them through a resumption of the paradigm of the “end of art,” that will comprise the central focus of this thesis project.

The serious historical assessment of Debord’s work is still in its infancy. As Tom McDonough has aptly phrased it, the reception of Debord has long been mired by an “alternating disdain... and hagiographic adulation,” which are “two sides of the same coin,” contributing to mythologization, to the positing of the SI as a “theoretical absolute divorced from its own record.”² Indeed, this fact becomes especially evident when the question of the Situationist platform regarding art is raised. In art history, the Situationists are known primarily as the inventors of *détournement*, a particularly politicized form of appropriation, and have been firmly situated within the context of the avant-garde revivals of postwar France. Further, the complex relationship that Situationist theory developed between art and politics has long been reduced to a simplistic historical narrative, one which supposes the group’s linear evolution from an avant-garde art collective to an activist political organ. As the story goes, the SI was founded in 1957 in Cosio d’Arroscia, Italy, by members of various European artistic avant-gardes including CoBrA, the Imaginist Bauhaus, and the Lettrist International, and developed a radical collective art practice until 1962 when Guy Debord, the leader of the so-called “political faction” of the SI, took control, expelled the artists, and effectively ended the Situationist involvement in culture. This overly schematic history has led to a sectarianism in the scholarship around the group, reinforcing a debate between those who wish to claim the group for art history and those who repudiate the SI’s positions on art as merely an infantile stage prefiguring their later political incarnation. Further, insofar as this historical schema has been mapped onto the person of Guy Debord, it has produced a

² McDonough, Tom. “Introduction: Ideology and the Situationist Utopia,” in *Ibid.*, xvii.

deep mystification of his own theory of art, a complex vision of the *Aufhebung* of art drawing equally from Hegelian-Marxist models as from the paradigmatic avant-gardist claim for the “end of art.”

This reductionist approach has led those scholars interested in the relationship of the SI to art to focus their attention on the works created by the artists associated with the group in its early years, most notably by the painters Asger Jorn and Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio, and the utopian architect Constant, and to situate outside their purview both the development of the group after the expulsions of 1962 and Debord’s political theory. This approach found its clearest manifestation in the exhibition of “Situationist art” organized in 1989 by Mark Francis and Peter Wollen at the Centre Pompidou, which later traveled to London’s ICA. While historically important for making available a wide range of art works, documents and ephemera associated with the group, the exhibition and its accompanying catalogue were patently insufficient as representations of Debord’s position on art precisely because of their emphasis on the material production of the group in its early years. Elisabeth Sussman, writing in the exhibition catalogue, noted the “conundrum facing the curators” that “it was only in the early stage of the movement, approximately 1957 through 1962, that material objects—books, paintings, drawings, models, maps—actually embodied the notions of the transformations of culture and everyday life central to the group.”³ Indeed, this conundrum is at the heart of art history’s inability to account for the scope of the Situationist position on art.

Writing in the catalogue for the exhibition, Peter Wollen, longtime contributor to *New Left Review*, offers one of the first sustained English language accounts of the

³ Sussman, Elisabeth. “Introduction,” in *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989, 9.

Situationist involvement in art. Wollen attempts to offer a synthetic approach to the question of art and politics in the SI by delineating the group's dual inheritance from the historical avant-gardes and Western Hegelian-Marxism; his essay, however, is structured according to the same rigid historical divisions as the exhibition, effectively truncating the Situationist involvement in art in 1962. For Wollen, "the rejection by Debord and his supporters of any separation between artistic and political activity, which precipitated the schism, led in effect not to a new unity within situationist practice but to a total elimination of art, except in secondary propagandist and agitational forms."⁴ This explanatory schema, based as it is on the most simplistic divisions between art and politics, is by its very nature unable to account for Debord's position, which, as Wollen himself acknowledges, is founded upon the refusal of such distinctions. Indeed, such conceptual limitations are to be found even in a recent text by art theorist Gerald Raunig, which seeks, through an engagement with the theories of Deleuze and Guattari, to present the Situationist project as "a successive development from the art machine to the revolutionary machine."⁵ This leads Raunig to criticize the SI for adopting a "concept of a linear idea of development beginning with art and ending in revolution," a concept which could not be further from Debord's position.⁶ As such, the principal theorist of the SI occupies a disproportionately marginal position in much of the literature on the Situationists and art. Indeed, his role in the early years is generally restricted to a

⁴ Wollen, Peter. "The Bitter Victory of the Situationist International," in *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989, 55.

⁵ Raunig, Gerald. *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century*. Trans. Aileen Derieg. Cambridge: Semiotext(e), 2007, 184.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 185.

discussion of the books he made in collaboration with Asger Jorn, *Fin de Copenhague*, 1957, and *Mémoires*, 1958, a few collages, and, far less frequently, his early films.⁷

The dialectical relationship between art and revolution proposed by Debord can perhaps only be grasped when one accepts, as Tom McDonough has recently noted, that “the real debate began only *after* 1960-1961, when the post-CoBrA expressionists who had been present since the group’s founding in 1957 were forced out.”⁸ Indeed, the artistic philosophy of the expelled parties was, from the SI’s inception, profoundly incompatible with Debord’s aims for the group. These artists were engaged in the creation of dynamic expressionistic paintings, conceived as spontaneous irruptions of free creativity based on a rejection of the principles of rationalism and functionalism in art and society. This individualistic model of art, for Debord, was a chimerical *representation* of freedom which tacitly exploited the privileged position of artistic production within bourgeois culture. Indeed, the departure of the artists in the group was precipitated by the decision to call all artistic works by members of the SI “antisituationist.”⁹ As such, for Debord, the expulsion of these “artists of repetition,” who were engaged in the “most shopworn forms of artistic production,” marked “an advance of the SI, the point where ambiguities are forced into the open and settled clearly.”¹⁰

For Debord the sphere of art had long exhausted its radical potential. Indeed, Debord identified in Dadaism and Surrealism “the same totalistic will for change” and “the same rapid crumbling away when the inability to change the real world profoundly

⁷ The reception of Debord’s films has been severely limited by the fact that they were removed from circulation following the assassination of his patron Gerard Lebovici, and remained unavailable until Debord’s death in 1994.

⁸ McDonough, Tom. *‘The Beautiful Language of My Century’: Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007, 105.

⁹ SI, “The Fifth SI Conference in Goteborg,” in Situationist International. *Situationist International Anthology*. Ed. Ken Knabb. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1989, 88.

¹⁰ SI “The Countersituationist Campaign in Various Countries,” in *Ibid.*, 111-112.

enough leads to defensive withdrawal to the very doctrinal positions whose inadequacy had just been revealed.”¹¹ For Debord, “Dadaism sought to abolish art without realizing it,” whereas “Surrealism sought to realize art without abolishing it.”¹² What was necessary, and what would form the basis of the Situationist platform, was the supersession of art as a sphere separate from the praxis of everyday life, and the consequent realization of modern art’s most radical promises in the revolutionary overthrow of the present conditions of alienated experience. Thus Debord coded his prohibition on artistic production as an explicit continuation of the contestations of the historical avant-garde: “So whereas surrealism, in the days of its attack on the oppressive order of culture and the everyday could rightly specify its weapon as a ‘poetry if need be without poems,’ today for the SI it is a question of a poetry *necessarily* without poems.”¹³ Debord’s demand, firmly in place at the founding of the SI and only further entrenched with the exclusions of 1962, was that the liberation, play, and creativity that had heretofore been restricted to the specialized domain of art be lived directly by all as the organizing principles of a new society, one that could only be founded upon the ashes of capitalist society. It is in this sense that Debord called not for art in service of revolution, but revolution in service of art.

That scholars interested in art downplay or ignore the theoretical foundation laid by Debord and scholars interested in Debord downplay or ignore his theses on art has left the concept of the “supersession and realization of art,” absolutely central to the Situationist project as well as to Debord’s work as a whole, curiously under-examined.

¹¹ Debord, Guy. “Report on the Construction of Situations,” in *Ibid.*, 18.

¹² Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995, thesis 191.

¹³ SI. “All the King’s Men,” in McDonough 2004, 155.

Indeed, much writing on the SI and art plays like an attempt to wrest the authentic legacy of “Situationism” from Debord. The caricatural dismissals of Debord’s historical analysis of art found in Roberto Ohrt’s *The Phantom Avant-Garde*, a text which purports to offer a “history of the Situationist International and Modern Art,” are unfortunately characteristic. Throughout the text, Debord is chided for his “obsolete political notions” and “abstract extremism,” while the artists associated with the group—Jorn in particular—are celebrated for their refusal of the “danger of anti-artistic tendencies in art.”¹⁴ Indeed, the field of Situationist studies, especially when focused on art, has long been dominated by onetime members of the group whose attempts to claim the mantle of “authentic” Situationist for themselves often do little to hide their bitterness or animosity toward Debord. The worst among these is Stewart Home’s *What is Situationism?*, a text whose very title is intended polemically to posit a history of the SI *against* Debord, who went to great pains to define “Situationism” as “a meaningless term... obviously devised by antisituationists.”¹⁵ The range of perspectives presented in this book serve to explicitly de-emphasize the role of Debord in favour of the various “dissident” Situationist groups that sprung from the splits of 1962 such as the Second Situationist International and the Bauhaus Situationniste, both of which are still active today.¹⁶ The ambiguous collectivity of the group, along with Debord’s policy of exclusion, frequently denounced as “tyrannical” or “Stalinist,” has left much of the important project of historical understanding in the hands of those who wish to claim authorship over a set of ideas resolutely opposed to the conception of individual production. As far as this study is

¹⁴ Ohrt, Roberto. *Phantom Avant-Garde: A History of the Situationist International and Modern Art*. New York: Lukas & Sternberg, 2006, 273, 298, 296.

¹⁵ SI 1989, 45.

¹⁶ Home, Stewart (ed). *What is Situationism?*. Oakland: AK Press, 1996.

concerned, the claims of authenticity made by those with an axe to grind do little to further an understanding of the theoretical bases of Debord's call for the sublation of art, a position whose complexity cannot be reduced to a mere "anti-cultural attitude" nor to a desire to transform the SI into a "political party." Indeed, the focus on organizational skirmishes serves to detract from the reasons why Debord deemed the preservation of artistic production as a "superior activity" profoundly incompatible with the Situationist platform.

As philosopher Jacques Rancière has recently commented,

The trajectory of Situationist discourse—stemming from an avant-garde artistic movement in the post-war period, developing into a radical critique of politics in the 1960s, and absorbed today into the routine of the disenchanted discourse that acts as the 'critical' stand-in for the existing order—is undoubtedly symptomatic of the contemporary ebb-and-flow of aesthetics and politics, and of the transformations of avant-garde thinking into nostalgia.¹⁷

Indeed, this comment signals the critical confusions that have sedimented over the years regarding the Situationist project and developments in post-'68 French philosophy, namely the strands of "postmodern" theory epitomized by the work of Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard's concept of "hyperreality," which gleefully celebrates the loss of the real in the play of simulations without referents—indeed, rendering the very concept of referentiality obsolete—is explicitly indebted to Debord's theory of the spectacle, a critique of the increasing abstraction of all aspects of life under capitalism, but with the latter's critical charge carefully excised. That the terms spectacle and simulation are often used interchangeably or posited as successive stages of a singular process testifies to little else but an abrogation of the possibility for historical agency or critique and a positing of

¹⁷ Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London; New York: Continuum Press, 2004, 9.

the current state of affairs as precisely beyond the arena of history. Such confusions can be glimpsed in Douglas Kellner and Steven Best's essay "Debord and the Postmodern Turn: New Stages of Spectacle," for example, where the authors argue that simulation and spectacle are interconnected in the current forms of society and culture, leading them to the dubious conclusion that developments in web technology offer examples of a "creatively interactive spectacle" with democratizing potential, somewhat perversely offering the chat room as a potential site for the construction of situations.¹⁸

A more fruitful investigation of the relationship between Debord and Baudrillard's theories has been offered by Sadie Plant in her text *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. Plant, who discusses the SI in relation to the work of philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard, and, of course, Baudrillard, all grouped under the insufficient umbrella of "postmodernism," emphasizes the development of much "postmodern" thought from the analyses of the SI, even as it reverses or rejects much of Debord's theoretical grounding. For Plant, postmodern theory offers "a manual for survival, and a very good one, in a capitalist world which seems immune to transformation," while the Situationist project is centered around the development of new forms of contestation, the struggle for authentic modes of communication and social organization.¹⁹ Thus, Plant very rightly emphasizes that Baudrillard's theory entails a celebration of the seduction of appearances and an abandonment of the historical agency of the subject so central to the Situationist project: "Baudrillard's work appears as a perfected and spectacular description of the spectacle,

¹⁸ Best, Steven; Kellner, Douglas. "Debord and the Postmodern Turn: New Stages of Spectacle" *SubStance*, v. 29, n. 3, issue 90 (1999): 140, 152.

¹⁹ Plant, Sadie. *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age*. London: Routledge Press, 1992, 7.

confirming its implicit insistence that history has ended, political action is futile, and subjective experience is always already commodified and recuperated.”²⁰ After Baudrillard’s recent death, Sylvère Lotringer, longtime friend and publisher, remarked in the pages of *Artforum* that Baudrillard “was a historian of the future, looking back from the end of the world at contemporary society.”²¹ This astute observation also serves to fundamentally differentiate the impassive description of the spectacle, offered from a position ostensibly outside the stream of history, from its impassioned historical critique; it is the difference between a theory of the spectacle and the spectacularization of theory.

When applied to art, likewise, the difference between Debord and Baudrillard’s projects comes into sharp relief. In the American art world of the 1980s, for example, the supposed “end of history” effected by the play of simulations in Baudrillard’s theory was employed—with the theorist’s disapproval—to legitimize a return to the canvas, free from the albatross of the critical modernist project. These returns to painting, warmly welcomed by the art market, resulted, in the words of Yve-Alain Bois, “from the feeling that since the end has come, since it’s all over, we can rejoice at the killing of the dead.”²² Such artistic models effectively situated themselves beyond the “end of art,” finding in their post-historical moment the license to abandon themselves to the passive representation of the abstractions of capital. In the wake of this “disenchanted discourse,” the necessity of critical models of artistic production that work through the “end of art” rather than take it as a *fait-accompli* has only intensified. In contrast to Baudrillard’s “manic mourning,” Debord’s “end of art” is a rejection of despondency, a call for a

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 167-8.

²¹ Lotringer, Sylvère. “Untimely Meditations,” *Artforum* (Summer 2007): 90.

²² Bois, Yve-Alain. “Painting: The Task of Mourning,” in *Painting as Model*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990, 242.

renewed engagement with the historical legacy of the avant-garde, an assessment, at once brutally materialist and uncompromisingly utopian, of its most radical claims and their potential relevance within advanced capitalist society. That the society of the spectacle has only further entrenched itself in all aspects of human life, that the avant-garde call for an integration of art and life may finally have been realized but according to a spectacular ethos of “total design,”²³ that art has become ever more specialized an activity at the same time as the globalized art market’s claims to populism reach a fever pitch only reinforces the historical necessity of an engagement with Debord’s critique.

It is this project, the historical assessment of Debord’s theory with an eye to its resonances with the present and promises for the future, to which the best among the glut of literature on the Situationist International has addressed itself. Tom McDonough’s recent text *“The Beautiful Language of my Century”: Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968*, for example, is a study concerned primarily with the legacy of the Situationist practice of *détournement*. The most striking merit of McDonough’s text is his refusal to insulate the Situationists from the wider social-cultural context of France in the years leading up to the events of May 1968, which has been the unfortunate tendency in much writing on the group. The Situationists are here presented in dialogue with other historical actors and events: their frequently strained relationship with the constellation of contemporaneous artistic practices developed by Daniel Buren, Christo, Jean-Luc Godard, and Raymond Hains, for example, is addressed in depth, as is the impact of the Algerian independence movement on the most politicized of postwar French art. Importantly, McDonough’s text also refuses to reinscribe the practice of

²³ Hal Foster has recently made this argument in his essay “Design and Crime”. Foster, Hal. *Design and Crime (and Other Diatribes)*. London: Verso Press, 2002.

détournement within the separate sphere of art that it sought to contest; it is instead framed as a form of “cultural communism,” as “the abolition of ‘personal property’ ... in other words, the very antithesis of the commodity form.”²⁴ These practices are further contextualized in a chapter organized around a discussion of Marcel Duchamp’s “reciprocal readymade” as critical engagements with the status accorded to art in bourgeois society and as an attempt to recast this very privilege in service of class struggle; in this way, *détournement* becomes less a politicized artistic strategy as a political practice making strategic use of art. McDonough also fruitfully draws parallels between Situationist appropriation tactics and the festive destruction of property in revolution. Here, the trope of “revolution as festival,” most commonly associated with Henri Lefebvre, is discussed in relation to Georges Bataille’s *potlatch*, a “lavish, imprudent expenditure” conceived of as the “inversion of classical economic theory.”²⁵ Tracing the Situationists’ “Bataillean inheritance,” in their celebration of the “depravity of the *lumpen*” as counterposed to the ideal “virtues of the classical proletariat,” McDonough importantly distinguishes Debord’s “revolutionary nihilism” from the more Dionysian visions of Lefebvre, which previous studies have tended to collapse together.²⁶ Finally, McDonough’s book serves as a model for art historical studies of the Situationists in that its varied discussions are based upon a nuanced understanding of Debord’s problematization of the categories of art and politics; it retains the radical charge of Debord’s critique but attempts to find in it openings or challenges for contemporary politics and artistic practices rather than artificial closures.

²⁴ McDonough 2007, 34-5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

Similarly, Anselm Jappe's *Guy Debord* and Vincent Kaufmann's *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*, "intellectual biographies" of Debord with as many consonances as divergences, have the shared aim of dispelling the haze of myth that has long obscured the historicization of Debord's project. Kaufmann's text addresses itself to the "spurious divisions that have given rise to endless polemics" in writing about Debord, alternately presenting him as a paranoid recluse, a brilliant stylist in the tradition of classical French prose, a terrorist with a Gallimard publishing deal, a theoretician of revolution, and a revolutionary only in theory; Kaufmann's text asserts that "these miniscule, and often myopic, portraits suggest, somewhat surprisingly, a Debord who is versatile, protean, multitalented, as well as a man continuously undergoing an identity crisis."²⁷ Indeed, Kaufmann engages with Debord's complete oeuvre, giving equal weight to his early broadsides as a member of the Lettrist International as to the melancholic words of his final years. Kaufmann's unitary approach to Debord, his refusal to privilege one "Debord" over another, and his insistence that we take Debord *as a whole*, effectively locates the nexus of Debord's importance precisely in his "unifying, totalizing" approach.²⁸ Though Kaufmann has a tendency to see in Debord's totalizing *Weltanschauung* a sort of Mallarméan purity²⁹ his approach foregrounds what is most essential in Debord's work: an absolute rejection of the role of the specialist, a critique of separation.

It is this point that T.J. Clark emphasizes in his introduction to Jappe's text, writing that Debord was not "only or essentially a writer (or a master of French prose),

²⁷ Kaufmann, Vincent. *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*. Trans. Robert Bononno. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, xii-xiii.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 273.

²⁹ For example, he refers to the *Society of the Spectacle* as "Debord's version of the old dream of the total book that would contain the world." *Ibid.*, 256. I will address Debord's relationship to Mallarmé at length in Chapter 3.

any more than he was an ‘artist,’ ‘filmmaker,’ ‘politician,’ or even ‘revolutionary.’ All of these identities, Debord never tired of telling us, are what now stand in the way of the activities they once pointed to.”³⁰ With a consciously smaller scope than Kaufmann’s biography, Jappe seeks to place Debord firmly in the heterodox tradition of Hegelian-Marxism, developing from the early “philosophical” writings of Marx through the work of the Georg Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* and into the “critique of everyday life” offered by Lefebvre. Jappe, thus, also offers a holistic view of Debord’s life and work, emphasizing that all of Debord’s activities were directed against one and the same society, the spectacular society in which the alienation theorized by the young Marx had transcended all class barriers to effect a proletarianization of the world. Jappe’s insightful discussion of the spectacle locates a point of intersection between Debord and Lukács in their shared rejection of “every form of contemplation, which they see as alienation of the subject,” the projection of lived reality into an illusory form.³¹ That Debord’s theory is rooted in conceptions of truth, authenticity, and history— notions which Jappe contrasts to the absolute rejection of “grand narratives” staged in postmodern thought—lends a totalizing force to his struggle against the falsification of life under capitalism; however, it also leads to certain aporias in his thought that Jappe, to his credit, discusses at length. For example, Jappe argues that in the oppositional relationship staged by Debord between the spectacle and “authentic” life, he ends up positing the subject as an *a priori*, waiting only for the material abolition of the society of the spectacle to be returned to a state of absolute plenitude.³² This vision of the subject, which Jappe also

³⁰ Clark, T.J. “Introduction” in Jappe, Anselm. *Guy Debord*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999a., viii.

³¹ Jappe 1999a, 24. Debord’s theses on contemplation, and their relation to Lukács’ work, will be addressed in Chapter One.

³² *Ibid.*, 136-143.

identifies as part of Debord's Lukácsian inheritance, effectively ignores the possibility that "the subject might be under attack, within itself, from forces of alienation capable of conditioning its unconscious in such a way as to cause it to identify actively with the system in which it finds itself."³³ Such a lucid assessment of the gaps in Debord's theory forms an essential part of a historical project seeking to ascertain Debord's relevance today, as opposed to a tendency to see his life and work as an inviolate or closed project.

In a signal gesture against the traditional disciplinary separations in Situationist scholarship, Jappe, who is above all a Marxist critic of the commodity, has recently published the first sustained essay on Debord's conception of "the end of art." Focusing on the divergences and similarities between Debord's theory of art and that of Theodor Adorno, Jappe locates the role of art in their respective work as the inversion of the capitalist language of exchange and functionality. Drawing primarily from *The Society of the Spectacle* and Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, as well as the latter's writings with Max Horkheimer on the culture industry, Jappe identifies in both authors the belief that the project of modern art served a profoundly "disalienating" role. For Adorno, the irreducibility of modern art's aphasia and willful meaninglessness to the logic of the commodity secured its potential for critique; indeed, according to Jappe, "for Adorno, art always embodies a social critique, even hermetic art, even art for art's sake, precisely because of its autonomy and its 'asocial' character."³⁴ Conversely, as has already been noted, for Debord it is the development of art as an autonomous institution, its absolute separation from the praxis of life—its "functionlessness" in Adorno's words—that

³³ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁴ Jappe, Anselm. "Sic Transit Gloria Artis: The End of Art for Theodor Adorno and Guy Debord," *SubStance*, v. 29, n. 3, issue 90 (1999b): 109.

necessitates its transcendence.³⁵ As Jappe aptly puts it, “in a society riven by separations, art’s function is to represent the unity that has been lost and the social totality”; however, once art achieved its status as an “autonomous sphere,” its pretensions to embody the truth of human existence as a whole became “manifestly contradictory.”³⁶ For Debord, modern art’s refusal of communication once posed a challenge to the seeming rationalism of an economistic worldview; however in the society of the spectacle, “whose very *manner of being concrete* is, precisely, abstraction,” the sector of culture assumes an alienating role as the projection of humanity’s “living strength” into a separate realm of illusory freedom, a realm governed by the same drive to abstraction characteristic of capitalism.³⁷ While, as Jappe demonstrates, Debord and Adorno shared many of the same criticisms of culture, they ended up at opposite conclusions: for Adorno, art’s lack of use-value, its anti-social character, was precisely what guaranteed its critical role, leading him to distinguish forcefully between mass culture and autonomous modernist art; conversely, for Debord it was a matter of realizing in life the *promesse de bonheur* that had heretofore only been represented by art.³⁸

As Eva Geulen has recently written, “because the announcement of the end of art presents us with a speech act that cannot invoke a governing instance, every end of art is a quasi-sovereign act of drawing or positing a boundary... Modern art stands and falls with the end of art. What counts as art depends essentially on what is not yet or no longer art.”³⁹ The end limit posited by Debord, his maximalist instantiation of this foundational “rumour” of modernity, in Geulen’s terms, has for too long been reduced to caricature,

³⁵ Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, 227.

³⁶ Jappe 1999b, 107.

³⁷ Debord 1995, thesis 29.

³⁸ Jappe 1999a, 118.

³⁹ Geulen, Eva. *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumor After Hegel*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2006, 9.

divorced from its specific tactical orientation, or simply ignored. That his position seems somehow impossible to account for, at once utopian and apocalyptic, is however precisely the intended effect of the discourse of the end—it situates itself beyond the borders of the possible. Art has been at an end for as long as there has been modern art; indeed, it is possible that the development of new critical models of artmaking depends upon a renewed analysis of the discourse of the end. Thus, it is my contention that a historical assessment of Debord’s place in the tradition of the “end of art” is invaluable to any future understanding of the crisis of political art, which has only intensified in the years since the dissolution of the SI, concurrent with the concentration and expansion of the global society of the spectacle. As Debord himself stated five years after the dissolution of the SI in his film *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, 1978, “avant-gardes will not endure, and the most fortunate thing that might happen to them is, in the full sense of the term, that they should have *served their times*... An historical project certainly cannot claim to preserve an eternal youth shielded from blows.”⁴⁰

Toward such a historical project, this study will not seek to give a comprehensive overview of Debord’s work, nor of the Situationist project and its erstwhile participants, but rather to situate one aspect of Debord’s thought—the thinking of the end of art—within its proper historical context, as well as in dialogue with other thinkers and artistic currents.⁴¹ The opening chapter will delineate Debord’s critical concept of “spectacle,” as developed primarily in his major work *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), and investigate his trenchant critique of the increasingly image-based fabric of capitalism; I

⁴⁰ Debord, Guy. *Complete cinematic works : scripts, stills, documents*. Translated and edited by Ken Knabb. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2003, 262.

⁴¹ This unfortunately means that certain important aspects of Debord’s oeuvre, in particular his cinematographic work and the Situationist theory of urbanism, will receive short shrift.

will seek to complicate the clichés surrounding Debord’s supposed “anti-visual” orientation by investigating the spectacle’s foundation in the Marxist critique of alienation and establishing the connections and divergences between the “spectacle” and other theories of modernity’s effect upon human experience and perception. The second chapter will focus on Debord’s relationship to the re-emergence in postwar France of paradigmatic avant-garde artistic practices, especially as evidenced in the work of Yves Klein and the *Nouveaux Réalistes*, as a means of broaching Debord’s prognosis for the possibility of critical cultural practices in the age of spectacle; the trope of “neo-avant-gardism” as developed by Marxist cultural critic Peter Bürger will form a primary point of reference as a means of differentiating the Situationist project from a disenchanted historicism which consigns all attempts to reformulate the avant-garde project after the “failure” of Dadaism and Surrealism to the status of meaningless “repetitions.” Following this, I will elaborate the poetic heritage of the key and interrelated Situationist concepts of *détournement* and of the end of art in the work of the nineteenth-century French poets Stéphane Mallarmé and Isidore Ducasse, the self-styled Comte de Lautréamont; in doing so, I hope not only to establish precedent for Debord’s conception of an art which would refuse its own status as art, but to assert that the “realization of art” for the Situationists necessarily implied a revolutionary discovery of authentic social communication. As such, the final chapter will focus on the Situationist relationship to the explosive events of May 1968 in Paris, and Debord’s contention that in the spontaneous uprising emerged models of directly practiced creativity and community which abolished divisions between classes and *métiers*, and effectively pointed to a zone beyond culture. Further, I will insist that Debord’s critique of the orthodox Communist discourse of work is central to his desire to supersede the specialization of art, and seek to relate this aspect of Situationist

theory to a theoretical lineage passing from Marx to Rimbaud to the Dadaists, as well as in light of certain strains of post-'68 French Marxist thought.

Chapter One

Separation Perfected: Spectacle and the Crisis in Perception

“For the situationists... mediation is evil,” “mediologist” Régis Debray has claimed.⁴² For Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, likewise, the Situationists “were caught up in a sort of Rousseauist reverie of appropriation—which was in the end merely set against all forms of representation (from the image to the delegation of power).”⁴³ Martin Jay, for his part, locates an “anti-visual pathos” at the core of the Situationist project.⁴⁴ Such perspectives are characteristic of the most recent—and perhaps the most pervasive—of the many interpretive shifts that the critical concept of “the spectacle” has passed through since its formulation forty years ago in Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*. From what could be called its first phase of reception as the retrospectively established theoretical foundation of the events of May 1968 in Paris to its absorption into a disillusioned and increasingly specialized field of academic cultural theory, the spectacle has taken on a life quite separate from the critique of late capitalist society in which it was originally anchored. Indeed, the canonization of Debord’s theses on the progressively image-driven nature of capitalism and its impoverishing effects on human experience has been accompanied by their abstraction into, on the one hand, a descriptive theory of the media not dissimilar from that of Marshall McLuhan, and, on the other, what Anselm Jappe has called a “metaphysical hostility toward the visual and the image.”⁴⁵ Both

⁴² Quoted in Clark, T.J.; Nicholson-Smith, Donald, “Why Art Can’t Kill the Situationist International,” in *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*. Ed. Tom McDonough. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2004, 468.

⁴³ Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. *Heidegger, Art, and Politics: The Fiction of the Political*. New York: Blackwell Press, 1990, 65.

⁴⁴ Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 418.

⁴⁵ Jappe, Anselm. *Guy Debord*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999a, 135.

perspectives uproot “the spectacle” from its grounding in Western Marxist thought and excise its critical charge; the second, however, to which this chapter will address itself, has the effect of de-historicizing Debord’s work and thus of neutralizing what may be its central assertion: that the present conditions are not a definitive stability but are, precisely due to their historical character, eminently *changeable*. To safeguard against turning Debord’s position into a naïve form of abstract opposition to the image and to preserve what potential his work may hold for the development of contemporary modes of resistance, attention must be paid to the specific historical regime of the image that concerned him and its irradiation into the broader field of social relations as spectacle. Toward this end, this chapter will first seek to establish the roots of Debord’s theory in the Marxist critiques of alienation and the commodity-form and then to situate the spectacle within the context of theories regarding the perceptive shifts effected by modernity.

The Visual Negation of Life: Spectacle and the Commodity

“The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation.”⁴⁶ This statement, which opens *The Society of the Spectacle*, immediately establishes the crucial opposition between lived reality and representation which forms the crux of Debord’s discourse. It also emphasizes the fundamental polyvalence of the term “spectacle” as it functions in the text—a collection of 221 theses, arranged in nine sections covering themes as diverse as workers’

⁴⁶ Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995, thesis 1. References to specific theses of *The Society of the Spectacle* in this chapter will henceforth be made parenthetically within the text. For example: (SS 1).

councils, the history of twentieth century proletarian revolutions, urbanism, culture, and time. While Debord emphasizes the totalizing nature of the spectacle, which has taken the globe as its field of operations, he also stresses an expanded understanding of “spectacle,” alternatively referring to an accumulation of *spectacles* and to *the spectacle* singular. As a concept, the spectacle seems to resist definition, to refuse containment and to evade determination. It is at once abstract and concrete, in the sense that while it is the product of concrete labour—indeed, for Debord, the ultimate product of all labour in the present society—it is also by definition a generalized will to abstraction; it is a system “whose very manner of being concrete is, precisely, abstraction” (SS 29). The manifold examples of modern “spectacles” include the entertainment and leisure industries, the mass media, and the fetishistic packaging of commodities, as well as planned urban spaces, political parties, and nationalisms; none, however, occupies a privileged explanatory position with respect to the total “spectacle.” While many later commentators have reduced the spectacle to an effect of the media or an intrinsic property of its technical apparatus, Debord stressed early on that “the spectacle” cannot be “understood in the limited sense of those ‘mass media’ that are its most stultifying superficial manifestation” (SS 24). For Debord, the spectacle had to be understood in its totality, or not at all.

The spectacle is not the media, thus, but the principle of mediation that imposes itself universally between the spectator and what, for Debord, constituted authentic historical experience and consciousness. As Hal Foster has written, the spectacle posits “critical distance as doomed” in that “spectacle subsumes criticality under distraction, and the dialectic of distance and closeness becomes an opposition of real separations

concealed by imaginary unities.”⁴⁷ It is in this way that Debord’s practice differs significantly from that of Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*, which was published in 1957, the same year as the founding of the Situationist International.⁴⁸ Where the critic of myth found that the objects of the banal commodity-world could be read *as texts*, in order to make legible the operations of power inscribed upon them, Debord’s work testifies to the fact that that beneath the sheen of the commodity there is no longer any hidden meaning, only the principle of the spectacle, the play of pure appearance detached from life. As such, the objects of Barthes’ analysis remained at the level of symptoms, while the abstract model governing the totality of appearances remained out of view. In the words of Jacques Rancière, writing on what he sees as the loss of credibility of such Barthesian models of criticality, “The complaint is then no longer that images conceal secrets which are no longer such to anyone, but, on the contrary, that they no longer hide anything.”⁴⁹ A preoccupation—even a critical preoccupation—with the particularities of the spectacle’s individual surfaces could not help but replicate in discourse the mystification of the total conditions of society that is the primary effect of the spectacle. The insistence on the concept of “totality” has long been one of the most criticized aspects of Debord’s worldview, deeply incompatible as it is with many of the theoretical positions associated with post-structuralism; however, it can only be underemphasized at the cost of a mystification of Debord’s contribution to the legacy of Western Marxist thought and twentieth-century cultural criticism more generally.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Foster, Hal. *The Return of the Real*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996, 220.

⁴⁸ The relationship between Debord and Barthes has been cogently discussed by Tom McDonough in a chapter entitled “The Language of Negation” in *‘The Beautiful Language of My Century’: Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2007, 13-52.

⁴⁹ Rancière, Jacques. *The Future of the Image*. London: Verso, 2007, 22.

⁵⁰ For a historical overview of the concept of totality in Marxism, see Jay, Martin. *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984. For

Such an emphasis on the necessity of any critique to grapple with social conditions in their totality follows directly from the work of the young Georg Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*, who wrote in 1922 that “the commodity can only be understood in its undistorted essence when it becomes the universal category of society as a whole.”⁵¹ Here, likewise, it is necessary to insist upon the centrality of the commodity-form to Debord’s formulation of the spectacle, which is nothing other than the subordination of all aspects of human society to the principle of the commodity. As such, the first sentence of *The Society of the Spectacle* is an appropriation—a *détournement* in Situationist terms—of the first sentence of Marx’s *Capital*: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an immense collection of commodities.”⁵² As Marx discerned, in the capitalist mode of production the relationship between a human being and his or her labour power moves away into representation in the form of the commodity, which is, precisely, “human labour in the abstract.”⁵³ Insofar as each human being under capitalism is recognized only for their labour-power, which is concretized in the form of the material products from which they are dispossessed, even the social relationship between people “assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things.”⁵⁴ With the seemingly boundless expansion of the economic sphere *for itself*, the commodity, which was once subservient to the economy, becomes its justification and its *raison-d’être*. As such, for Debord, “the spectacle corresponds to the historical moment at which the commodity completes its colonization of social life. It is

a discussion of the promise of Debord’s concept of “totality” for the contemporary Left, see Clark, T.J.; Nicholson-Smith, Donald. “Why Art Can’t Kill the Situationist International,” in McDonough 2004, 467-488.

⁵¹ Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971, 86.

⁵² Marx, Karl. *Capital Volume I*. Trans. Ben Fowkes. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1976, 125.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

not just that the relationship to commodities is now plain to see—commodities are now *all* that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity” (SS 42).

Effectively, in the society of the spectacle “the commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making” (SS 53).

With the commodity’s total domination of society, Debord, like other contemporaneous Marxist critics, identified the increasing importance of ideological rather than direct modes of repression for ensuring the reproduction of present social conditions. For example, Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology as “the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence,” comes quite close to capturing the thrust of Debord’s “spectacle,” despite the vast gap that separates their respective positions.⁵⁵ The society of the spectacle has invented fundamentally *new* ideological apparatuses and modes of acculturation, which ensure the smooth accumulation of capital and encourage the boundless quantitative growth of the economy. The functioning of pre-spectacular stages of capitalism depended upon the dehumanization of the worker, the transformation of human into machine; conversely, it is precisely to the humanity of the worker that the spectacle appeals. In effect, the sphere of consumption, upon which the massive surplus of the spectacle-commodity economy depends, necessitates the participation of the worker outside of work hours. “All of a sudden,” according to Debord, “the workers in question discover that they are no longer invariably subject to the total contempt so clearly built into every aspect of the organization and management of production; instead they find that every day, once work

⁵⁵ Althusser, Louis. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Contemporary Critical Theory*. Ed. D. Latimer. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989, 87. Althusser, for example, claimed that ideology was “eternal, exactly like the unconscious,” in that its “structure and functioning are immutable, present in the same form throughout what we can call history,” a position far removed from Debord’s attempt to historicize capitalist ideology. *Ibid.*, 86.

is over, they are treated like grown-ups, with a great show of solicitude and politeness, in their new role as consumers” (SS 43). Where the workers’ movements of the past invariably focused their energies on obtaining increased leisure time, that which ostensibly stood opposed to the principle of ever-increasing productivity upon which capitalism is based, the originality of Debord’s critique lay in the fact that he located within leisure time an important nexus for the exercise of class power. This required a shifting of the terms of Marxism from an analysis of the economy *stricto sensu* to a “critique of everyday life,” which became necessary at the moment where Debord identified that capital had made integral to its functioning those spheres of life which once had constituted its outside.⁵⁶ The colonization of everyday life by the commodity was made possible by the development and deployment of spectacular techniques of control, which Debord identified as having a pre-eminently visual character.

Debord characterizes the spectacle as a “negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself*” (SS 10). If money is the abstract mode of equivalence of commodities, and according to Marx the endless circulation and accumulation of money becomes capital, then the spectacle is “capital accumulated to the point where it becomes image” (SS 34). Of course, since commodities are, to begin with, the abstraction of human activity, in the spectacle direct social relations between people become obscured in the opacity of mediations. According to Debord, earlier forms of capitalism effected “an obvious downgrading of *being* into *having*” in human society (SS 17); this is the stage analyzed by Marx under the banner of commodity fetishism, in which capital conceals “the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations

⁵⁶ The trope of “everyday life” was also explored by Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau, relatively contemporaneously with Debord. See also, in this regard: Kaplan, Alice; Ross, Kristin. “Everyday Life,” *Yale French Studies*, N. 73 (1987).

between material objects.”⁵⁷ With the spectacle, however, human society has entered a new stage which has effected a shift from “*having* to *appearing*: All effective ‘having’ must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate *raison d’être* from appearances” (SS 17). For Debord, this reign of appearances conceals the lack of what is necessarily banished under the spectacle: community, historical consciousness, and human agency. The spectacle *represents* communication as a one-way monologue, eclipses history under the rule of a perpetual present, and presents *images* of action to be passively identified with. Debord emphasizes this point in yet another *détournement* of Marx,⁵⁸ stating that “the spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relation between people that is mediated by images” (SS 4). Considered in this light, the spectacle takes the form of a fetish, in the Freudian sense, images that are compulsively (visually) consumed in an attempt to fill the fundamental *lack* in the modern experience. The images of the spectacle ceaselessly represent, in the form of illusory plenitudes, all aspects of life that are impoverished and fragmented by capitalism. The false appearance of a reconciled and satisfying totality is predicated upon the rule of images and the suppression of what constitutes the unrepresentable excess of spectacle, that which by its very nature is irreducible to image: real social praxis. As Debord writes,

Since the spectacle’s job is to cause a world that is no longer directly perceptible to be *seen* via different specialized mediations, it is inevitable that it should elevate the human sense of sight to the special place once occupied by touch; the most abstract of the senses, and the most easily deceived, sight is naturally the most readily adaptable to present-day society’s generalized abstraction (SS 18).

⁵⁷ Marx 1976, 169.

⁵⁸ “Capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons which is mediated through things,” in *Ibid.*, 932.

As such, “the spectacle is heir to all the weaknesses of the project of Western philosophy, which was an attempt to understand activity by means of the categories of vision” (SS 19).

The place of the visual in Debord’s work has long been contested terrain. Martin Jay, for example, accords Debord a place next to Michel Foucault in his synoptic view of the “denigration of vision” central to much “French theory” in the twentieth century. For Jay, Debord’s work contains “many familiar motifs of the antiocular discourse: the contrast between lived, temporally meaningful experience, the immediacy of speech, and collective participation, on the one hand, with ‘dead’ spatialized images, the distancing effects of the gaze, and the passivity of individuated contemplation, on the other.”⁵⁹ Jay’s comments here are apt, but are marred by his tendency, which is at times stated explicitly, to separate these visual concerns from their historical and political mooring. Throughout Jay’s text, there is an attempt to locate an “anti-visual pathos” at the center of Situationist thought; indeed, Jay suggests that the primary relevance of Debord today lies not in his politics, but in his critique of opticality as such. For Jay, in the decades after May ’68, Debord’s “political analysis no longer attracted much interest” and with the collapse of the “French infatuation with Marxism... he no longer seemed very relevant to current problems.”⁶⁰ Jay seeks to locate the primary historical significance of Debord’s thought not in his analysis of the development of modern capitalism as spectacle, but in a philosophical opposition to categories of sight as a means of apprehending the world. “Whatever the mixed results of the Situationist project to overthrow bourgeois society,” Jay writes, “there can be no doubt that it contributed significantly to the undermining of

⁵⁹ Jay 1993, 429.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 430-431.

the dominant visual order.”⁶¹ This discussion of the spectacle is problematic in that it shifts the emphasis from the specific to the abstract; the spectacle ceases to identify a development of the capitalist negation of life that has developed a visual form for itself, and becomes a generalized belief that the “negation of life” is something that is *inherent* in the visual field as such. Such a slippage is what allows Jay to place an “ascetic suspicion of ‘the lust of the eyes’” and a “relentless hostility to visual pleasure in the present” at the core of Debord’s thought.⁶²

A more fruitful approach to the role of the image in Debord’s work would heed his warning that “the critical concept of the *spectacle* is susceptible of being turned into just another empty formula of sociologico-political rhetoric designed to explain and denounce everything *in the abstract*—so serving to buttress the spectacular system itself” (SS 203). Jay’s abstraction of Debord’s critique of spectacle can be grounded by emphasizing that the hostility towards visual mediation apparent in his work was not a transhistorical repudiation of opticality *tout court*, but rather a critical response to a historically determined regime of images. His opposition to the image was neither abstract nor metaphysical, but strategic and resolutely materialistic. To avoid constructing a distorted portrait of a Debord whose insights are limited to a naïve neo-Platonic preference for the immediacy of speech versus the illusions of sight—a *spectacularization* of Situationist thought, in Debord’s argot—one would do well to shift the focus away from a discussion of the metaphysical nature of the image itself onto the psychological and physical consequences of the spectacular reign of images in late capitalist society for the human subject. As such, it will be instructive to establish a relationship between

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 417.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 429-30.

Debord's theses on the historical effect of the spectacle with other theories about the perceptual experience of modernity.

Reception in a State of Distraction: Separation, Contemplation, and Attention

In his important study *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture* (2001), Jonathan Crary offers a discussion of the spectacle which departs in several significant ways from the clichés about Debord's supposed mistrust of the image. Crary insists, rather, that the spectacle designates a historical intensification of the perceptive conditioning which is intrinsic to the functioning and naturalization of modern capitalism. This spectacular re-shaping of human perception effectively represents for Crary "an *internalization* of disciplinary initiatives," which engenders sensory habits assuring the subject's acclimatization to the demands of a productive life in modern society.⁶³ This relates to Debord's discussion of *diffuse* mechanisms of power at work in advanced capitalist societies, where the spectacle is maintained without the direct police repression necessary in totalitarian states, and can instead rely upon the satisfaction of "pseudo-needs" through images which are produced and consumed in an ever-accelerating cycle (SS 68). Crary correctly insists that Debord's critique of the spectacle "has little to do with the visual contents of these screens [television and computer, for example] and far more with a larger strategy of the individual... Spectacle is not primarily concerned with a *looking at* images but rather with the construction of conditions that individuate, immobilize, and separate subjects, even within a world in which mobility and circulation are ubiquitous."⁶⁴ For Crary, as for Debord, it is the form that the spectacle

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁶⁴ Crary, Jonathan. *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2001, 74.

takes as a whole, rather than the content of its particular images, that is most significant as a mechanism of social regulation. Crary's text concerns itself primarily with late nineteenth-century techniques and discourses attempting to construct attentive subjects within the continual distractions of modern life—a sort of pre-history of the spectacle. Through this study, Crary significantly does not locate distraction as the opposite of attention, but as a problem intrinsic to modern capitalism's increased demand for socially productive forms of attention. In his words,

Part of the cultural logic of capitalism demands that we accept as natural switching our attention rapidly from one thing to another. Capital, as accelerated exchange and circulation, necessarily produced this kind of human perceptual adaptability and became a regime of reciprocal attentiveness and distraction... Unlike in any previous order of visibility, mobility, novelty and distraction became identified as constituent elements of perceptual experience.⁶⁵

As such, the “problem of distraction” emerges with capitalism in the late nineteenth century “not as a disruption of stable or ‘natural’ kinds of sustained, value-laden perception that had existed for centuries, but [as] an effect, and in many cases a constituent element of the many attempts to produce attentiveness in human subjects.”⁶⁶ That is, contrary to classical models of attention as the grasping of an objective world by a unified subject, Crary situates attention and distraction on a “single continuum” as inseparable elements of one “dynamic process” of adaptation to the experience of modernity.⁶⁷ While “all that is solid melts into air” in modern capitalism—epitomized by the speed at which capital circulates, the global distribution of commodities, and the instantaneous flows of information—this perpetual mobility is both dependent upon and productive of states of passive absorption and socially useful attentiveness. To produce a

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 29-30.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 49.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

more nuanced understanding of the role of the image within Debord's theory, it will be necessary to investigate the spectacle's relation, firstly, to the problems of attention and contemplation, and, secondly, to the notion—exemplified in the work of Walter Benjamin—that modernity has effected a historical “crisis in perception.”

Though Debord does not use the term “attentiveness” in *The Society of the Spectacle*, he asserts that what characterizes the spectacle above all is the promotion of a *contemplative* attitude toward life. Contemplation and attentiveness are correlates in that both imply the ability on the part of a subject to isolate an object from outside stimuli and enter into an absorptive relationship with it. For Debord, the absolute pervasiveness of the contemplative mode in everyday life under the spectacle is an extension of the alienation effected by capitalism; in the abstractions of the spectacle the entirety of human activity moves away into representation—in the commodity-form and in the image—and becomes an object of contemplation. Activity, that which is “banned” in the spectacle, is replaced by contemplation, a state of being governed, for Debord, by the principle of “non-intervention” (SS 27). In Debord's words, “the spectator's alienation from and submission to the contemplated object (which is the outcome of his unthinking activity) works like this: the more he contemplates, the less he lives” (SS 30). The absolute rejection of the contemplative aspect of capitalism is yet another aspect of Debord's inheritance from the work of Lukács. For Lukács, the basis of the commodity structure “is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity,’ an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.”⁶⁸ This is essentially what Lukács describes as the phenomenon of “reification,” the transformation of a

⁶⁸ Lukács 1971, 83.

relationship between people into a relationship between things, and the investment of a preeminently human characteristic into things. In a passage from *History and Class Consciousness*, which Debord chose as an epigraph for the second section of the *Society of the Spectacle*, Lukács stresses that reification engenders a contemplative attitude in the labourer:

As labour is progressively rationalized and mechanized [the worker's] lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more *contemplative*. The contemplative stance adopted towards a process mechanically conforming to fixed laws and enacted independency of man's consciousness and impervious to human intervention, i.e. a perfectly closed system, must likewise transform the basic categories of man's immediate attitude to the world: it reduces space and time to a common denominator and degrades time to the dimension of space.⁶⁹

Informed by Henri Bergson's writing on the spatialization of time, Lukács focuses on how the "qualitative, variable, flowing nature" of time becomes quantified, uniform, and frozen in the rational ordering of human labour under capitalist conditions of production—"in short, it becomes space."⁷⁰ In the simultaneous separation of humanity from the products of its labour and alienation from the experience of time "the *contemplative* nature of man under capitalism makes its appearance."⁷¹ Capitalism, thus, presents human labour and activity as always already separated from the subject, as reified objects to passively gaze upon, effacing the desire and ability to directly intervene within one's own life.

For Debord, the contemplative mode effected by the reification that Lukács identified within capitalist commodity production has expanded itself into all sectors of society in the generalized "separation" that is the "alpha and omega of the spectacle" (SS

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

25). In the following passage, Lukács compares reification to the aesthetic attitude, and offers a useful example, which he drew from Ernst Bloch, of the way in which separation could be posited as the operative principle of contemplation:

When nature becomes landscape – e.g. in contrast to the peasant’s unconscious living within nature – the artist’s unmediated experience of the landscape (which has of course only achieved this immediacy after undergoing a whole series of mediations) presupposes a distance (spatial in this case) between the observer and the landscape. The observer stands outside the landscape, for were this not the case it would not be possible for nature to become a landscape at all. If he were to attempt to integrate himself and the nature immediately surrounding him in space within ‘nature-seen-as-landscape’, without modifying his aesthetic contemplative immediacy, it would then at once become apparent that landscape only starts to become landscape at a definite (though of course variable) distance from the observer and that only as an observer set apart in space can he relate to nature in terms of landscape at all.⁷²

That Lukács should have turned to an aesthetic metaphor is significant for an understanding of how the problematic of separation and contemplation operates within the spectacle. In the aesthetic attitude, a gap is presupposed between the contemplating subject and the object contemplated; such a separation, in fact, constitutes the aesthetic condition of possibility. For Lukács, as for Debord, the disinterestedness that Kant located in aesthetic perception is promoted under capitalism as a generalized mode of being in the world; the spectacular citizen perceives the world in the same way that Lukács’ painter perceives the contemplated landscape—that is, *at a distance*. Under the spectacle “reality unfolds in a new generality as a pseudo-world apart, solely as an object of contemplation” (SS 2). From a Marxist point of view, this disinterested contemplation—this passive attentiveness—has the effect of alienating the subject from history, of preventing a demystified historical consciousness and the knowledge of being an actor within history. In Jürgen Habermas’ terms, aesthetic contemplation is a “concentrated engagement with a

⁷² *Ibid.*, 157-8.

decentered subjectivity which is released from the constraints of knowledge and action.”⁷³

The estrangement of the subject from history, knowledge and action under the spectacle is also compared by Debord to the separation effected between the material world of human activity and the “world beyond” of “religious contemplation,” which offers “an imaginary compensation for a poverty of real social activity” (SS 25). In effect, humanity projects its own experience of life into the separate realm of spectacle, which it then contemplates; in Debord’s words, “the spectacle’s externality with respect to the acting subject is demonstrated by the fact that the individual’s own gestures are no longer his own, but rather those of someone else who represents them to him” (SS 30). As such, with the universal contemplative stance effected by the spectacle, the modern subject stands indifferent before history, witnessing its flows and vicissitudes as an objective process from which they are fundamentally *separate*.

While Debord situates this spectacular estrangement from experience as a direct development from and expansion of reification, Crary importantly notes that “a striking feature of Debord’s book was the absence of any kind of historical genealogy of the spectacle, and that absence may have contributed to the sense of the spectacle as having appeared full-blown out of the blue.”⁷⁴ In 1988, however, Debord offered a more precise periodization of the spectacle in his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, stating that when he was writing *The Society of the Spectacle* in 1967, the spectacle itself was barely forty years old, putting its origin around 1927.⁷⁵ Following from this observation, Crary offers several “fragmentary speculations” as to why Debord might have cited this date as

⁷³ Habermas, Jürgen. “Modernity: An Unfinished Project,” in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997, 48.

⁷⁴ Crary, Jonathan. “Spectacle, Attention, Counter-Memory,” *October*. vol. 50 (Autumn 1989): 98.

⁷⁵ Debord, Guy. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Malcolm Imrie. London: Verso Press, 1990, 3.

the historical birth of spectacle, suggesting for example that 1927 “saw the technological perfection of television” as well as the release of the first synchronized sound film, *The Jazz Singer*.⁷⁶ Crary also notes that 1927 was the year Walter Benjamin began his *Arcades Project*, a monumental study of the experience of the city and the emergence of commodity culture in nineteenth-century Paris, which would inform his assertion that the historical conditions of modernity had effected a deep “crisis in perception itself.”⁷⁷

While it is highly doubtful that Debord was familiar with Benjamin’s work, the latter’s theses on history and on the perceptive conditions of modern life offer an important early reflection on the circumstances that Debord would analyze in their postwar maturity as spectacle. In a particularly compelling formulation, Benjamin writes in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) that, “mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.”⁷⁸ Though Benjamin had in mind the specific relation of aesthetics and politics at play within Fascism—Fascism aestheticizes politics, whereas Communism politicizes art—the parallel with Debord’s own theses on contemplation is apparent. With the effacement of historical consciousness in the spectacle, humanity has come to resemble the angel of history that Benjamin saw in Paul Klee’s *Angelus Novus*, 1921, (fig. 1) who contemplates the movement of history with necessary detachment as “one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage.”⁷⁹ Whereas, in Benjamin’s reading, the angel wishes it could slow the inexorable progress, in the society

⁷⁶ Crary 1989, 100-101.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁷⁸ Benjamin, Walter. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*. London: Fontana Press, 1973, 244.

⁷⁹ “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Ibid.*, 259.

of the spectacle the catastrophe of history becomes an object to contemplate with aesthetic detachment, even pleasure. For Debord, “history is the specter haunting modern society,” as the awareness of one’s own historically contingent position, and thus of the historicity of present social conditions, is obscured by the rapid procession of spectacular novelties (SS 200). One of the spectacle’s most profound paradoxes is that while it maintains the false appearance of a permanent present from which history has been evacuated, it does so precisely by founding itself upon ceaseless flux:

Whatever can lay claim to permanence in the spectacle is founded on change, and must change as that foundation changes. The spectacle, though quintessentially dogmatic, can yet produce no solid dogma. Nothing is stable for it: this is its natural state, albeit the state most at odds with its natural inclination. (SS 71)

Thus, for Debord, the individual’s “lack of historical life in general” was effected by the parade of “pseudo events that vie for attention in the spectacle’s dramatizations,” and yet “are quickly forgotten, thanks to the precipitation with which the spectacle’s pulsing machinery replaces one by the next” (SS 157). The contemplative relationship to everyday life and history effected by the spectacle is therefore underwritten by the ever-increasing demands made upon the individual’s attention span and the speed at which information is processed, responded to, and finally discarded.

Developing from his study of the experience of the modern city in the late nineteenth century, Benjamin argued that the accelerated pace of life and the unprecedented flood of stimuli facing the modern subject had fundamentally reshaped the nature of human perception. Indeed, for Benjamin, modernity itself could be defined as “an experience for which the shock experience has become the norm.”⁸⁰ In the spectacle of the crowd passing through the wide boulevards of Haussmann’s Paris, for example, the

⁸⁰ “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Ibid.*, 164.

individual was involved “in a series of shocks and collisions” causing “nervous impulses [to] flow through him in rapid succession, like the energy from a battery”—an experience absorbed with relish by Baudelaire’s *flâneur*.⁸¹ Further, modern industrial labour necessitated that “workers learn to co-ordinate ‘their own movements with the uniformly constant movements of an automaton.’”⁸² Indeed, perpetual technological growth demanded that human perception consistently adapt itself to an ever-accelerating rate of change, which had the effect of subjecting “the human sensorium to a complex kind of training.”⁸³ It is again in his “Artwork essay” that Benjamin describes a modern state of “reception in a state of distraction, which... is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception.”⁸⁴ For Benjamin, this modern condition of perception, at once absorbed and distracted, which he identifies with the experience of architecture in previous times, finds its most potent manifestation and extension in film. Film, constructed from fragments assembled in a flurry of edits, is more significant than painting as a representation of reality for “contemporary man” precisely because it makes manifest through the “thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment.”⁸⁵ That “aspect of reality,” which film captures as an inherent part of its technical characteristic, is, for Benjamin, the constant bombardment of the subject with stimuli, making heretofore unimagined demands on attention in every aspect of quotidian life. In this way, Benjamin asserts that “the painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. Before the movie frame he cannot do so. No sooner has his eye grasped a scene than it is

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁸⁴ “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Ibid.*, 242.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 236.

already changed.”⁸⁶ The film demands a synchronization of human perception with the constant flux of images on the screen in a similar way to the worker who must adapt his or her actions to those of a machine in automated labour conditions. While Benjamin asserts that film offers new potential for a collective and even participatory art experience, it is inseparable from the distracted state of apperception that has become normalized: “The film makes the cult value recede into the background not only by putting the public in the position of the critic, but also by the fact that at the movies this position requires no attention. The public is an examiner, but an absent-minded one.”⁸⁷ Film, even as it seems for Benjamin to condition perception directly—by enlarging the field of the perceivable, for example, and introducing “us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses”—remains simply the “true means of exercise” of the new modalities of perception occasioned by the wider conditions of modernity.⁸⁸

The shift that Benjamin identifies from the absorptive aesthetic mode solicited by the experience of painting to the absent-minded reception necessitated by film, may seem to establish an opposition between attention and distraction at odds with Debord’s understanding of contemplation. The work of Susan Buck-Morss on Benjamin’s *Artwork* essay, however, emphasizes a dialectical understanding of distraction and contemplation in modern perception, as pervasive in the experience of film as it is in the experience of everyday life. In Buck-Morss’ reading, the shock which is “the very essence of modern experience” has fundamentally transformed the structure of sensory perception so that trauma is no longer directly perceived as such, with the cognitive system of synaesthetics

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 239.

instead acting as a buffer to protect consciousness from outside stimuli.⁸⁹ In this way, Buck-Morss claims that the modern experience has necessitated the development of repressive mechanisms within the subject in order to protect from an excess of shock. Further, this “crisis in perception” has effected a transformation of the very meaning of aesthetics:

Bombarded with fragmentary impressions they see too much—and register nothing. Thus the simultaneity of overstimulation and numbness is characteristic of the new synaesthetic organization as *anaesthetics*. The dialectical reversal, whereby aesthetics changes from a cognitive mode of being ‘in touch’ with reality to a way of blocking out reality, destroys the human organism’s power to respond politically even when self-preservation is at stake.⁹⁰

For Benjamin, the most important aspect of the modern experience of shock is precisely that it is not experienced directly as trauma, but rather is sublimated, cushioned by the defense mechanisms of cognition. Indeed, with reference to Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Benjamin writes that “the greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience.”⁹¹ Further, Benjamin cites Freud’s formulation that “for a living organism, protection against stimuli is an almost more important function than the reception of stimuli.”⁹² Benjamin stresses that such a continuous parrying of shock, an internalization of trauma before its registration in consciousness, has the effect of training the subject and of creating new habits of perception. For Buck-Morss, the primary effect is that “response to stimuli

⁸⁹ Buck-Morss, Susan. “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered,” *October*. Vol. 62 (Autumn 1992): 16.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁹¹ “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in Benjamin 1973, 165.

⁹² Quoted in *Ibid.*, 163.

without thinking has become necessary for survival.”⁹³ For Debord, likewise, “in the face of the massive realities of present-day social existence, individuals do not actually experience events” (SS 200); further, the dynamic images of the spectacle act as “the efficient motor of trancelike behaviour” (SS 18). In the society of the spectacle, such perpetual bombardment of the subject by the phantasmagoria of commodities in a state of planned obsolescence and by the infiltration of media apparatuses into every aspect of life has the effect, in Buck-Morss’ words, “of anaesthetizing the organism, not through numbing, but through flooding the senses”; as such, “sensory addiction to a compensatory reality becomes a means of social control.”⁹⁴

It is precisely this aspect of the spectacle—its role as a “second Nature... [that imposes] inescapable laws upon our environment”—that Debord stressed, rather than a metaphysical critique of vision or representation as a means of apprehending the world (SS 24). Indeed, as Crary insists, for Debord, “the spectacle is not an optics of power but an architecture” generating “antinomadic procedures that fix and *stria*te.”⁹⁵ As such, “rather than emphasizing the effects of mass media and its visual imagery, Debord insists that the spectacle is (...) the development of a technology of separation.”⁹⁶ As the spectacular image is by definition mere surface, divorced from any concrete referent in life, Debord saw the necessity to critique its form, circulation, and social function rather than its manifest content. Debord’s focus was thus on the concrete effects of capital’s abstractions, its production of isolated and controllable subjects, and its abolition of authentic modes of communication. Debord insists that “the reigning economic system is

⁹³ Buck-Morss 1992, 16.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22-3.

⁹⁵ Crary 2001, 75.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 73-4.

founded on isolation; at the same time it is a circular process designed to produce isolation. Isolation underpins technology, and technology isolates in turn; all *goods* proposed by the spectacular system, from cars to televisions, also serve as weapons for that system as it strives to reinforce the isolation of the ‘lonely crowd’” (SS 28). For Debord, the centralized diffusion of spectacular images has come to constitute the very ground of human sociability, offering instantaneous communication which paradoxically reinforces the real physical separations between people. “If the administration of society and all contact between people now depends on the intervention of such ‘instant’ communication,” Debord writes, “it is because this ‘communication’ is essentially *one-way*” (SS 24); “spectators are linked only by a one-way relationship to the very center that maintains their isolation from one another. The spectacle thus unites what is separate, but it unites it only *in its separateness*” (SS 29). As such, it is telling that in Jay’s desire to situate the spectacle within his genealogy of “anti-ocular” discourse, he is led to contrast Debord’s theory unfavourably with Michael Foucault’s work on disciplinary society, overlooking the many significant consonances between their positions. Despite Foucault’s famous dismissal of the spectacle in his text *Discipline and Punish*—“our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance”—he too focuses on the rigid material separations concealed and produced by the immaterial surfaces of capital:

Under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, reversed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated in it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies....⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage Books, 1979, 217.

Similarly, in Debord's writing it is never the image as such that is targeted, but rather the historical extension of the commodity-form into the image, and the spectacular image's domination over all aspects of human life. The autonomous representations of the spectacle are not problematic because they are representations, but because they offer an illusion of social unity, a chimera at once dependent upon and generative of the real separations of capitalist society; indeed, this reconciled and satisfying totality produces subjects who can only contemplate "in a state of distraction" the unilateral communication of spectacle, which is the ceaseless discourse of the commodity about itself.

As T.J. Clark has written, Debord's critical engagement with the image emerged from the "politicization, of a group of people (some of them previously 'artists') whose encounter with the conditions of production of the image, and the nature of the changes overtaking that production, had led them to realize that the realm of the image was, increasingly, the social location in which and against which a possible future 'politics' would have to be framed."⁹⁸ The discourse which attributes to Debord a universalizing rejection of the image/sight tends to effect—whether implicitly or explicitly—a transposition of the spectacle from the plane of *history* to that of *nature*. This has the effect of locating the spectacle beyond the reach of human intervention, while also tacitly permitting a dismissal of the politics specific to Debord's critique. That Debord identified the image as the axis around which the present society rotates also caused him to assign the image a tactical importance in the struggle against the spectacle. While ultimately the spectacle, for Debord, could only be shattered by a historically conscious and united revolutionary movement, the critical *use* of images was indispensable as a means of

⁹⁸ Clark, T.J. "Origins of the Present Crisis," *New Left Review*, n. 2 (March-April 2000): 89.

disturbing the “compensatory reality” of the dominant image-culture. One would do well, in closing, to consider Debord’s words in his *Panegyric*, an autobiographical “text” which is, indeed, composed mainly of images:

The reigning deceptions of the time are on the point of causing us to forget that truth may also be displayed by means of images. An image that has not been deliberately separated from its meaning can add great precision and certainty to knowledge. Nobody had ever cast doubt on this until these last few years.⁹⁹

Having necessarily established the terms of Debord’s critique of spectacle, the ambiguous yet central role accorded by Debord to art will comprise the primary focus of the remainder of this thesis; in this regard, Chapter Two will investigate how Debord and the Situationist International’s formulation of new oppositional practices geared toward undermining the reign of spectacle was developed through a historical re-examination of the legacy of avant-garde art and its place within postwar French culture.

⁹⁹ Debord, Guy. *Panegyric Volumes I & II*. London: Verso, 2007, 73.

Chapter Two

The Beauty of Nothingness: Decomposition and the Neo-Avant-Garde

Paris in the 1950s and 1960s saw the simultaneous rise of an increasingly pervasive commodity culture and a widespread artistic revival of paradigmatic early twentieth-century avant-garde practices, including montage, the readymade, and monochromatic painting. In following decades, this resurgence has resulted in problematic territory for historicization and has predominantly been conceptualized through the pejorative and reductive trope of “neo-avant-gardism.” The terms of the debate were largely established by the Marxist critic Peter Bürger’s significant *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, written in 1974, which crucially established the distinction between the authentic “historical avant-gardes” of the early twentieth century and their banalized repetition in the postwar “neo-avant-gardes.” Predating this critique by two decades, however, Guy Debord and the Situationist International presciently perceived that the significance of avant-garde tactics in art and culture had undergone a historical transformation in the society of the spectacle; strategies which had originally been oriented toward the critique of the institution of culture and the formal self-destruction of art were now being exploited anew as a source of positive aesthetic and cultural value. For the Situationists, this shift, which they theorized as a process of cultural “decomposition,” signaled a point of no return and necessitated the development of a new conception of avant-gardism, one which would not rescind the most radical critique of the historical avant-gardes, but seek to build constructively upon it. As a means of bringing the Situationist project to bear upon contemporary art historical debates about the postwar avant-gardes, this chapter will take as a central case study the relationship between

Debord and the artist Yves Klein, who the art historian Benjamin H.D. Buchloh has dubbed “the quintessential neo-avant-garde artist”;¹⁰⁰ it is indeed partly through an engagement with Klein’s work that Debord first formulated the terms of his theory of the avant-garde. Further, Debord’s position will be evaluated in light of the historical framework established by Bürger and the subsequent critiques of his opposition between the historical avant-garde as an auratic moment of historical plenitude and the neo-avant-garde as a meaningless copy.

Decomposition: Debord *contra* Klein

In 1952, as a member of Isidore Isou’s Lettrist movement, the twenty-one year old Debord produced his first film, *Hurlements en Faveur de Sade*, which he conceived as the most extreme possible manifestation of avant-garde tendencies in the history of film; indeed, at the beginning of the film, *Hurlements* constructs its own prehistory and situates itself as the punctual event in a cinematic lineage running through the great works of early cinema, Expressionism, the Russian and French avant-gardes, and, finally, Lettrism, as Debord’s voice intones, “1902: *A Trip to the Moon*. 1920: *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*. 1924: *Entr’acte*. 1926: *Potemkin*. 1928: *An Andalusian Dog*. 1931: *City Lights*. Birth of Guy-Ernest Debord. 1951: *Treatise on Slime and Eternity*. 1952: *The Anticoncept. Howls for Sade*.”¹⁰¹ *Hurlements* does indeed constitute a limit test of the cinematic medium in that it is an imageless film, whose entire visual aspect consists of an alternation between uniformly white and black sequences. When the screen is white, the soundtrack features Debord and other Lettrist compatriots including Isou and Gil J.

¹⁰⁰ Buchloh, Benjamin. “Primary Colours for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde,” in *October*. v. 37 (Summer 1986): 45.

¹⁰¹ Debord, Guy. *Complete cinematic works : scripts, stills, documents*. Translated and edited by Ken Knabb. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2003, 2.

Wolman making nonsensical proclamations, reading passages appropriated from avant-garde manifestos, James Joyce, Dadaist sound poetry, and other, more banal sources including news items and the French civil code. These heterogeneous speech fragments are inter-cut with sequences of silence and complete blackness which last up to five minutes before jarringly transitioning back into blinding whiteness and abrasive sound, creating a viewing experience based upon anticipation, surprise, and frustration. Debord's reduction of cinema to the basis of its technical apparatus, black and white leader, predates the earliest examples of structural film—Tony Conrad's formally similar *The Flicker*, 1965-1966, for example—but departs significantly in his desire to create a fundamentally unsatisfying cinematic experience. The film notoriously ends with twenty-four minutes of complete silence and darkness, with only the sound of the projector running to remind the audience that the film has not in fact ended. This provocative final “scene,” when first projected on June 30th 1952 at the Paris “Ciné-club d'Avant-Garde” provoked a near riot with “real violence and destruction” in Debord's words, precisely the reaction for which he had hoped.¹⁰²

By the time of the Situationist International's founding in 1957, however, Debord's attitude toward *Hurléments*' formal strategies and the scandal it incited had shifted considerably. That year, the film was shown at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, and again caused an uproar, with several ICA members threatening resignation and exiting the theater in a rage—of course, only heightening the curiosity of those waiting for the next screening in the process.¹⁰³ In the five years intervening between the two screenings, Debord had grown increasingly skeptical of the productive

¹⁰² Debord, Guy. “Technical Notes on the First Film,” in *Ibid.*, 211.

¹⁰³ Atkins, Guy. *Asger Jorn: the crucial years 1954-64 paintings : 2 November through 3 December 1977*, New York : Gruenebaum Gallery, 1978, 57-58.

worth of such “avant-garde” gestures, writing in a letter dated November 1957 to fellow Situationist Mohamed Dahou that he did not consider *Hurlements* a “situationist achievement.” In this letter, Debord importantly registers a shift in the cultural climate of postwar Europe that was in the process of banalizing his previous achievement:

Last June witnessed a scandal when a film I had made in 1952 was screened in London... Afterward, the same London audience (...) was treated to some paintings executed by chimpanzees, which bear comparison with respectable action painting. This proximity seems to me instructive. *Passive consumers* of culture (one can well understand why we count on the possibility of active participation in a world in which ‘aesthetes’ will be forgotten) can love any manifestation of decomposition (they would be right in the sense that these manifestations are precisely those that best express their period of crisis and decline, but one can see that they *prefer* those that *slightly disguise* this state). I believe that in another five or six years they will come to *love* my film and the paintings of apes, just as they already love Robbe-Grillet.¹⁰⁴

Further, Debord writes that *Hurlements* “fully participated in the phase of decay, precisely in its most extreme form, without even having—except for a few programmatic allusions—the wish for positive developments.”¹⁰⁵ This important passage—written in a tone managing to be at once boastful and self-deprecating—claims for *Hurlements* the mantle of the most radical gesture of artistic negation, but also expresses the realization that the significance of such aesthetic extremity has undergone a historical transformation. It is this shift in the meaning of avant-garde culture that Debord sought to account for with the concept of “decomposition” or “decay.” Decomposition is defined in the first issue of the Situationist journal in 1957 as “the process in which the traditional cultural forms have destroyed themselves... We can distinguish between an active phase of the decomposition and effective demolition of the old superstructures—which came to an end

¹⁰⁴ Debord, Guy. “One More Try if you Want to Be Situationists (The SI *in* and *against* Decomposition),” in McDonough, Tom, Ed. *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2004, 58.

¹⁰⁵ SI. “Absence and its Costumers,” in *Ibid.*, 79.

around 1930—and a phase of repetition which has prevailed since then.”¹⁰⁶ This concept signals the Situationist perception and response to the growing resurgence of prototypical avant-garde tactics in the art of the late 1950s, including the monochrome, the readymade, aphasia and anti-communicative language, and the utilization of chance procedures. Writing in 1958, Debord would accord his own first film, especially its final scene, a place of priority within the current “exhaustion of traditional aesthetic categories,” alongside John Cage’s *4’33”*—in which “the composer... obliged his audience to listen to a moment of silence”—and “Yves Klein’s recent monochrome paintings” (fig. 2).¹⁰⁷ It is to the latter that we now turn as a means of clearly grasping the terms of the Situationist indictment of contemporary “decompositional” art.

In this regard, the relationship of Yves Klein to Debord is instructive on several levels. Not only is Klein’s work of this period an early and paradigmatic example of the return of many postwar French artists to avant-garde tropes, but his brief acquaintance with Debord and the subsequent critique leveled at him by the Situationists reflects in many ways the shifting attitudes toward culture in the mid to late 1950s on the part of the SI. Indeed, prior to the formation of the SI in July 1957, Klein had exhibited with Debord, Asger Jorn, and other soon-to-be Situationists as part of the *First Exhibition of Psychogeography* in February of that year at the Taptoë Gallery in Brussels.¹⁰⁸ One month following this exhibition, Debord writes of meeting Klein, in a letter to Piero Simondo, a founding Italian member of the SI, and mentions that he had given him a few

¹⁰⁶ SI. “Definitions,” in Situationist International. *The Situationist International Anthology*. Translated and edited by Ken Knabb. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1989, 46.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 80. Cage, for example, asserted that “we need not fear these silences—we may love them.” Cage, John. *Silence: Lectures and Writings by John Cage*. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1961, 111.

¹⁰⁸ Cabañas, Kaira M. “Yves Klein’s Performative Realism,” in *Grey Room*. N. 31 (Spring 2008): 16.

unidentified texts to see if they could “come to an understanding.”¹⁰⁹ Debord was evidently considering Klein for membership in the SI, and that spring he visited Klein’s studio and also attended his exhibition at the Galerie Colette Allendy in May;¹¹⁰ indeed, a photograph exists, taken by Klein, of Debord and Jorn at the opening to this exhibition, standing with *galeriste* Iris Clert (fig. 3). However, by the time of the SI’s founding, Debord had severed ties with Klein, and the scathing words reserved for the artist in the second issue of the *IS*, where he is denounced as being at “the forefront of a fascist wave that is making headway in France,” undoubtedly assured the definitive end to this short and curious relationship.¹¹¹ Much later, Debord would also claim that Klein had drawn his inspiration for his famous monochrome paintings directly from his experience of *Hurlements* at its inaugural screening in 1952. In his words,

the painter Yves Klein, whom I knew at the time and who was present at the first very tumultuous public projection of this film, was overwhelmed by a convincing black sequence lasting twenty-four minutes. Out of this experience he developed, a few years later, his ‘monochrome’ painting which, to tell the truth, wrapped in a bit of Zen mysticism for his famous ‘blue period,’ was what provoked many an expert to call him a genius. Some still insist that he is one today. As far as painting is concerned, however, it is not I who could obscure Yves Klein’s glory, but rather what Malevich did much earlier and which was momentarily forgotten by these very same experts.¹¹²

Though Debord’s chronology can certainly be debated, since Klein’s earliest monochromes as well as his “monotone symphony” date from 1947, there is something more interesting at play in this passage than his claim of artistic progeny. To unpack these implications will require a closer look at Klein’s production of this period and the Situationist critique thereof.

¹⁰⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ SI. “Absence and its Costumers,” in McDonough 2004, 81.

¹¹² Cited in Levin, Thomas. “Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord,” in *Ibid.*, 439.

In 1957, along with two exhibitions in Paris, Klein opened an exhibition in Milan at the Galleria Apollinaire in which ten monochrome works painted in his newly trademarked colour *International Klein Blue* were displayed (fig. 4). Each of these canvases were, by all rights, identical to one another; however, in a scandalous and sardonic gesture, the prices were different. Writing that same year about the exhibition, Klein stated that “each blue world of each picture, although of the same blue and treated in the same manner, revealed itself to be of an entirely different essence and atmosphere; none resembled another, no more than pictorial moments or poetic moments resemble each other.”¹¹³ He described the absorbed state of pseudo-mystical contemplation solicited by his paintings as an individual response to the inherent but variable “value” of each canvas; as such, “the prices were all different of course.”¹¹⁴ Through a feat of tautological thinking, Klein concluded that the willingness of buyers to pay different prices for the same paintings, “prove[d], for one thing, that the pictorial quality of each picture was perceptible through something other than the material physical appearance.”¹¹⁵ Klein took the gesture further in his *Immaterial Pictorial Sensitivity Zones*, 1957-59, in which non-existent aesthetic “zones” were “relinquished against a certain weight of fine gold.”¹¹⁶ The buyer of such a zone was given a receipt which “indicate[d] the exact weight of pure gold which is the material value correspondent to the immaterial acquired”; Klein asserted that this receipt would, however, necessarily end up “materializing” his immaterial zones, thus voiding their “authentic... value.”¹¹⁷ In order for this value to become the inalienable property of the buyer, Klein specified that the

¹¹³ Klein, Yves. “The Monochrome Adventure,” in *Yves Klein*. New York: The Arts Publisher, 1982, 105.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ Klein, Yves. *Yves Klein: 1928-1962, Selected Writings*. London: The Tate Gallery, 1974, 49.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

receipt would have to be burned, and that half the gold would have to be thrown into the ocean by Klein, in the presence of “an Art Museum Director, or an Art Gallery Expert, or an Art Critic, plus two witnesses.”¹¹⁸

In this way, Klein insisted on the infusion of his radically emptied works with various forms of value, whether mystical, aesthetic, institutional, monetary, or a confused *mélange* thereof. Indeed, art historian Thierry de Duve has written that “value and price are conflated in a perfect congruence” in Klein’s assignment of monetary worth to the immaterial pictorial value that he insists is present in the work.¹¹⁹ As such, for de Duve,

the ‘real value of the picture’ is invisible and could only be the hidden social relation that is later to be brutally revealed through its price. The price, in turn, is the expression of the exchange-value that the transaction itself presents as a social relation only to be hidden again in the materiality of the picture.¹²⁰

For Debord, it was precisely these gestures of reinvestment that signaled the most problematic aspect of Klein’s production, as well as their representative status in the current state of cultural “decomposition.” As Debord puts it, “these empty exercises seldom escape the temptation to rely on some kind of external justification, thereby to illustrate and serve a reactionary conception of the world.”¹²¹ While *Hurlements*, for example, was conceived as an absolute evacuation of all forms of value from the work of art, whether aesthetic or otherwise, as a means of “staging the scandal of absence” as it were, Klein’s work asserted that there was a positivity to be discovered by the viewer within these “negative” practices.¹²² Indeed, as one contemporary critic writing for *Le Monde* favourably asserted, Klein’s monochromes “transpose this purely plastic theme of

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ De Duve, Thierry. “Yves Klein, or The Dead Dealer,” *October*, vol. 49. (Summer 1989): 78.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹²¹ SI. “Absence and its Costumers,” in McDonough 2004, 80.

¹²² SI. “The Avant-Garde of Presence,” in *Ibid.*, 145.

color saturation into a sort of incantatory pictorial mystique. It involves being swallowed up in spellbinding blue uniformity like a Buddhist in Buddha.”¹²³

Beyond Debord’s deep contempt for mysticism and religiosity of all stripes, for him, the notion invoked by Klein and his advocates that one could experience—and purchase—what Debord ironically called “the beauties of dissolution” represented a historical reversal of the critical role played by the avant-garde art of the early twentieth century.¹²⁴ Indeed, the contemplative, immersive, and spiritual experience solicited by Klein’s monochromes reinstated precisely the values that Russian avant-garde artists of the 1920s sought to destroy in art by developing the practice of monochrome painting. Aleksander Rodchenko’s monochrome triptych *Pure Colours: Red, Yellow, Blue*, 1921, (fig. 5) for example, reduced painting to its base material components in order to effect, in Benjamin Buchloh’s words, a “demystification of aesthetic production” which would “liberate color from all spiritual, emotional, and psychological associations, analogies with musical chords, and transcendent meaning in general.”¹²⁵ For the Situationists, likewise, the most radical legacy of modern art evinced that “the liberation of artistic forms... signified their reduction to nothing.”¹²⁶ The aesthetic void of the first monochromes was intended as a critique of the mythical dimension of art in bourgeois society, embodied by the axioms of individualistic creation and contemplative absorption in a unified work; as such, monochromy was conceived as a cultural correlate to the wider revolutionary movement, a means of redefining the social role of the artist and the constitution of the work of art in a way suitable for a classless society. For Debord, once

¹²³ Cited in Situationist International. “Absence and its Costumers,” in *Ibid.*, 80.

¹²⁴ SI. “The Meaning of Decay in Art,” in *Ibid.*, 86.

¹²⁵ Buchloh 1986, 44.

¹²⁶ SI. “The Meaning of Decay in Art,” in McDonough 2004, 85.

separated from this explicitly revolutionary orientation, the continuation of these “decompositional” strategies left “a choice between two possibilities...: dissembling nothingness by means of a suitable vocabulary, or its offhand affirmation.”¹²⁷ With Klein’s monochromes, thus, meaning is persistently assigned from the outside in order to fill or dissemble the “nothingness” to which artists such as Rodchenko had reduced the work of art; now asserted as the central, and *meaningful*, elements of the radically emptied work were precisely the individual personality of the artist, the transcendent mystical aesthetic experience, the institutional framework of culture, the spectacular value of scandal as entertainment, and the equation of the work’s exchange value with its *true* value.

The Theory of the Avant-Garde

On October 27th, 1960, Klein and a group of seven other artists including Arman, Jean Tinguely, and Jacques de la Villeglé signed a collective declaration written by the critic Pierre Restany, and the *Nouveaux Réaliste* movement was born. More a loose association of independent artists than a cohesive group entity, the *Nouveaux Réalistes* reassessed art practices developed by the Dadaists in the early decades of the twentieth century, and applied them to the context of postwar European popular and commercial culture, with widely varying aims and results. Arman, for example, developed a practice extending directly from Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, presenting “accumulations” of *objets trouvés*, mostly banal, everyday material—from garbage to electric razors to gas masks—often displayed in Plexiglas cases (fig. 6). The interpretative framework within which these practices have long been understood was established by Restany, the *de facto*

¹²⁷ Debord, Guy. “Report on the Construction of Situations,” in *Ibid.*, 35.

spokesperson for the group, who emphasized that “lots of people in Europe and America have tended to consider *Nouveau Réalisme* as a kind of critical approach to consumer society at the end of the fifties. It may appear that way today but it is a totally distorted vision.”¹²⁸ Restany stressed that the common objects appropriated by the *Nouveaux Réalistes* and transformed into art were not subverted, but were, rather, infused with added aesthetic and cultural value through the artist’s selection. “By the sole fact of this appropriating gesture,” Restany writes, “the object transcends its insignificant, banal everydayness and is liberated: it attains its full expressive singularity.”¹²⁹ While Restany’s reading should not be considered a definitive expression of the intentions of the artists associated with the movement, it nevertheless signaled a fundamental shift in the historical reception of avant-garde practices. Whereas Duchamp insisted that his readymades were aesthetically indifferent, Restany claimed that “it is obvious thirty-five years later that the bottle rack selected by Duchamp had a far more beautiful shape than most pieces of sculpture executed as such in 1914.”¹³⁰ This retrospective reversal of the critical legacy of Dadaist tactics in art was registered by Debord, who undoubtedly had the *Nouveaux Réalistes* in mind when he criticized in 1963 “the neodadaists [who] speak of recharging Marcel Duchamp’s earlier plastic refusal with (aesthetic) positivity.”¹³¹ For Debord, these “neodadaists” abrogated the critical dimension of Dadaism, whose “revolutionary role was the destruction of all conventions in art, language or actions,” and instead produced art which was merely “*representative*,” not critical, of contemporary

¹²⁸ Cone, Michele. “Pierre Restany and the Nouveaux Réalistes,” *Yale French Studies*, no. 98 (2000): 63.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ Debord, Guy. “The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Politics or Art,” in McDonough 2004, 165.

culture—art in service of “the acceptance and decoration of the present world.”¹³² The avant-garde “destruction” of art and culture was definitive for Debord, and, as such, the transformation of their work into “an acknowledged cultural style,” explicitly coded *as art* and firmly situated within the institutional framework of the cultural sector, was a betrayal. The practices of the *Nouveaux Réalistes*, then, amounted to “[digging] up corpses to kill them again, in a cultural no-man’s-land beyond which they can imagine nothing.”¹³³

The meaning of the original avant-gardes, for Debord, was inseparable from their historical coincidence with the revolutionary movements of the early twentieth century. Indeed, he ascribes to Dadaism and Surrealism a parallel role within the sphere of culture to the role of the proletarian revolutions within society at large. The first programmatic Situationist tract, written by Debord in 1956, already lays out the schema that will underpin all of his subsequent reflections on avant-garde art. In it, Debord writes that “Dadaism, contrived in Zurich and New York by refugees and deserters of the First World War, wished to be the refusal of all the values of bourgeois society, whose bankruptcy had just become so glaringly evident.”¹³⁴ He continues,

[Dadaism’s] drastic expressions in postwar France and Germany focused mainly on the destruction of art and writing and, to a lesser extent, on certain forms of behavior (intentionally idiotic shows, speeches, walks). Its historical role was to have dealt a mortal blow to the traditional conception of culture.¹³⁵

The entire pantheon of Dadaist strategies in art—the development of aleatory procedures, the refusal of communicative language, the de-skilling of art, the embrace of the

¹³² *Ibid.*, 164-5.

¹³³ SI, “Once Again, On Decomposition,” in *Ibid.*, 117.

¹³⁴ Debord, Guy, “Report on the Construction of Situations,” in *Ibid.*, 32.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

irrational, and the denial of individual creation—were directed toward the refutation, point by point, of the myths and conventions which preserved art’s status as a privileged sector of bourgeois society, that is to say, those of individual genius, unified composition, and contemplative reception. There is, for Debord, in the transition from Dadaism to Surrealism an important shift from a purely critical or negative program to the positive desire for new attitudes and practices in life, the search for a zone of action beyond culture. The extremity of the Dadaist revolt against art was unsustainable and in fact, “the almost immediate breakup of dadaism was necessitated by its wholly negative definition”,¹³⁶ in contrast, the Surrealists “did their best to define the grounds for a constructive action starting from dada’s emphasis on moral revolt and the extreme erosion of traditional means of communication.” As such, Debord asserted that “the surrealist program, asserting the sovereignty of desire and surprise, offering a new practice of life, is much richer in constructive possibilities than is generally thought.”¹³⁷ Though Debord did not share the surrealist belief in the liberatory potential of the unconscious, the Situationist project was deeply informed by Surrealism’s search for ways of living opposed to capitalism’s rationalistic ordering of society, human labour and the self. In Debord’s words, “resisting an apparently irrational society in which the rupture between reality and still loudly proclaimed values was carried to ridiculous lengths, surrealism made use of the irrational to destroy that society’s superficially logical values.”¹³⁸

However, with the ultimate end of the revolutionary movements of the time in either bureaucratization or repression, the artistic avant-gardes found themselves trapped within the bourgeois sphere of culture that they had so vociferously rejected. For Debord,

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

thus, “one discovers [within the historical avant-gardes] at each stage the same universal will for change, and the same quick break-up when the incapacity to change the real world profoundly enough leads to a defensive withdrawal into the very doctrinal positions whose inadequacy had just been revealed.”¹³⁹ In this way, Debord claimed that both Dadaism and Surrealism were crippled by a “fatal one-sidedness,” “for dadaism sought to *abolish art without realizing it*, and surrealism sought to *realize art without abolishing it*.”¹⁴⁰ The perception of this failure in fact formed the departure point for the Situationist project: “the critical position since worked out by the situationists demonstrates that the abolition and the realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art.”¹⁴¹ The potential for new forms of creativity and a new conception of art which would not be contained within the horizons of a bankrupted culture was theorized by Debord as the constructed situation, conceived as a free and spontaneous appropriation of one’s own time and space. However, before this central Situationist concept can be broached, it is necessary to further investigate the underpinnings of Debord’s historical conception of the avant-garde by establishing its significant conceptual ties to the Marxist critiques of culture and the avant-garde presented by the German critic Peter Bürger.

In his important text *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), Bürger crucially establishes the distinction between the “historical avant-garde” and the “neo-avant-garde,” a distinction which has gone on to structure subsequent debates on the relationship between the first avant-garde works and their later stylistic reemergence. Bürger conceives of the ultimate aim of the historical avant-gardes of the early twentieth

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁴⁰ Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995, thesis 191.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

century, specifically Dadaism and Surrealism, as the radical negation of the institution of culture as it has developed in bourgeois society; with the repetition of avant-garde tactics in the works of the postwar neo-avant-garde, this negation becomes culturally legitimated *as art*, thus voiding avant-garde practices of any critical charge. In this respect, Bürger's position is quite close to Debord's; indeed, they both significantly base their respective theories of the avant-garde around a shared definition of culture. For Bürger, the defining characteristic of culture as an institution is its autonomy, its "dissociation from the praxis of life."¹⁴² Bürger argues that values that are incompatible with the means-end rationality of capitalist society are banished to the specialized sector of culture, which then precludes their realization in life: "Needs that cannot be satisfied in everyday life, because the principle of competition pervades all spheres, can find a home in art, because art is removed from the praxis of life. Values such as humanity, joy, truth, solidarity are extruded from life as it were and preserved in art."¹⁴³ As such, even though individual works of art may possess critical content or express values opposed to the rest of productive existence, their institutional housing in a privileged sector of bourgeois society nevertheless inevitably "stabilizes the very social conditions against which [art] protests."¹⁴⁴ Likewise, Debord argues that,

one of the contradictions of the bourgeoisie in its stage of elimination is its respect for intellectual and artistic creation in principle, while at first opposing its creations and then making use of them. It needs to preserve the sense of critique and research among a minority, but only with the condition that this activity be directed toward strictly separated utilitarian disciplines, dismissing all comprehensive critique and research.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Bürger 1984, 49.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴⁵ Debord, Guy. "Report on the Construction of Situations," in McDonough 2004, 31.

Art at its best, thus, represented “the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world,” but its development as an autonomous specialization paradoxically doomed it to a profound ineffectuality and lack of consequence.¹⁴⁶ The critique of art is thus positioned by both Bürger and Debord as the heir to Marx’s critique of religion; both contain a radical kernel as a “protest against true wretchedness,” but also act as a pacifying agent as humanity exiles its living strength to a mythical domain apart from life.

In both theorists’ historical schemas, it is only with the historical avant-gardes that culture achieves an awareness of its own institutional constitution as autonomous and embarks upon a radical self-criticism. For Bürger, “it is a distinguishing feature of the historical avant-garde that they did not develop a style. There is no such thing as a Dadaist or a surrealist style.”¹⁴⁷ Instead, what the historical avant-garde enacted was a “liquidation of period style” where it “no longer criticized the schools that preceded it,” but rather “criticized art as an institution and the course its development took in bourgeois society.”¹⁴⁸ The avant-gardist attack, for Bürger, systematically took on “the three areas... used above all to characterize autonomous art: purpose or function, production, reception.”¹⁴⁹ To the functionlessness of bourgeois art, the avant-garde proclaimed a “sublation of art in the praxis of life” which would abolish the separation that is operative even in the demand that art serve a practical function in society.¹⁵⁰ To the affirmation of the individual producer in autonomous art, the avant-garde opposed “a radical negation of the category of individual creation,” best epitomized for Bürger by Duchamp’s

¹⁴⁶ Debord 1995, thesis 183.

¹⁴⁷ Bürger 1984, 18.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 18, 32.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

readymades.¹⁵¹ Finally, the avant-garde emphasis on shock-tactics and the provocation of the viewer were devised as a means of combating the passive mode of contemplative absorption expected in the reception of bourgeois art. For Debord, the avant-garde critique emerged as a necessary historical consequence of the internal dynamic established by culture's autonomy. According to Debord's inexorably end-driven historical narrative,

every discipline, once it becomes autonomous, is bound to collapse—in the first place as an attempt to offer a coherent account of the social totality, and eventually even as a partial methodology viable within its own domain. The *lack of rationality* in a separated culture is what dooms it to disappear, for that culture itself embodies a call for the victory of the culture.¹⁵²

The greatest merit of the historical avant-gardes, in both Bürger and Debord's view, was to have achieved an unprecedented level of self-consciousness about the contradictions of an autonomous culture, and to have formulated practices designed to contest the institution of culture from within.

Both theorists, however, agree upon the fundamental failure of the avant-gardes to realize their historical calling as the gravediggers of culture. Bürger takes the "failure of the avant-gardist intent to sublate art" for granted, but claims that this disappointment only became perceptible with the emergence of the postwar "neo-avant-garde" which retroactively legitimized the practices of the avant-garde, re-absorbing them within the cultural sector as a mere period style to be exploited anew.¹⁵³ He discusses the use of found objects in neo-avant-garde art as fully embodying this tendency, citing *Nouveau Réaliste* Daniel Spoerri's readymades as an example (fig. 7)—a minor exception in a text

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁵² Debord 1995, thesis 182.

¹⁵³ Bürger 1984, 53.

that, as several later commentators have noted, offers little in the way of concrete analysis of postwar artistic practice. For Bürger, while in historical avant-garde practices “the *objet trouvé* is totally unlike the result of an individual process but a chance find, in which the avant-gardist intention of uniting art and the praxis of life took shape, [it] is recognized today as a ‘work of art.’ The *objet trouvé* thus loses its character as antiart and becomes, in the museum, an autonomous work among others.”¹⁵⁴ Where the avant-garde sought to destroy the category of the “work of art” through the use of found objects, the neo-avant-garde seeks to *expand* the same category, gaining cultural legitimacy for the *objet trouvé* as “autonomous art in the full sense of the term.”¹⁵⁵ Bürger thus asserts that “the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardist intentions.”¹⁵⁶ It is this purely temporal hierarchy established between the “genuine” avant-garde and its later debased rehearsal in Bürger’s homogeneous and often caricatural category of “neo-avant-gardism” that has been most heatedly contested by later critics such as Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster. Buchloh has pointedly argued that Bürger’s ascription of “genuine” intentions to the historical avant-garde testifies to a faith in “the fiction of the origin as a moment of irretrievable plenitude and truth.”¹⁵⁷ Buchloh continues, “as is usually the case with such fictions, we find in Bürger’s text the consequence of this loss of the original for the present,” which is “comparatively empty and meaningless, lacks the vigor of the original, and therefore, at best, offers us the randomness of historicism.”¹⁵⁸ Bürger’s belief that in the neo-avant-garde the tragic failure of the historical avant-garde to sublate art and life is replayed, however this time as

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁵⁷ Buchloh 1986, 42.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

farce—as “a manifestation that is void of sense and that permits the positing of any meaning whatever”—is based upon a total consignment of all contemporary cultural production to the realm of ideology.¹⁵⁹ Hal Foster, likewise, argues that such a move presents “history as both *punctual and final*,” leading Bürger to the questionable conclusion that “a work of art, a shift in aesthetics, happens all at once, entirely significant in its first moment of appearance, and it happens once and for all, so that any elaboration is only a rehearsal.”¹⁶⁰ It also places Bürger’s “critical scientist” in a privileged position outside of the ideological determinations of the present, from which he can apprehend the historical avant-garde as a closed package. In Buchloh’s words, “when esthetic knowledge is assigned to the realm of ideology, the critical subject (the academic, the historian) produces knowledge that supposedly looks into the esthetic abyss from a position of scientific objectivity.”¹⁶¹

These critiques help to elucidate not only the limits of Debord’s stance on the neo-avant-garde, similar in so many respects to Bürger’s, but also, more importantly, the fundamental gap that separates the two positions. In contrast to Bürger’s “punctual” vision of history, Foster offers the model of Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*, a “deferred action” in which a traumatic break such as that effected by the historical avant-gardes is “never historically effective or fully significant in its initial moments” but instead can only clearly be understood by being repeated and laboriously worked through.¹⁶² It is as such that Foster argues that rather “*than cancel the historical avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde enacts its project for the first time—a first time that, again, is theoretically endless.*”¹⁶³

¹⁵⁹ Bürger 1984, 61.

¹⁶⁰ Foster, Hal. “What’s Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde?” *October*, vol. 70 (Autumn 1994): 13.

¹⁶¹ Buchloh, Benjamin H.D. “Theorizing the Avant-Garde,” *Art in America* (November 1984): 21

¹⁶² Foster 1994, 30.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 20. Emphasis in the original text.

Unlike Bürger's critique, the Situationist indictment of the neo-avant-garde was not delivered from a mythical position outside contemporary endeavours to grapple with and work through the "trauma" of the avant-garde legacy, but rather from *within* an attempt to develop a renewed and relevant conception of the avant-garde, rethinking the very conceptual grounding of the term in the process. For Debord, the avant-garde discourse of the end of art could not be dismissed as a utopian and increasingly dated relic, nor could be it used to legitimize a fashionably radical aesthetic of nothingness. Conversely, Bürger's conception of the avant-garde critique as a privileged historical moment whose time has definitively passed leads him to claim that "the demand that art be reintegrated in the praxis of life within the existing society can no longer seriously be made after the failure of avant-gardiste intentions."¹⁶⁴ Following from this, he adopts a position of disenchanted historical relativism wherein "the historical succession of techniques and styles has been transformed into a simultaneity of the radically disparate. The consequence is that no movement in the arts today can legitimately claim to be historically more advanced as art than any other."¹⁶⁵ This melancholic foreclosure of the potential for a critical avant-garde in the present is profoundly incompatible with the Situationist project, which, while also conceiving of the historical avant-garde as a definitive break with traditional forms of art and culture, sought constructive possibilities beyond this apparent holding pattern. As such, the Situationists asserted in an editorial in the *Internationale Situationniste* journal from 1962 that "we must not exhibit such respect for art or writing that we would want to completely abandon them, and we must not hold modern art history or philosophy in such contempt that we would want to carry on with

¹⁶⁴ Bürger 1984, 109 n4.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

them as if nothing had happened. Our opinion is undeceived because it is *historical*.”¹⁶⁶

Toward this end, the Situationists aimed to develop *positive* practices issuing from the purely *negative* critique of the historical avant-gardes; it was toward this end that they wrote, “we place ourselves on the other side of culture. Not before it, but *after*. We say that one must *attain* it, while going beyond it as a separate sphere, not only as a domain of specialized production that does not directly affect the construction of life—including the very lives of its own specialists.”¹⁶⁷

In the same editorial in which Debord self-critically compares *Hurlements en Faveur de Sade* to Klein and Cage’s works of “decomposition,” he proclaims that “any creative effort that is not henceforth carried out in view of a new cultural theater of operations, of a direct creation of life’s surroundings, is in one way or another a hoax.”¹⁶⁸ This introduces the founding aim of the SI, which was to construct “situations.” The “situation” was defined as an active moment in life radically opposed to both the alienation of everyday life under the spectacle and to the traditional conception of art in bourgeois society. The situation was conceived through a theatrical paradigm, where the passive role of the spectator would be abolished, leaving only active “*viveurs*,” or “livers.”¹⁶⁹ In contrast to the model of individual creation within the autonomous sphere of culture and to the contemplative role it ascribes to the observer, the situation would be a collective action with the aim of constructing “temporary settings of life and their

¹⁶⁶ SI. “Priority Communication,” in McDonough 2004, 134.

¹⁶⁷ SI. “The Avant-Garde of Presence,” in *Ibid.*, 149.

¹⁶⁸ SI. “Absence and its Costumers,” in *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁶⁹ Debord, Guy. “Report on the Construction of Situations,” in *Ibid.*, 47. Tom McDonough notes that Debord’s use of the French term *viveur* is a theatrical pun: “Typically, the word means ‘rake’ or ‘playboy’, and was thus commonly linked with the dubious morality of the theatrical world; here, Debord assigns it a new meaning that recalls its roots in *vivre*, to live.” *Ibid.*, 50.

transformation into a higher, passionate nature.”¹⁷⁰ The temporal dimension of the situation was described by Debord as a “variation of fleeting moments resolutely arranged” whose success was dependent not upon their persistence, but rather only upon “their passing effect.”¹⁷¹ The situation would be by definition “ephemeral” and “without future,” and would, as such, be radically opposed to aesthetic processes, “which aim at the fixing of emotion.”¹⁷² In Debord’s words, “the unchanging nature of art, or of anything else, does not enter into our considerations, which are in earnest. The idea of eternity is the basest one a man could conceive of regarding his actions.”¹⁷³ As a means of achieving such situations, the group conducted experiments with urbanism, collaborative cultural activity primarily focused on *détournement* or appropriation, and the *dérive* or “drift,” the practice of wandering through the city with no aim other than to engage with the affective flows of the urban environment. However, it was frequently noted by Debord that the possibilities for an *authentic* situation—the creation of an unalienated time and space wholly removed from the logic of the spectacle—were trumped on every side by the reality of contemporary capitalist society, which maintained, in Debord’s words, “a freezing of life that might be described ... as an absolute predominance of ‘tranquil side-by-sideness’ in space over ‘restless becoming in the progression of time.’”¹⁷⁴ As such, Debord regrets that the realization of a true “situationist achievement” effectively

... presupposes a revolution that has yet to take place, and that any research is restricted by the contradictions of the present... The Situationist International exists *in name*, but that means nothing but the beginning of

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁷¹ Debord, Guy. “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” in *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁷² Debord, Guy. “Report on the Construction of Situations,” in *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁷⁴ Debord 1995, thesis 170.

an attempt to build beyond the decomposition in which we, like everyone else, are completely involved.¹⁷⁵

While the neo-avant-garde, however, was largely content to revel in decomposition, compulsively affirming the cultural value of the negative for its own sake, the Situationists perceived the necessity to conceive of new *positive* practices beyond the specialization of art; as such, the SI asserted that “victory will be for those who will be able to create disorder without loving it.”¹⁷⁶

With the legitimacy of the cultural sector challenged beyond redemption by the historical avant-gardes, Debord perceived a historical ultimatum offering two choices: “the project of culture’s self-transcendence as part of total history, [or] its management as a dead thing to be contemplated in the spectacle.”¹⁷⁷ For in the spectacle, even the most aesthetically decomposed artistic practices, once comfortably ensconced within the institution of culture, lacked the critical distance necessary to effectively contest the dominant social order; no longer able to reveal the hidden contradictions of an apparently rational society, these practices could at best present a “mimesis of incoherence,” to borrow film theorist Thomas Levin’s phrase, a representation wholly consistent with the deep irrationality of advanced capitalism.¹⁷⁸ In *The Society of the Spectacle*, Debord formulates the question thusly:

Spectacular consumption preserves the old culture in congealed form, going so far as to recuperate and rediffuse even its negative manifestations; in this way, the spectacle’s cultural sector gives overt expression to what the spectacle is implicitly in its totality—the *communication of the incommunicable*. Thoroughgoing attacks on language are liable to emerge in this context coolly invested with positive value by the official world, for the aim is to promote reconciliation with a dominant state of things from

¹⁷⁵ Debord, Guy. “One More Try if you Want to be Situationists: the SI *in* and *against* Decomposition,” in McDonough 2004, 52.

¹⁷⁶ Debord, Guy. “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” in *Ibid.*, 65.

¹⁷⁷ Debord 1995, thesis 184.

¹⁷⁸ Levin, Thomas. “Dismantling the Spectacle: the Cinema of Guy Debord,” in McDonough 2004, 360.

which all communication has been triumphantly declared absent. Naturally, the critical truth of such attacks, as utterances of the real life of modern poetry and art, is concealed.¹⁷⁹

Insofar as the spectacle's primary effect is the destruction of social communication and the possibilities for authentic modes of community, the neo-avant-garde claim that "the dissolution of the communicable has a beauty all its own" in fact acts as a reconciliation with dominant conditions.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, in a society where authentic meaning, communication, and action are eclipsed by the ruses of spectacle, the neo-avant-garde spectacle of nothingness was recuperable in the extreme; in fact, for Debord, "the law today dictates that everyone consume the greatest possible quantity of nothingness, including the respectable nothingness of the old culture, which has been completely severed from its original meaning."¹⁸¹ As such, the entire activity of the SI was directed towards the creation of a political and cultural practice that would appropriate and refashion the insights of the historical avant-garde with an eye toward a generalized criticism of the present society; such a practice, if it were to exceed the achievements of the Dadaists and Surrealists, would necessarily take as its central axiom the rejection of the specialized role of the artist within the autonomous cultural sphere of bourgeois society. The constructed situation was thus identified with the utopian goal of creating new forms of "real and direct communication" which would displace the old forms of "pseudocommunication" proliferating in the spectacle.¹⁸² For Debord, the Situationist project to supersede the compartmentalization of life into specialized, and thus ineffectual, social spheres demanded revolutionary action carried out in the name of art,

¹⁷⁹ Debord 1995, thesis 192.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ SI. "Priority Communication," in McDonough 2004, 129.

¹⁸² Debord, Guy. "Theses on Cultural Revolution," in *Ibid.*, 65.

the ultimate realization of the *promesse de bonheur* contained in art. In order to transcend decompositional art's "joyous affirmation of a perfect mental nullity" the SI proposed a continuation of the most radical project of "the avant-garde of the true self-destruction of art [which] had expressed inseparably the absence and possible presence of quite another life."¹⁸³

Jürgen Habermas, in his critique of what he dubbed the "false sublation of culture," wrote that "all attempts to bridge the disjunction between art and life... can be seen today as nonsense experiments."¹⁸⁴ For Habermas, the dreams of the avant-garde were fundamentally flawed in that "a rationalized everyday life could not possibly be redeemed from the rigidity of cultural impoverishment by violently forcing open *one* cultural domain, in this case art, and establishing some connection with *one* of the specialized complexes of knowledge."¹⁸⁵ That is, an art which attempts to overcome its own specialization is doomed to fail as long as this sublation is carried out within a society based upon the "autonomous systemic dynamics of the economic and administrative system."¹⁸⁶ Such is why Habermas writes that a reconnection of culture with the exigencies of everyday life "will admittedly only prove successful if the process of social modernization can *also* be turned into *other* non-capitalist directions."¹⁸⁷ In this way, Habermas suggests an alternative to this "false sublation" in the "appropriation" of "expert culture... from the perspective of the lifeworld."¹⁸⁸ In closing, I would suggest

¹⁸³ Debord, Guy. "Report on the Construction of Situations," in *Ibid.*, 36; SI. "The Avant-Garde of Presence," in *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁸⁴ Habermas, Jürgen. "Modernity: An Unfinished Project," in *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity: Critical Essays on the Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Eds. Maurizio Passerin d'Entrèves and Seyla Benhabib. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997, 49.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 52-3.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

that it is indeed toward a similar end that the Situationists directed their activities. The Situationist critique of art has acquired a lasting significance in that it formulates a Marxist aesthetic thought, similar in many ways to that of Bürger or Habermas, however from within an engaged cultural and political praxis. Where Bürger's theory was subtended by his view of history as a closed object to be gazed upon from without, Debord's attempted to operate explicitly from *within* the flow of history. Like Foster, who urges an awareness of the historical delay in the project of the avant-garde—the “deferred action that throws over any simple scheme of before or after, cause and effect, origin and repetition”—Debord attempts to situate the constructive potential of the avant-garde “failure” in the present.¹⁸⁹ For Debord, the opposite and congruent “fatal one-sidedness” which doomed Dada and Surrealism could only reach a dialectical synthesis in the critique of *all* specializations of knowledge and life. In the meantime, the tactical necessity “of consenting to act *in* culture while being against the entire present organization of this culture and even against all culture as a separate sphere” was recognized, but only as an inseparable component of a revolutionary rejection of present day social conditions *in toto*.¹⁹⁰ As such, the remaining chapters of this work will be dedicated to the Situationist activity within and against culture, focusing on their development of the montage technique of *détournement* as well as their critique of specialization, both forming integral components of the Situationist “revolution at the service of poetry.”¹⁹¹ Chapter Three will analyze the desire to create forms of unalienated communication through the precarious tension in Debord's aesthetic thought between the perceived insufficiency of cultural production and the possibility of its self-critical use, by

¹⁸⁹ Foster 1994, 30.

¹⁹⁰ Situationist International. “The CounterSituationist Campaign in Various Countries,” in SI 1989, 111.

¹⁹¹ SI. “All the King's Men,” in McDonough 2004, 155.

engaging with the complimentary yet opposed poetic models of Mallarmé and Lautréamont. Chapter Four will investigate Debord's claim that "all modern art is the revolutionary claim to other professions" within the context of the events of May 1968 and the Situationist conception of the "festive revolution."¹⁹² Both of these aspects of Situationist thought are inseparable from their dual foundation in Debord's critique of spectacle and in his diagnosis that the decomposition of art *within art* could not continue indefinitely, but had to be directed toward the transformation of what Habermas termed the *lifeworld*. As such, Debord demanded a revolutionary "avant-garde of presence," rather than the aestheticization of absence, as a means of contesting the fundamental operations of the spectacle, which are precisely the dissembling of a deep social disorder and the investment of beauty into nothingness.¹⁹³

¹⁹² Situationist International. "The Meaning of Decay in Art," in *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁹³ Debord, Guy. "Theses on Cultural Revolution," in *Ibid.*, 65.

Chapter Three

Impersonal Poetry: *Détournement*, Lautréamont, and Mallarmé

In a collective tract published in the *Internationale Situationniste* journal in 1958, the Situationist International stated that “there can be no situationist painting or music, but only a situationist use of these means.”¹⁹⁴ This proclamation, at once a prescription and a foreclosure, located the possibilities for Situationist cultural production in an ambiguous zone perpetually on the brink of disappearance. Indeed, the utopian architect Constant, associated with the group from 1958 through 1961, could resolutely claim, “the Situationists are against individual productions.”¹⁹⁵ It was toward an art which would transcend the individualism in which it was historically and institutionally mired that the Situationists conceived of the practice of *détournement*, by which previously existing cultural fragments were seized upon, combined, and re-purposed in new constructions that would capitalize upon the subversive power of theft. *Détournement* was an art which denied its own status as art, one which was applied in fields as disparate as painting, poetry, architecture, film, and theory; its potential application was theoretically limitless, possible in any form of communication, even in everyday speech. As a communicative practice, *détournement* was conceived in opposition to the model of unilateral communication, which Debord identified as dominant within the society of the spectacle; rather, in *détournement* communication would “contain *its own critique*.”¹⁹⁶ This chapter will begin with an investigation of the theory and practice of *détournement* and its primary precedent in the plagiaristic poetry developed by Isidore Ducasse (1846-1870),

¹⁹⁴ Situationist International. “Definitions,” in Situationist International. *Situationist International Anthology*. Ed. Ken Knabb. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1989, 46.

¹⁹⁵ From a letter to Debord dated June 23rd 1959. Quoted in Wigley, Mark. *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire*. Rotterdam: Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art, 1998, 32, ft. 80.

¹⁹⁶ SI. “Priority Communication” in McDonough, Tom, Ed. *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*. Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2004, 134.

the self-proclaimed Comte de Lautréamont. The theorization of *détournement* as a mode of communication which would be impersonal insofar as it would critique the unilateral communication typical of art or poetry—taking place between an active producer of meaning and a passive recipient thereof—will lead into a discussion of the importance for the Situationist project of Stéphane Mallarmé (1842-1889) and his metaphysical project of “the Book,” an ultimately unrealizable book which would lead writing to its own aporia and in so doing imply the poetic death of the writing subject. The Mallarméan model of an end of poetry which would simultaneously be a fulfillment of its highest potential would in fact be politicized and put into practice by Debord’s call for the “supersession and realization of art,” an exigency which discloses the inseparability of the cultural and the political at the center of Situationist thought. Finally, following Debord’s statement in the first programmatic text of the SI that, “in a given society, what is termed culture is the reflection, but also the foreshadowing, of possibilities for life’s planning,” this chapter will introduce the implications of *détournement* for the Situationist conception of social communication.¹⁹⁷

“Plagiarism is Necessary. Progress Demands it.”

Between 1957 and 1958, Guy Debord produced two artist’s books, *Fin de Copenhague*, 1957, and *Mémoires*, 1958, in collaboration with painter Asger Jorn, a founding member of the Situationist International and lifelong friend of Debord’s. Initially produced in small photolithographed editions, of which every copy was given away as a gift, the two books are akin in execution and conception, consisting of textual fragments, painterly dabs and smears, and appropriated images taken primarily from

¹⁹⁷ Debord, Guy. “Report on the Construction of Situations...” in *Ibid.*, 29.

advertisements, maps, and photographs. Taken together, the books trace an abstract and poetic pre-history of the Situationist International. *Fin de Copenhague* takes as its subject matter Jorn's involvement with the pan-European avant-garde collective CoBrA (which stands for Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam), founded in 1945 and disbanded in 1951, and its offshoot the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, led by Jorn; this less than literal history is represented primarily through the presence of fragments of a Copenhagen map, text in Danish, and Jorn's expressionistic abstract painting, which is characteristic of the work associated with CoBrA. In the case of the second book, which will be the primary focus of this chapter, the titular "memoirs" are Debord's, with his time as a member of the Lettrist International as the stated subject matter. The LI were a groupuscule of young Parisian avant-gardists who in their brief collective existence from 1952 through 1956 wrote little, produced no art, and in Debord's words, "did not seek the formula for changing the world in books, but by wandering."¹⁹⁸ *Mémoires* (fig. 8) pays tribute to Debord's youth through disjointed fragments from maps of Paris rejoined by drips of paint, photographs of unidentified faces, and banal imagery drawn from postwar European popular culture, all of which establish poetic links between places, people, and half-forgotten memories. *Mémoires*, as such, resembles one of the group's *dérives* (literally translated as "drifts"), collective journeys through the night governed only by chance and spontaneous desire, with no aim other than discovering and engaging with the affective flows of the urban environment—a practice which would also be central to the early years of the Situationist International. The textual component of the work, composed entirely of phrases appropriated from disparate journalistic, literary, and

¹⁹⁸ Debord, Guy. *Complete Cinematic Works: Scripts, Stills, Documents*. Trans and Ed. Ken Knabb. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2003, 251.

commercial sources, addresses in varying degrees of coherence the inexorable passage of time and the inaccessibility of past moments of life existing only imperfectly in recollection, central themes throughout Debord's work. The first page (fig. 9), for example, reads:

*Me souvenir de toi? Oui, je veux/Des lumières, des ombres, des figures/on observera des franges de silence/Le soir, Barbara/ce curieux système de récit/il est pour toi pleine de discorde et d'épouvante/il s'agit d'un sujet profondément imprégné d'alcool/Bien entendu, je vais tout de même agiter des événements et émettre des considérations.*¹⁹⁹

These disjointed phrases, spread out on the white surface of the page and linked by thin lines of dripped paint, essentially set out the programme of the Situationist theory of art—a critique from within of the individualism characterizing artistic expression; as such, this small book will serve as a departure point for an examination of the “curious system” “full of discord and terror” developed by Debord, namely the Situationist tactic of *détournement*.

It is striking that *Mémoires*, a book whose putative genre fixes it in the subjective realm of personal recollection, stands as one of the earliest and most fully articulated examples of the radically depersonalized artistic strategy of *détournement*, literally translated as “diversion.” As a means of transcending the model of individual artistic production which had, for the Situationists, been bankrupted by the historical movement of modern art, a work of *détournement* was an assemblage of fragments, appropriated from any number of sources, and brought into confrontation on the plane of the work. This strategy, as defined by Debord and Lettrist filmmaker Gil J. Wolman in “Mode d'Emploi du *Détournement*,” a broadside published in 1956, was conceived of as a “parodic-serious stage where the accumulation of *détourned* elements, far from aiming at

¹⁹⁹ McDonough 2004, 219.

arousing indignation or laughter by alluding to some forgotten original work, will express our indifference toward a meaningless and forgotten original, and concern itself with rendering a certain sublimity.”²⁰⁰ Images, phrases, sounds—“anything can be used.”²⁰¹ Debord emphasizes that *détournement*’s efficacy in fact increases in relation to the arbitrariness of its combinations—the resistance of *détourned* elements to logical synthesis is a measure of their success; indeed, “*détournement* is less effective the more it approaches a rational reply.”²⁰² Such is why Debord and Wolman criticized, and refused to consider as *détournement*, the project proposed by some colleagues to alter an anti-Communist poster of the Fascist group “Peace and Liberty,” which proclaimed “Union makes strength” over a backdrop of Western flags, with the addition of “...and coalitions make war.”²⁰³ As a counter-example, Debord cites his own “metagraph,” or collage-poem, on the Spanish Civil War, *Le Temps Passe, En Effect, Et Nous Passons Avec Lui*, 1954 (fig. 10); in this work, press photos of Franco, his soldiers, and the dead bodies of resistors are overlaid with blocks of text, one in particular reading “*les jolies lèvres ont du rouge.*” Debord concludes that “the phrase with the most distinctly revolutionary sense is a fragment from a lipstick ad: ‘Pretty lips are red.’”²⁰⁴ The chain of associations set off by this seemingly random juxtaposition could better express a revolutionary spirit than any literal condemnation of Franco and his tactics. As such, it is through the assertion of distance between the elements in a work that *détournement* transcends mere argumentation or negation and opens up to the realm of poetic allusiveness. It is here, in

²⁰⁰ Debord, Guy and Wolman, Gil J. “Methods of *Détournement*,” in SI 1989, 9.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

²⁰² *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

the incommensurability of parts, in the impersonal clash of significations, that the political efficacy of *détournement* is located.

That the politics and poetics of *détournement* resulted from the perceived exhaustion of personal expression is by no means self-evident, but it is central to an understanding of the Situationist stance in culture. Debord himself explicitly located *détournement* as a direct development from the innovations of nineteenth-century poetry, stating, “The discoveries of modern poetry regarding the analogical structure of images demonstrate that when two objects are brought together, no matter how far apart their original contexts may be, a relationship is always formed. Restricting oneself to a personal arrangement of words is mere convention.”²⁰⁵ As such, an investigation of the poetic models in question provides a privileged opening into the genesis of *détournement* and its place within the wider context of Situationist theory. The concept of writing expanded to an *impersonal* arrangement of words—a worthy definition of *détournement* itself—was primarily derived by Debord from his engagement with the work of Isidore Ducasse, the Comte de Lautréamont, one of Debord’s earliest heroes and most pervasive influences.²⁰⁶ Long steeped in legend and remaining to this day an obscure figure, in his short life Ducasse completed only two works, both published posthumously: *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1868-9), written under the pseudonym Lautréamont, and *Poésies* (1870), composed under his own name. *Maldoror*, his best-known work, is a monumental paean to evil and cruelty, which, in the style of Baudelaire, begins by advising the reader not to read the book in front of them or else “the deadly emanations of this book will imbibe his

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 9

²⁰⁶ Debord stated in his *Panegyric* that in his youth, “the people I respected more than anyone alive were Arthur Cravan and Lautréamont.” Debord, Guy. *Panegyric Volumes I & II*. London: Verso Press, 2007, 13.

soul as sugar absorbs water.”²⁰⁷ The six cantos that comprise the work tell of the strange trials and animalistic metamorphoses that Maldoror undergoes as he rejects God and morality. This text’s afterlife was secured in the early decades of the twentieth century by the Surrealist discovery and subsequent canonization of Lautréamont as a prophetic precursor; most notably, Lautréamont’s famous phrase “as beautiful... as the fortuitous encounter upon a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella!” was read as a directive for the uncanny and fragmented montage tactics of Surrealist artists such as Max Ernst.²⁰⁸ The Surrealist reception of Lautréamont’s work, however, was mired in hagiographic adulation which cast a mythological taint to the poet’s life and work which many later accounts would unfortunately retain. In the “Second Manifesto of Surrealism,” for example, André Breton consecrates Lautréamont over all the writers held in his highest esteem, noting that “with one exception—Lautréamont—I do not see a single one of them who has not left some questionable trace in his wake.”²⁰⁹ Even further, for Breton, *Maldoror* was “the only name which, since time began, constituted a pure challenge to everything stupid, base, and loathsome on earth.”²¹⁰

Following the Surrealist engagement with Lautréamont, his place in the canon of nineteenth-century French poetry was secured, but it was only much later, with Maurice Blanchot’s *Lautréamont and Sade* (1949), that this reception escaped the realm of myth and was opened to serious criticism. Blanchot rejects the Surrealist vision of the text as the product of a writer in the throes of madness, as an irrational outburst of the unfettered unconscious, writing that “if we see Lautréamont as a writer blinded or enlightened by

²⁰⁷ Lautréamont, Comte de. *Les Chants de Maldoror & Poesies*. New York: New Directions Press, 1966, 1.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 263. Translation modified.

²⁰⁹ Breton, André. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972, 127.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 167.

dark forces alone, we must then attribute the ability to write as much to these unknown forces as to the most thoughtful art”;²¹¹ conversely, Blanchot insists that “signs of conscious writing abound in *Maldoror*,” and that this writing must be opened to textual analysis.²¹² In his reading, Blanchot finds not the work of “a mind absent from itself” but one containing “at the highest level, all the qualities that Lautréamont justly proclaims for the self: ‘cold’ attention, ‘implacable logic,’ ‘relentless caution,’ ‘ravishing clarity’ (which multiplies meanings while complicating the labyrinth of its influence).”²¹³ Building upon Blanchot’s work, Philippe Sollers, writing in 1968, claims that “for surrealism, Lautréamont remains a pretext to verbal inflation, an insistent yet inadequately studied reference, an expressive shadow, a myth permitting the perpetuation of a lyrical, moral, and psychological confusion.”²¹⁴ For Sollers, “there can be little doubt that this metaphysical grandiloquence is aging badly,” but even worse, he argued, it was a mode of interpretation fundamentally at odds with the most radical implications of Ducasse’s poetry:

To fashion declarative sentences on Lautréamont, to construct the personage who might be the author of this pseudonym, to bestow a ‘meaning’ on the *Chants de Maldoror* and *Poems*, is to persist in a mode of reading that was radically transformed by the very appearance of a writing comparable to the invention of an unknown language that must first be learned before one can speak about it.²¹⁵

For Sollers, seeking to move beyond the limitations of an “essentialist reading”—that which necessitates “1) an author (an individual adventure) 2) a noncontradictory text 3) a truth-effect”—it is precisely the unity of the author and the text that is fundamentally

²¹¹ Blanchot, Maurice. *Lautréamont and Sade*. Trans. Stuart Kendall and Michelle Kendall. Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 2004, 72.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 71.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 73-4.

²¹⁴ Sollers, Philippe. *Writing and the Experience of Limits*. Trans. Philip Barnard and David Hayman. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, 135.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

unsettled in *Maldoror* and *Poésies*, a fragmentation insisted upon even in the shifting identities assumed by the author—the triumvirate of Ducasse/Lautréamont/Maldoror—a fact relegated to the *hors-texte* by traditional analytic mores.²¹⁶ Sollers notes that the radical poetic model laid out in *Poésies* had long been marginalized, by the Surrealists as much as by Blanchot, for its seeming incongruity with *Maldoror*, its appearance of recantation, and its instantiation of a new poetic practice which denies the singularity of the author. Significantly, many years later Sollers would write that “in the twentieth century, Debord is one of the only people to make Lautréamont’s *Poésies* readable, because he was not carried away by Surrealist romanticization. He thus retained its charge of negativity.”²¹⁷

If *Poésies* was deemed beyond analysis, this was largely due to its stylistic departure from *Maldoror*, and, furthermore, to its apparent incompatibility with the mythical and otherworldly identity so often ascribed to Lautréamont. Indeed, in *Poésies* Ducasse is primarily occupied with a reflection on the history and conditions of poetry itself; this reflection, however, is marked by an intense iconoclasm, with *ad hominem* attacks launched throughout the work, seemingly without discrimination, on various writers and poets from Racine to Baudelaire. In a phrase which would resonate deeply with Debord’s project, Ducasse proclaims: “Poetry should be made by all. Not by one. Poor Hugo! Poor Racine! Poor Coppée! Poor Corneille! Poor Boileau! Poor Scarron! Ticks, ticks, and ticks!”²¹⁸ If Ducasse’s rhetorical violence threatens to appear ironic or merely arbitrary, it is because his is not a violence directed at particular features of any

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 136.

²¹⁷ Philippe Sollers, interviewed by Arnaud Spire, “Avez-vous lu Debord?,” in *L’Humanité*, November 5, 1992, 16. Quoted in McDonough, Tom. *The Beautiful Language of My Century’: Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007, 29.

²¹⁸ Lautréamont 1966, 333. Translation modified.

individual poet's work, but rather at the individual as the source of poetry itself. Early in the poem, Ducasse writes, "Personal poetry has had its day of relative jugglery and contingent contortions. Let us take up again the indestructible thread of impersonal poetry..."²¹⁹ His critique of authorship, begun with the play of pseudonyms in *Maldoror*, is now—under the sign of his own name—extended into the simultaneous theory and practice of a radically impersonal poetry. Following the proclamation that "Criticism must attack form, never the content of your ideas, of your phrases," Lautréamont sets into play a poetic model based on theft and alteration.²²⁰ Indeed, the second half of *Poésies* is composed almost entirely of maxims appropriated from aphorists such as Pascal, La Rochefoucauld and Vauvenargues, which are then altered, reversed or otherwise negated to form contradictory or illogical thoughts. In one passage, Ducasse candidly reflects on the meaning of theft in writing, stating, "Ideas improve. The meaning of words has a part in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress demands it. Staying close to an author's phrasing, plagiarism exploits his expressions, erases false ideas, replaces them with correct ideas."²²¹ The importance of this passage for Debord and for the Situationist project altogether is hard to overstate; indeed, it would reappear one hundred years after its composition, plagiarized itself, in a thesis of Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, as a description of *détournement*.

If, according to Sollers, it is only after Debord's reading of Ducasse that the *Poésies* "become readable," it is because out of Ducasse's radical de-personalization of the author figure Debord formulated *détournement*, a practice addressed to the historical impasse of art in the age of spectacle. Debord, however, traces the lineage of

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 317.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 319.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 327.

détournement not only from Ducasse, but also from the “epigrammatic style” of Hegel and Feuerbach, which involved frequent reversals of subject and predicate, a tactic later developed into the “*insurrectional style*” of the young Marx.²²² For Debord, this dialectical mode of writing had the profound effect of unsettling *idées reçues*, of seizing upon an apparently fixed notion and reversing or diverting its meaning toward new ends. The *Society of the Spectacle* is remarkable for its thoroughgoing use of appropriated passages—often reversed or “corrected” in the style of Ducasse—taken from Marx, Hegel, and Lukács, but also from sources far less typical of Debord, such as Freud, Herman Melville, and Alexandre Kojève among others. Foreshadowed only by the vast network of quotations that makes up Walter Benjamin’s monumental *Arcades Project*, *The Society of the Spectacle* is an attempt to write political philosophy in an utterly new fashion, one in which thoughts are ripped from their contexts, divorced from their original meanings, and made to work against the grain. For Debord, the power of *détournement* lies in its resistance to a discourse of truth, identity, and transcendental meaning. It is never fixed, but instead operates as a practical movement which unravels linguistic or conceptual stasis; as such, it is a mode of writing intended to be revolutionary in form and not simply in content. In this sense, Debord asserts that *détournement* is “the fluid language of anti-ideology”; “a type of communication aware of its inability to enshrine any inherent and definitive certainty,” “found[ing] its cause on nothing but its own truth as critique at work in the present.”²²³ The disruptive potential of *détournement* consists in the fact that it can set a stagnant phrase into dynamic movement; put differently, it resists the force of entropy at work within language, which causes words to harden into *clichés*

²²² Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995, thesis 206.

²²³ *Ibid.*, thesis 208.

and ideologies.²²⁴ As previously discussed in relation to *Mémoires*, *détournement* was conceived of by Debord as radically opposed to “the ordinary spirit of repartée, which similarly uses the opponent’s words against him” and was intended to escape the form of a “rational reply.”²²⁵ *Détournement*, as such, does not seek to replace one totalizing expression with another, but to work from within language to undo identities and in doing so, to “throw... back into play the unsettled debts of history,” as a textual correlate to revolutionary action.²²⁶

Détournement was, as such, charged with a certain historical necessity, and nowhere is this necessity more urgently expressed than within the context of the Situationist theory of art. *Détournement* was not conceived by Debord as an artistic strategy, properly speaking, but rather as a means of undermining from within, and ultimately transcending, the category of “art.” For Debord, the concept of individualistic artistic production ensconced within the separate sphere of culture was a founding convention of bourgeois society, one which, parallel to the role ascribed to religion by Marx, exiled humanity’s creative spirit to a realm apart where it was destined to a profound ineffectuality. Indeed, as Debord writes in the guide to *détournement*, “the idea of pure, absolute expression is dead.”²²⁷ The continued restriction of art to the unidirectional communication of a singular author was insupportable for Debord insofar as it conformed to the alienation and separation of human beings characteristic of capitalist social organization; as such, the mythical conception of art as unfettered self-expression was deemed eminently spectacular. According to Debord, the mode of

²²⁴ This analogy is indebted to Yve-Alain Bois’ discussion of entropy as the “cooling down of words into clichés” in relation to Georges Bataille’s concept of the formless. Bois, Yve-Alain and Krauss, Rosalind. *Formless: A User’s Guide*. New York: Zone Books, 1999, 36.

²²⁵ Debord and Wolman. “Methods of *Détournement*,” in SI 1989, 11.

²²⁶ SI. “All the King’s Men,” in McDonough 2004, 156.

²²⁷ Debord and Wolman. “Methods of *Détournement*,” in SI 1989, 10.

communication promoted under the conditions of spectacle was “unilateral,” and therefore undeserving of the label “communication.”²²⁸ Indeed, he argued, even in many “pre-spectacular” societies, art had always tended to exist as a one-sided conversation—from the creator to the viewer—only capable of putting forth “unilaterally arrived-at conclusions...., speaking *to others* of what had been experienced without any real dialogue, and accepting this shortfall of life as inevitable...”²²⁹ The Situationist project in art, then, was directed toward the active creation of new modes of communication that would transcend individualism and, as such, be irreconcilable with what Western society had heretofore acknowledged as “Art.” As Debord wrote in 1956, “it is necessary to finish with any notion of personal property [in art]... The appearance of new necessities outmodes previous ‘inspired’ works. They become obstacles, dangerous habits. The point is not whether we like them or not. We have to go beyond them.”²³⁰ *Détournement* was conceived, thus, as a form of “literary communism” which would oppose the concept of “personal property” in culture.²³¹ Through the use of appropriated images and phrases, rendered anonymous, the notion of an individual artist or author is rendered obsolete; if the dominant mode of artistic communication is unilateral, *détournement* offered a means of subverting the author-function and removing the guarantor of an utterance’s origin. Indeed, the author of a *détourned* work is impossible to identify; it is not the “*détourneur*” who has committed the act of plagiarism, but still less is it the author of any single *détourned* phrase, whose words have now been re-purposed and brought into dialogue with those of any number of other “authors.” The work, thus, simultaneously has

²²⁸ Debord 1995, thesis 24.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, thesis 187.

²³⁰ Debord and Wolman. “Methods of *Détournement*,” in SI 1989, 9.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 11. Perhaps coincidentally, the phrase “literary communism” was used without acknowledgement in an essay of the same name by Jean-Luc Nancy in his *La Communauté Désœuvrée*, a work which will be discussed in Chapter Four.

several authors and is authorless. Furthermore, with *détournement*'s refusal to lock down the infinite movement of signification—to assemble phrases or images so that they form “rational replies” to one another—the author's authority is displaced and the reader or viewer is given an equal share in the creation of meaning. Further still, *détournement* was conceived less as a means directed toward an end in the creation of a finished “work” than as a practice to be put to use by anyone, a new mode of communication essentially popular in character, “because it is so easy to use and because of its inexhaustible potential for reuse.”²³² It is as such that *détournement* approaches the condition of a poetry made not by one, but by all.

A Poetry Necessarily Without Poems: Mallarmé, the Book, and the Transcendence of Art

If the influence of Ducasse has been explicitly at play in the theorization of *détournement*, the model presented by the poetic practice of Stéphane Mallarmé, a poet who dreamt of restructuring the traditional modes of reading and writing and of dissolving the very selfhood of the author in the process, is equally determinant, albeit far less recognized. Literary critic Vincent Kaufmann has been one of the only commentators to explore the connection between Debord and Mallarmé, with the latter appearing frequently in Kaufmann's wide-ranging study *Guy Debord: Revolution in Service of Poetry* (first published in French in 2001). Kaufmann states in a footnote, for example, that,

we can say that Debord's debt to Mallarmé has been underestimated, possibly hidden by the obvious connection to Ducasse, the tutelary figure of appropriation. This did not prevent Debord from reading Mallarmé, whom he admired, not only because of the anarchist leanings of a man who

²³² SI. “*Détournement* as Negation and Prelude,” in SI 1989, 55.

is often made out to be a symbolist lost in the game of letters, but also because he perceived, with remarkable lucidity, the challenge to the legitimacy of all poetry found in Mallarmé's work, and because he perceived its destructive scope (in *Panegyric* he refers to [Mallarmé's] famous line "Destruction was my Beatrice").²³³

Kaufmann's identification of this connection is lucid; however, his discussion of Mallarmé remains unfortunately slight and too often merely anecdotal.²³⁴ To bring Mallarmé and Debord into dialogue offers not only the possibility of assigning influence, but more interestingly opens the practice of *détournement* to interpretive possibilities beyond the recitation of commonplaces on the topic of cultural appropriation. An investigation of Mallarmé's work, which, like Debord's, was a sustained attempt to overcome the condition of unilateral communication by means of an induced disappearance of the author, presents an essential means of reconciling the practice of *détournement* with the Situationist project of a "supersession and realization of art." As Kaufmann states, for Mallarmé as for Debord, "the transcendence of art is the rediscovery of authentic communication."²³⁵

While the influence of Ducasse manifests itself in the use of stolen phrases, the Mallarméan dimension of Situationist practice enters the very formal structure of a "metagraph" like *Mémoires*. The plagiarized phrases and fragments that make up the textual component of *Mémoires* are endlessly forking, breaking off into new directions only to be interrupted mid-thought by an image or transitioning abruptly from one voice to another (fig. 11). Freed from the dictates of coherence or any requirement to follow a line of thought through to its conclusion, the words peregrinate—they *drift*. The dynamic

²³³ Kaufmann, Vincent. *Guy Debord: Revolution in Service of Poetry*. Trans. Robert Bononno. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, 313 ft. 7.

²³⁴ Kaufmann also unfortunately adopts a reverence toward Debord which is inflated even beyond Debord's own propensity for self-aggrandizing proclamations; he makes the improbable claim, for example, that, "Debord's writing will last eternally, well beyond the death of the French language." *Ibid.*, 207.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

typographical arrangements, forming multiple trails across the pages—culminating in dead ends or clustering together—allow the varying tones, voices, and typesettings of the *détourned* phrases to open onto a variety of readerly possibilities and thus onto polyvalent signification. The immediate visual precedent for such works can be found in the Lettrist poetry of Maurice Lemaître, for example, or the earlier Dada typographical works of Tristan Tzara and Raoul Hausmann; unlike these works, however, *Mémoires* (and the products of *détournement* more generally) insists on the use of phrases rather than letters, symbols, or phonetic compounds; as such, it does not plunge headfirst into nonsense and asignification, but instead produces surprising and contradictory meanings. In this sense, it is much closer to the radically spatialized writing established by Mallarmé, and brought to its fullest realization in the visual poem *Un Coup De Dés Jamais N’Abolira Le Hasard* (1896). Mallarmé sought in his poetry (and nowhere more profoundly than in *Un Coup de Dés*) to establish a mode of writing which would treat the blank page not as a neutral support, but as an integral component of the work; as Mallarmé stated in the explanatory preface written for the first publication of *Un Coup de Dés*, “the ‘blanks’ in fact assume an importance” and “the paper intervenes every time an image on its own.”²³⁶ Indeed, Mallarmé fully exploited the newly activated arena of the page, with the titular phrase of *Un Coup de Dés* slowly unfolding in large capitals across the poem’s eleven pages, a few words at a time, with secondary and tertiary lines branching off and forming varied textual patterns (fig. 12). Throughout the poem, other subordinate phrases weave into one another, set apart by spatial or typographical variations, breaking off only to resume again a few pages later. One such passage, which runs across the final few pages, marked by

²³⁶ Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Selected Poetry and Prose*. Ed. Mary Ann Caws. New York: New Directions Press, 1982, 105.

capitals and interrupted by several digressions, reads “NOTHING... WILL HAVE
TAKEN PLACE... OTHER THAN THE PLACE... EXCEPT... PERHAPS... A
CONSTELLATION.”²³⁷ With the spacing of the text asserted as paramount, words are
freed from linearity and form confounding visual patterns of a sort echoed directly in the
form of *Mémoires*, with phrases ascending and descending the page with the inevitability
of a grouping of stars,²³⁸ crossing the gutter between two pages, playfully suggesting
several patterns to the reader.

In his critical preface to *Un Coup de Dés*, Mallarmé stated that the work required a
new mode of reading, incompatible with the habits of any “naïve reader who has to look
at the first words of the Poem so that the following ones—spread out as they are—lead on
to the last ones.”²³⁹ Rather, he envisioned an active role for the reader, comparable to a
musician sight-reading a score, one which would engage the reader’s “lightning-like
initiative which can link the scattered notes together.”²⁴⁰ Mallarmé meant for his poetry to
achieve the condition of music; indeed, the playful interpenetration of lines has an effect
on the reader similar to that on a listener who follows a melodic line as it is augmented by
harmonizing passages. The spatial arrangement of words and the sonorous relationships
between them insist on polysemy to an unprecedented degree; to attempt a totalizing
reading or exposition of the work’s singular “meaning,” would be to counter the way in
which Mallarmé’s poetry explicitly sought open-endedness. In the play of words
employed for their musical value, the visual arrangement of phrases, the ambiguous

²³⁷ Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Collected Poems and other Verse*. Trans. and Ed. E.H. and A.M. Blackmore.
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006, 180-181.

²³⁸ E.H. and A.M. Blackmore suggest in the commentary to *Un Coup de Dés* in the Oxford collection of
Mallarmé’s poems that the final seven lines of the poem form the shape of Septentrion, the seven principal
stars of the Great Bear. *Ibid.*, 265.

²³⁹ Mallarmé 1982, 105.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 83.

alternation of homonyms, and the disorienting use of grammatical distortion, Mallarmé's poetry endlessly defers signification. For Jacques Derrida, a thinker greatly indebted to Mallarmé, all language is marked by "dissemination," a term which Derrida uses—playing on the homonymy between *seme* and *semen*—to connote both the fertility of an endless proliferation of meanings and a semantic expenditure which leads to an experience of the void. Mallarmé was aware that the meaning of language was forever haunted by the threat of dispersal, of un-meaning, a threat which recurs in his poetry most frequently through the tropes of the Void or Nothingness [*le Néant*], the blank, and the white page. For Derrida, traditional criticism has recuperated these words as *themes*, signifiers with determinable signifieds, even if the play of polysemy in Mallarmé assures that these are viewed as "themes whose plurivalence is particularly rich or exuberant."²⁴¹ Derrida, however, asserts that "what one tends not to see... is that these textual effects are rich with a kind of poverty... One does not see this because one thinks one is seeing themes in the very spot where the nontheme, that which cannot become a theme, the very thing that has no meaning, is ceaselessly re-marking itself—that is, disappearing."²⁴² For Derrida, the "blank" which appears in Mallarmé is no longer, in all rigor, even a signifier at all, but rather a word which marks "the spots of what can never be mediated, mastered, sublated or dialectized," that is, the irruption of non-sense and unmeaning within the text.²⁴³ Beyond this, Derrida argues that many of the figures which reappear frequently in Mallarmé—the swan, the sail, the fold, the fan, foam, the *hymen*, snow, and virginity—should not be read as semantically "full" themes, but rather as markers signaling the

²⁴¹ Derrida, Jacques. *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981, 251.

²⁴² *Ibid.*

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 252, 221.

presence of the Void, the “trope of ‘empty’ white space,” the “non-sense of spacing, the place where nothing takes place but the place.”²⁴⁴ That is, for Derrida, Mallarmé’s poetics can best be described not under the rubric of an infinite polysemy or a “superabundance of meaning,” but instead as a practice following “the law and structure of the text” where “all the ‘whites’ accrue to themselves the blanks that stand for the spacing of writing.”²⁴⁵ For Derrida, all writing is characterized by “spacing,” that which deflates or temporalizes presence and immediacy; it is operative in the gap between the interiority of thought and the exteriority of text, in the successiveness inherent to writing and reading, and in the physical space of writing—the “pause, blank, punctuation, interval in general.”²⁴⁶ Furthermore, the fall from the immediacy of thought or speech to the objectification of text links writing, in the most intimate way, to death: “That a speech supposedly alive can lend itself to spacing in its own writing is what relates it originally to its own death.”²⁴⁷

Mallarmé’s discovery of this Void—this spacing—at work between the seams of language informed his poetics in a most thoroughgoing manner; it also led the poet to the experience of his own “death” in the experience of writing. During the mid 1860s, Mallarmé underwent a personal crisis, inseparable from the “crisis of verse” that his poetry sought to explore. In a letter to his friend Cazalis, dated April 1866, Mallarmé states that “in delving so far into verse, I have come upon two abysses, which are driving me to despair.”²⁴⁸ From this point onwards, Mallarmé is gripped by sickness, an inability to draw breath, and is struck by panic attacks whenever he tries to write—“the mere

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 257-8.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 253, 260.

²⁴⁶ Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Trans. Gayatri Spivak. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, 68.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁴⁸ Quoted in Bersani, Leo. *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 84.

physical act of writing sets off an attack of hysteria.”²⁴⁹ He is driven to dictating verse to his wife, Marie Mallarmé, but, as he continues in the same letter, “the impression of a pen moving as a result of *my* will (even though its movements depend on someone else’s hand) brings back my palpitations.”²⁵⁰ Mallarmé attributes these attacks to his discovery of Nothingness and his debilitating efforts to produce a poetry which would “describe not the object itself, but the effect which it produces”;²⁵¹ that is, a poetry which would capture “the wonder of transposing a fact of nature into its vibratory near-disappearance.”²⁵² This conception of the text as a kind of tomb, where things are put to death, where signifiers split from their signifieds and reveal nothing but the void, had troubling implications for the poet. In a letter to poet Théodore Aubanel, written by Mallarmé in 1866, he announces, “I am dead.” Alternately, in another letter to Cazalis, Mallarmé states, “I am now impersonal and no longer the Stéphane you once knew, but one of the ways the spiritual Universe has of seeing itself and developing, through what used to be me.”²⁵³ However, even though Mallarmé produces no poetry at all between 1867 and 1871, this “death” was conceived as a sort of poetic rebirth, a purging of the individual from his work as a means of composing a universal and impersonal poetry which would take place apart from the author. Leo Bersani, in his text *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé*, importantly seeks to engage directly with Mallarmé’s poetic death and to place it at the center of his oeuvre, insisting that “Mallarmé considers the death he speaks of in his letters not as the end of his literary career, but as the condition of literary productivity.”²⁵⁴

²⁴⁹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 85.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² Quoted in Blanchot, Maurice. *The Book to Come*. Trans. Charlotte Mandell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003, 225.

²⁵³ Quoted in Bersani 1981, 86.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

However, for Bersani, this begs the question, “what kind of poetry can a dead poet produce?”²⁵⁵

Mallarmé’s answer came in the form of the utopian project which would occupy him for the rest of his life, ultimately remaining unrealized, known in his writings simply as The Book [*Le Livre*] or the Work [*l’Oeuvre*]. Mallarmé ceaselessly theorized about the Book in his “critical poems”—most significantly in *The Book as Spiritual Object* and *Action Restricted* (both dating from 1895)—letters to friends, and extensive personal notes, but he never produced a single line which one could say undoubtedly *belonged* to the Book itself. Of what, then, would this Book consist? Mallarmé responds in a letter to Paul Verlaine: “What would it be, it’s hard to say: a book, quite simply, in several volumes, a book that would be a real book, architectural and premeditated, and not a collection of chance inspirations, however wonderful.”²⁵⁶ For Mallarmé, the Book would surpass even *Un Coup de Dés*—which he saw merely as an impoverished trace of the perfect Book—in its investigation of the space of writing and indeed present nothing less than an apotheosis of the book. Mallarmé describes this Book in numerous ways: “the orphic explanation of the world,” the proof that “everything in the world exists to end up as a book,” and as a book which would not be written or even read, but instead “take place all alone: something made, being [*fait, étant*].”²⁵⁷ He resolutely insists that the Book would be anonymous, suggesting not only that the Work should remain unsigned by any individual author, but further that it would necessarily imply “the disappearance of the poet speaking, who yields the initiative to words, through the ordered clash of their

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁵⁶ Mallarmé, Stéphane. *Divigations*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007, 3.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3, 227; quoted in Blanchot 2003, 229.

inequalities.”²⁵⁸ Elsewhere, Mallarmé insists that everyone who has ever written has attempted to write the Book without being aware of it; however, being written by all, being inscribed upon the very firmament of nature, Mallarmé became aware of the incontrovertible fact that the Book could not be written by any single poet, for to write the Book would be to fashion it according to one’s individual intentionality and, thus, to destroy it.

The perilous tension struck between the realization and the suppression of the Book was, for Mallarmé, exemplary of the acts of writing and reading. For the author to impose their totalizing will, or even their name as author, upon the text was to commit an act of violence against the purity of poetry—hence the open network of readerly possibilities asserted in *Un Coup de Dés* and the play of polyphony in his work more generally. However, Mallarmé also insisted upon the violence inherent to the act of reading, which is inevitably a gesture of possession over the book. For Mallarmé, this situation was literalized in the form of the paper-knife, that “barbarian symbol” which violates the “virginal foldings” of uncut pages and “stakes out claims to possession of the book”; indeed, Mallarmé asserts that “there can be only blindness and discourtesy in so murderous and self-destructive an attempt to destroy the fragile, inviolable book.”²⁵⁹ The Book, then, would be consigned to unwritability and unreadability, to ultimate absence. Having confronted the very conditions of writing’s possibility and discovering that the realization of poetry’s highest vocation necessarily implied its disappearance, Mallarmé concluded that he was henceforth destined to write nothing but “meaningless sonnets.”²⁶⁰ The poems he did produce in the following decades were anything but minor works, but

²⁵⁸ Mallarmé 2007, 208.

²⁵⁹ Mallarmé 1982, 83.

²⁶⁰ Quoted in Blanchot 2003, 225.

were primarily what Bersani calls “occasional poetry,” works written for specific occasions, including speaking engagements, commemorations, eulogies, anniversaries, critical reviews, and Mallarmé’s fashion magazine *La Dernière Mode*; he also prepared extensive notes for the Book, meditating on its physical structure, considering practical and even financial questions, all too aware, however, that anything he did write, by the very fact of its composition, would have to be excluded from the perfect architecture of the Book. Blanchot, much of whose work is committed to thinking through the implications of this impossible Book, writes,

Strangely, the future is announced, for this demand to hold back the Book—which will never be anything but its own holding back—seems to have destined him to write nothing but meaningless poems, that is to say, to give force and existence only to what is outside of everything (and outside of the book, which is this everything), but thereby to discover the very center of the Book.²⁶¹

Mallarmé essentially wrote *around* the unwritable work, elaborately framing the void of what would by necessity remain unwritten. It is as such that the ultimate fulfillment of poetry and of writing in general would in fact imply the end of poetry and of writing. Bersani states that “We might even define Mallarmé’s major enterprise—astonishing as this may seem—as an effort to do away with literature.”²⁶²

It is precisely here, in the absence of the work, that the truly Mallarméan dimension of the Situationist project emerges. *Détournement* was a means of producing art which would not be art in the fullest sense accorded to it by the SI; instead, like Mallarmé’s “occasional poetry,” it served a tactical purpose, which was to negatively inscribe, through practice, the end of art. This, for example, is the meaning of the

²⁶¹ Blanchot 2003, 225.

²⁶² Bersani 1981, 45.

statements made by Situationist Raoul Vaneigem in 1961 at the fifth SI conference in Göteborg,

It is a question not of elaborating the spectacle of refusal, but rather of refusing the spectacle. In order for their elaboration to be *artistic* in the new and authentic sense defined by the SI, the elements of the destruction of the spectacle must precisely cease to be works of art. There is no such thing as *situationism* or a situationist work of art or a spectacular situationist. Once and for all.²⁶³

This conference is important in Situationist lore because it represented a proverbial drawing of the line in the sand for the organization and, the following year, led to the expulsion of a number of Scandinavian artists heretofore associated with the group who claimed to produce “Situationist art” and called for an increased presence of the SI in culture. This split has long been represented in histories of the SI as marking a transition from the group’s early “artistic” period to its “political” period under the increased sway of Debord; however, the crudeness of this distinction—to say nothing of its absolute incompatibility with Debord’s thought on culture—can be glimpsed in an article entitled “The Counter-Situationist Campaign in Various Countries” published in the eighth issue of the *IS* in 1963, where the split is labeled as an objective result of “the SI’s ambiguous and risky policy of consenting to act *in* culture while being against the entire present organization of this culture and even against all culture as a separate sphere”; it is further asserted that “the moment when the contradictions between [the excluded artists] and us lead to these antagonisms marks an advance of the SI, the point where the ambiguities are forced into the open and settled clearly.”²⁶⁴ Despite the perceived “totalitarianism” of Debord’s policy of excluding any inconsistent elements from the group—or perhaps because of it—the split of 1962 should not be perceived as a new orientation for the SI,

²⁶³ SI. “The Fifth SI Conference in Göteborg,” in SI 1989, 88.

²⁶⁴ SI. “The Countersituationist Campaign in Various Countries,” in *Ibid.*, 112.

but rather as a forceful affirmation of the Situationist conception of art and a commitment to seeing through its most radical implications: an art “which will never be anything but its own holding back.”

The Situationists positioned art as an ideal to be achieved, not as a possibility open under the present conditions where art—even the most up-to-date models of neo-avant-garde work—could be nothing more than its own “management as a dead thing to be contemplated in the spectacle.”²⁶⁵ It is as such that Debord did not consider his position as one of “anti-art,” but rather saw himself as a partisan for art’s highest calling, engaged in a struggle to secure its fate, while others were content with propping up its corpse. *Détournement*, or any cultural work produced by a Situationist was, therefore, described as a necessary “prelude” to true Situationist activity, which was deferred into the future: “We are partisans of a certain future of culture, of life. Situationist activity is a definite craft which we are not yet practicing.”²⁶⁶ The emphasis on the insufficiency of *détournement* as a mode of communication is indeed central to understanding the SI’s activity within culture and is too frequently ignored by commentators seeking to seamlessly induct the group into the history of art. Indeed, in a questionnaire put to the group and published in their journal in 1964, the SI asserts, “We are artists only insofar as we are no longer artists: we come to realize art.”²⁶⁷ Further, responding to a question by the Center for Socio-Experimental Art regarding the social dimension of art, the group forcefully states:

The time for art is over. It is now a matter of *realizing* art, of really building on every level of life everything that hitherto could only be an artistic memory or an illusion, dreamed and preserved unilaterally. Art can

²⁶⁵ Debord 1995, thesis 184.

²⁶⁶ SI. “*Détournement* as Negation and Prelude,” in SI 1989, 55.

²⁶⁷ SI. “Questionnaire,” in *Ibid.*, 139.

be realized only by being suppressed. However, as opposed to the present society, which suppresses it by replacing it with the automatism of an even more passive and hierarchical spectacle, we maintain that art can really be suppressed *only by being realized*.²⁶⁸

For the Situationists, the individualism characterizing the worldview of the spectacle has been bolstered by an art whose communicative model is essentially unilateral; as such, to conceive of a suitable continuation of the avant-garde project necessitated an art which would exceed what had heretofore been recognized as such—an art which would disappear in the active creation of everyday life. “Whereas surrealism, in the days of its attack on the oppressive order of culture and the everyday, could rightly specify its weapons as a ‘poetry if need be without poems,’” Debord writes, “today for the SI it is a question of a poetry *necessarily* without poems... The program of fulfilled poetry is nothing less than the creation of events and their language at the same time, inseparably.”²⁶⁹

It is here, in the call for a poetry without poems, that the Situationist model of the end of art—an end which would simultaneously be a realization—presents a transposition of the Mallarméan model of poetry onto the field of politics as such. The Situationists grasped the inherently political implications of the dream of an impersonal poetry so central to Mallarmé and Lautréamont; the conception of art as a communicative practice which would dismantle the unity of both the reading and writing subjects was reconceived as a call for revolution, for the creation of a new world where the atomized social model of the spectacle would be supplanted by community. The conception of the subject implied by the most radical of the late nineteenth century French poets was articulated in Julia Kristeva’s text *Revolution in Poetic Language*, written in 1967, which arrives at

²⁶⁸ SI. “Response to a Questionnaire from the Center for Socio-Experimental Art,” in *Ibid.*, 145.

²⁶⁹ SI. “All the King’s Men,” in McDonough 2004, 155.

surprisingly comparable conclusions to the SI by rejoining linguistic and psychoanalytic models with a Marxist emphasis wholly typical of the writers associated with the *Tel Quel* journal at this time. For Kristeva, in Lautréamont and Mallarmé, “social” modes of communication are disrupted through the “dissemination” of non-signifying language, putting into play a poetic practice which “moves through zones that have relative and transitory borders and constitutes a path that is not restricted to the two poles of univocal information between two full-fledged subjects.”²⁷⁰ The Book written by the dead poet and addressed to no-one—taking place all alone, made, being—is the limit-case of the poetic challenge to the bourgeois myth of a unitary subject. For Kristeva,

this practice has no addressee; no subject, even a split one, can understand it. Such a practice does not address itself at all. It sweeps along everything that belongs to the sane space of practice: human ‘units’ in process/on trial... It does not instigate the ‘process-of-becoming-a-subject’ of the masses. Instead, it includes them in an upsurge of transformation and subversion.²⁷¹

The fundamental challenge presented by the avant-garde text, Kristeva argues, is that it introduces the subject to its own dissolution in the experience of both death and *jouissance*, and, as such, refuses the paranoid-narcissistic moment preserved by capitalism, the state, and religion, which asserts the self as an inviolable and closed singularity by repressing “asocial” drives and desires. As such, Kristeva asserts that a textual practice becomes ethical and even revolutionary when it dissolves the illusory unity of the speaking and reading subjects; she therefore concludes that to keep artistic practice “within a simply subjective representation is to make it mandible or complicitous with dominant bourgeois ideology. Although the latter can accept experimental

²⁷⁰ Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Trans. Margaret Waller. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, 87-8.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

subjectivism, it can only barely tolerate—or will reject altogether—the critique of its own foundations,” which are based themselves upon the myth of the unary bourgeois monad.²⁷²

Kristeva, however, acknowledges that no matter the ideological challenge presented by impersonal poetry—or any avant-garde cultural manifestation—such a practice is always recuperable by the dominant culture; indeed, it “plays into its hands” because, through it, “the system provides itself with what it lacks—rejection—but keeps it in a domain apart, confining it to the ego, to the ‘inner experience’ of an elite and to esoterism.”²⁷³ This insight, albeit phrased in a very different dialect and directed toward different ends, guided the Situationist project from its earliest days, and led to their conclusion that for art to realize its most radical promises, it could not remain in a “domain apart,” in which its character could be nothing but “affirmative,” but would have to take its own claims seriously and deny its existence as a specialized competence. *Mémoires*, thus, achieves the condition of a political critique, in that through the self-critical language of *détournement* it refutes its own status as a work of art and becomes, rather, a call to *realize* art and poetry. Indeed, as an editorial puts it in the eighth issue of the *IS* journal (1963), “what is poetry if not language in revolution and as such inseparable from revolutionary moments in world history as well as in the history of private life?”²⁷⁴ To assert, as the SI did, that Mallarmé’s “*Sonnet en –yx* is a revolutionary pamphlet,” is to claim that the politics of poetry do not emerge in its subservience to a specific ideology, but that *poetry as the search for authentic communication* in fact

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 191.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 186.

²⁷⁴ SI. “All the King’s Men,” in McDonough 2004, 154.

demanded revolution—a “revolution at the service of poetry.”²⁷⁵ It is also here, in the inseparability of the SI’s cultural and revolutionary projects, that an ethical conception of the subject emerges within Debord’s political theory, which has been criticized for conceiving of revolution as the restoration of the subject to a mythical state of original plenitude.²⁷⁶ Contrary to this, the Situationist conception of the transcendence of art, formulated through the influence of Mallarmé and Ducasse, was a revolutionary model which sought as its end not the replenishing of the subject to a state of unity robbed by capitalist alienation, but a permanent revolution where the subject would endlessly be put “in process/on trial” through the experience of true communication and community. As Raoul Vaneigem provocatively stated, “when a poem by Mallarmé becomes the sole explanation for an act of revolt, then poetry and revolution will have overcome their ambiguity.”²⁷⁷ This will mark the departure point for the fourth and final chapter, which will examine the Situationist conception of the death of art as its rebirth in the communicative tissue of everyday life, and the way in which Debord found his most utopian pronouncements extraordinarily yet fleetingly realized in the events of May 1968.

²⁷⁵ Quoted in Kaufmann 2006, 152; SI. “All the King’s Men,” in McDonough 2004, 155.

²⁷⁶ Anselm Jappe, for example, has written, that *The Society of the Spectacle*, like Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*, is devoid of “any hint that the subject might be under attack, within itself, from forces of alienation capable of conditioning its unconscious in such a way as to cause it to identify actively with the system in which it finds itself... Although the spectacle tends to invade ‘lived reality,’ the latter remains distinct from it, even the opposite of it. There must after all be such a thing as a substantially ‘healthy’ subject, otherwise it would make no sense to speak of the ‘falsification’ of a subject’s activity.” Jappe, Anselm. *Guy Debord*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999a, 27-28.

²⁷⁷ Vaneigem, Raoul. “Basic Banalities,” in SI 1989, 97.

Chapter Four

“Never Work”: May ‘68, Communication, and the End of Art

In January 1953, with a piece of chalk, Guy Debord wrote in large capitals on the soot-blackened walls of Paris’ Rue de Seine, “*Ne Travaillez Jamais*,” or “Never Work” (fig. 13). Debord insisted years later that this imperative, scrawled with the most economic and ephemeral of means, was not only the “preliminary program of the Situationist movement” and a personal credo, but also one of his major “works.”²⁷⁸ This slogan, one of his most memorable, positions itself precisely at the intersection of two strains of Situationist thought which can initially appear incompatible, if not wholly antithetical; namely, Debord’s critique of orthodox Marxist conceptions of labour and of revolutionary organization, and the resumption of the avant-garde discourse of the end of art. Debord’s rejection of work could not be further from the official Socialism of the French Communist Party [PCF], centered as it was around a fetishization of labour and mythical conception of “the worker,” conceived as a synecdoche of a homogeneous class, of whom the Party was the privileged representation. Debord, indeed, was unique among French Marxist intellectuals in the postwar period in his early and unwavering rejection of all forms of Communist bureaucracy at home and abroad—Debord’s outspoken opposition to both the Soviet Union and the Chinese Cultural Revolution separated him absolutely from the majority of the Left—which he regarded as the spectacular “*image of socialism*” which was soon to emerge as the mortal enemy of the proletariat.”²⁷⁹ Debord countered models where “socialism... means working hard,” with a conception of

²⁷⁸ *Internationale Situationniste* n. 8, p. 42 reprinted in *Internationale Situationniste: 1958-1969*. Paris: Champ Libre, 1975.; Kaufmann, Vincent. *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry*. Trans. Robert Bononno. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006, 41.

²⁷⁹ Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995, thesis 97.

revolution as an inventive and spontaneous reclamation of individual and collective time and space, a creative revolt against social regimentation.²⁸⁰ “Never work”: It was evidently a source of great pleasure for Debord when his slogan reappeared early in May 1968 among the blossoming graffiti spray-painted on the walls of Paris during the massive insurrection and wildcat strikes that took hold of the city for close to an entire month, largely in opposition to the PCF and union bureaucracies (fig. 14).²⁸¹ This chapter will take the relation of Debord and of Situationist theory to the *événements* of May ’68 as a historical departure point in order to broach several questions about the Situationist insistence on a synthetic attitude toward art and revolution. As such, it will not attempt to add to an ever growing body of literature seeking with widely varying ideological stakes to give a synoptic view of May—its genesis, the motivation of its historical actors, the disillusionment of its end—or to expose the putative truth of the event, but rather to account for its significance to certain key and interrelated aspects of the Situationist project: the rejection of the Communist discourse of work, the trope of spontaneous, “festive” revolution, and the supersession and realization of art. Just as May represented for Debord a concrete and lived transcendence of the opposition between the aesthetic and the political, so too can it offer an opportunity to overcome that same opposition which has long governed the historical understanding of Debord’s “work.”

The SI and May ’68: “In the People as Fish are in Water”

On the evening of May the third 1968, the writer Michèle Bernstein, an important early member of the SI, was preparing dinner and listening to music when Debord and his

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁸¹ Jappe, Anselm. *Guy Debord*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999a, 99.

partner Alice Becker-Ho burst into her apartment, carrying in from the streets a palpable sense of exhilaration. “Both of them were saying, do you know there’s fighting in the streets of Paris and we are winning, this is it, we cannot turn back now,” Bernstein recalls. “I didn’t know what to say or do... I had not expected it to come like this and so quickly, and nor did Guy and Alice. But they were ready to do anything necessary, even though they had no plans or tactics worked out.”²⁸² That evening, after months of agitation on the Nanterre University campus that had culminated in student riots and the closure of the school, vicious street fighting between students and the police broke out at the Sorbonne and quickly spread through the Latin Quarter, the air filled with paving stones torn from the streets and used as projectiles. The police were taken by surprise by the apparently spontaneous appearance of several thousand rioters, mostly students attracted by the chaos, and, though they arrested over six hundred demonstrators that day, they could not contain the unrest that spilled over into the following weeks, quickly growing beyond anyone’s expectations. On May 10th, the student rioters were joined by workers, who together erected over sixty barricades in Paris; soon after, workers around the city and its *banlieues* declared a general strike and occupied their factories, also helping students take over the Sorbonne and declare it a “*club populaire*” (fig. 15).²⁸³ The occupations were sustained for the duration of the month—in the face of continuous confrontation with the police—by hundreds of “action committees,” which often formed as suddenly as they dissolved. These committees, without any coherent objectives or demands, were the decentralized government of the movement, developing outside and mostly against the control of the major unions and the PCF, the traditional avenues of revolutionary action.

²⁸² Hussey, Andrew. *The Game of War: the Life and Death of Guy Debord*. London: J. Cape, 2001, 229.

²⁸³ SI. “The Beginning of an Era,” in Situationist International. *Situationist International Anthology*. Ed. Ken Knabb. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1989, 233.

Writing in August 1969 on the events of May in the final issue of the *Internationale Situationniste* journal, Debord characterized the anti-bureaucratic and horizontal orientation of May as a profound rejection of the society of the spectacle, its institutions, its logic, and its domination over everyday life. May was, in Debord's words,

a festival, a game, a real presence of people and of time. And it was a rejection of all authority, all specialization, all hierarchical dispossession; a rejection of the state and thus of the parties and unions, a rejection of sociologists and professors, of medicine and repressive morality.²⁸⁴

It represented, in stark contrast to the ahistorical "permanent present" of the spectacle, "a rediscovery of collective and individual history, an awareness of the possibility of intervening in history, an awareness of participating in an irreversible event ('Nothing will ever be the same again')."²⁸⁵ It is generally accepted by both May's critics and eulogists that the movement did not have any unifying goal or project; it did not aim for the capture of state power, nor did it demand specific reforms. Rather, for Debord, the movement constituted "a *generalized critique* of all alienations, of all ideologies and of the entire old organization of real life." During the month of May, "people looked back in amusement at the *strange* existence they had led a week before, at their outlived survival."²⁸⁶

The Situationist role in May '68 has been subject to widespread mystification, alternatively inflated and effaced, with Debord being retrospectively and falsely charged with the "leadership" of the movement almost as often as he is not mentioned at all, overshadowed by charismatic and media-savvy student leaders such as Daniel Cohn-Bendit. That the shape the events took was profoundly consonant with the "festive" and

²⁸⁴ SI, "The Beginning of an Era," in *Ibid.*, 226.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 225.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 225-6.

anti-bureaucratic model of revolution proposed by Debord over the course of the previous decade is undeniable; however, to claim that Debord, or any single person or group for that matter, was capable of predicting, or, even worse, of *determining* May's genetic makeup would be an absurdity—one fundamentally at odds with the historical rupture represented by May, its status as absolute "event" in Alain Badiou's terms. The years prior had indeed seen the SI gain unprecedented exposure, especially with the publication and distribution in 1966 of 10,000 copies of a pamphlet by Situationist Mustapha Khayatai entitled *On the Poverty of Student Life* by the radical student union at Strasbourg University, who having thus scandalously used all their allocated funds promptly disbanded; the following year also marked the publication of Debord and Raoul Vaneigem's major political works, *The Society of the Spectacle* and *Traité de Savoir-Vivre à l'Usage des Jeunes Générations*, respectively. However, before May, access to Situationist theory had never reached much further than small cadres of Marxist intellectuals, even though Debord, perhaps apocryphally, asserted that these books were the most frequently stolen from bookstores in 1968.²⁸⁷ Rather than claim any direct influence, therefore, Debord insisted on a sort of elective affinity between Situationist theory and the events of May: "Naturally, we had prophesied nothing. We had simply pointed out what was *already present*."²⁸⁸ "If our enterprise struck a certain chord," he continues, "it was because the critique *without concessions* was scarcely to be found among the leftisms of the preceding period. If many people *did* what we *wrote*, it was

²⁸⁷ SI. "The Beginning of an Era," in *Ibid.*, 241. Kristin Ross asserts that save for "the elite readership who had access to these texts in the early 1960s... Situationist texts were only read by large numbers of people *after* 68, in an effort to come to terms with or understand what had occurred." Ross, Kristin. *May '68 and its Afterlives*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002, 194.; Julia Kristeva, likewise, asserts that "even though Guy Debord's distrust of the society of the spectacle made itself felt very early on (in 1967), his indictment was only known to a small group." Kristeva, Julia. *Revolt, She Said*. New York: Semiotext(e), 2002, 19.

²⁸⁸ SI 1989, 227.

because we essentially wrote the negative that had been lived by us and by so many others before us.”²⁸⁹ Indeed, in the Situationist view, no theoretical framework or organizational structure could adequately account for or direct an authentic revolution, which was by definition unpredictable. It was as such that the Situationists would assert in 1963 that “*the only thing we organize is the detonator*; the explosion must be free, escaping permanently from our control just as it does from anyone else’s.”²⁹⁰ The explosive advent of May exceeded any claims to ownership and, as such, was just as troubling to the established specialists in revolution as it was to Charles de Gaulle’s government and police force.

In this sense, it is significant that while Situationists were active on the barricades and in the meetings between students and workers, with Debord participating in the “Committee for Maintaining the Occupations” [CMDO], a group important in resisting the push of unions for settlement, the SI as an organization was curiously invisible during the month of May.²⁹¹ Beyond simply abandoning any pretenses to leadership—“a role the SI has always rejected for itself”—among the dizzying proliferation of action-committees, groupuscules, councils, and collectives that spontaneously formed in May—each vying for increased visibility and status with signature logos and acronyms plastered on banners, walls, posters and pamphlets—Debord proudly claims that “the SI, in contrast... to all the leftist groups, refused to make any propaganda for itself.”²⁹² “The SI is not a group of [this] type,” Debord asserts, “competing on their terrain of militancy or claiming like they do to be leading the revolutionary movement in the name of the ‘correct’

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ SI, “The Countersituationist Campaign in Various Countries,” in *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁹¹ SI, “The Beginning of an Era,” in *Ibid.*, 241.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 249.

interpretation of one or another petrified truth derived from Marxism or anarchism.”²⁹³ As such, Debord proudly states that the CMDO never once mentioned the SI in any of its texts or raised a “situationist banner,” and insists that “amidst all the brand-name initials of groups pretending to a leadership role, not a single inscription mentioning the SI was to be found on the walls of Paris, even though our partisans were undoubtedly the best and most prolific writers of graffiti.”²⁹⁴ It may seem perverse, a clear sign of the group’s willful obscurity, that at the moment of the apparent realization of their loftiest ambitions, the SI refused to admit of its own existence. But beyond the group’s secretive nature—some would say elitism—the SI sought during May to dissolve itself within the movement rather than to raise itself above it in order to stake claims of intellectual or organizational ownership. Indeed, Debord had always asserted that Situationist theory sought not to be prescriptive nor to serve as a separated representation of revolutionary struggle, but—perhaps even more grandly—to be “totally popular,” to be “in the people as fish are in water.” In 1962, Debord insisted, “To those who believe the SI is building castles of speculation, we affirm the contrary: we are going to dissolve ourselves in the population that lives our project at every moment, living it first, of course, as lack and repression.”²⁹⁵ In Debord’s thinking, the revolt of May, without definite project or end, spontaneous in its genesis and refusing codification or institutionalization, was “Situationist” in nature, insofar as it rejected the entire edifice of late capitalist society and countered it with self-governing models of community. May was also a refutation, for Debord, of charges of utopianism commonly leveled against the SI by the Left, and it is

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 242.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 249.

²⁹⁵ Quoted in McDonough, Tom. *Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2004, 287.

with evident relish that in 1969 Debord quoted the Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre's critique, which he published in 1967 and would come to deeply regret the following year:

The situationists... propose not a concrete utopia, but an abstract one. Do they really imagine that one fine day or one decisive evening people will look at each other and say, 'Enough! We're fed up with work and boredom! Let's put an end to them!' and that they will then proceed into the eternal Festival and the creation of situations? Although this happened once, at the dawn of 18 march 1871, this combination of circumstances will not occur again.²⁹⁶

The Critique of Specialization

Debord's "utopian" rejection of work and celebration of play have proven at once the most controversial and distinctive contributions of the SI to both political and cultural theory. Indeed, as Anselm Jappe has written, while "the whole of the Left, including the anarchists, had always thought in terms of liberating work and based the proletariat's entitlement to rule society on the fact that it was the proletariat that laboured," the Situationist project was a "programmatic demand for a liberation *from* work, as a way of asserting the rights of the individual under the banner of subjectivity and play."²⁹⁷ This perspective was centered around the conception, a product of the Situationist heritage in the European artistic avant-garde, that the negative of alienated labour was "liberated creativity," that which had been evacuated from the everyday lives of workers and exiled to the specialized domain of art. The "festive" and playful aspect of May '68, then, represented a radical challenge not only to the structure of work, but to that of art as well—indeed, to the opposition staged in capitalist society between the two. It is as such

²⁹⁶ Quoted in SI. "The Beginning of an Era," in SI 1989, 227-8. The relationship between Lefebvre and the Situationists, in particular on the topic of revolution and "festival," unfortunately cannot be explored here, but has recently been investigated with great clarity and depth by Tom McDonough in a chapter entitled "Killing Property: On Festival and Revolutionary Nihilism," in McDonough, Tom. *The Beautiful Language of My Century: Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007, 135-174.

²⁹⁷ Jappe 1999a, 98.

that Debord discussed May '68 as “a *rejection* of art that did not yet know itself as the historical *negation* of art.”²⁹⁸ In order to understand this claim, it is necessary to first address the seeming paradox of Debord’s simultaneous faith in “the proletariat” as the only revolutionary class and wholesale rejection of the discourse of work, which has long been cited by critics as the weakest link in Debord’s political theory, a sign of his irredeemable utopianism and disconnect from the realities of the workers’ movement. Martin Jay, for example, is wholly characteristic of this strain of critique when he writes that “Situationism was doomed to ultimate frustration from the beginning. Its stress on play and the festival was incoherently related to its celebration of workers’ councils and intransigent faith in the proletariat as the subject of history.”²⁹⁹ Furthermore, Jappe, summing up this line of attack, states, “only the proletariat, on the Situationist view, occupied the crucial position that would allow it to overthrow the entire social order. It has frequently been remarked that this view is somewhat paradoxical for a group that, doubtless before others, had abandoned any positive notion of work.”³⁰⁰ However, it is essential to note that the “proletariat” of the Situationist International is not made of the same substance as the “proletariat” of orthodox Marxism; indeed, one of the most profound challenges that Debord’s conception of the spectacle posed to much Left discourse up to that point was its reconception of the historical status and composition of the proletariat. For Debord, the mythical class represented by the PCF, whose noble devotion to work and class solidarity entitled them to ownership of the means of production, had been radically expanded by the universalized alienation of the society of

²⁹⁸ SI. “The Beginning of an Era,” in SI 1989, 226.

²⁹⁹ Jay, Martin. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, 431.

³⁰⁰ Jappe 1999a, 98.

the spectacle. As Debord clearly states in the first section of *The Society of the Spectacle*, “the triumph of an economic system founded on separation leads to the *proletarianization of the world*.”³⁰¹ That is, with the commodity’s absolute colonization of everyday life, the lack of self-determination heretofore reserved for the traditional “working class” has become a generalized condition of existence encompassing vast sectors of human society. For Debord, the essence of the “proletariat” was no longer determined by membership in a sharply defined class, but encompassed all “people who have no possibility of altering the social space-time that society allots for their consumption.”³⁰² In this sense, for Debord, the explosive and creative re-appropriation of social space and time witnessed in May ’68 designated “the sudden return of the proletariat as a historical class, a proletariat *enlarged* to include a majority of the wage labourers of modern society and still tending toward the actual suppression of classes and wage labour.”³⁰³

Debord was insistent about the necessity for a contemporary revolutionary movement to establish interconnections and transgressions between the working class and its traditional outside. These sort of linkages are to be found everywhere in May, perhaps nowhere more significantly than in the circuits established between the universities and the factories, and the instatement of common social spaces of discussion between students and workers, those who had previously remained absolutely separate; during May, workers were invited to the occupied Sorbonne and students went to meet with workers in the factories. Though these encounters were fraught with difficulty—Debord speaks of pedantic “PhDs in revolution” condescending to the workers—Kristin Ross states in her important study *May ’68 and its Afterlives* (2002) that “the principal idea of May was the

³⁰¹ Debord 1995, thesis 26.

³⁰² SI. “Ideologies, Classes, and the Domination of Nature,” in SI 1989, 108.

³⁰³ SI. “The Beginning of an Era,” in *Ibid.*, 225.

union of intellectual contestation with workers' struggle."³⁰⁴ For Ross, the union experienced by so many during May took the form of *rencontres*,

meetings that were neither magical nor mythical but simply the experience of incessantly running into people that social, cultural, or professional divisions had previously kept one from meeting up with, little events that produced the sense that those mediations or social compartments had simply withered away.³⁰⁵

For Debord, May did not represent the actualization of a student fantasy of literally becoming a worker, nor did these divisions in any way dissolve completely; rather, the best of May emerged in the questioning, on the part of both workers and students, of the practices and institutions that had previously determined their identities. Contrary to any of the common caricatures of May as a "student movement," Debord stressed that "the student" as a coherent sociological category comprised at best the rearguard of the occupations movement; it was rather those students who abandoned the traditional language, behaviour, and space of their "studenthood" who participated most effectively. For Debord, the occupation of the Sorbonne by a notoriously "anti-student" group of students and the subsequent invitation of non-students to open assemblies and debates was one of the most decisive early moments of May, "the prefiguration of a *council*, a council in which even the students broke out of their miserable studenthood and ceased to be students."³⁰⁶ Indeed, as Ross points out, a common concern of student tracts in May was the denunciation of "the student": "There is no student problem any longer... The *student* is not a valid notion... Let us not be enclosed within a pseudo-class of students...."³⁰⁷ Of all the "symbolic accoutrements" of students—from flags, posters and

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 231; Ross 2002, 11.

³⁰⁵ Ross 2002, 103.

³⁰⁶ SI. "Report on the Occupation of the Sorbonne," in SI 1989, 346.

³⁰⁷ Ross 2002, 206-7.

slogans to the very strategies of resistance such as barricades, occupations, etc.—Ross asserts that “almost none... makes an allusion to the existence of a student movement; almost every one is inscribed within the political struggle against the Gaullist regime and in a rhetoric of solidarity with workers’ struggles and the general strike,” engaged in an attempt to “address... workers over the heads of bureaucratic leaders, to create communication between two worlds that had hitherto been closed off from one another.”³⁰⁸ As the Minister of the Interior Raymond Marcellin incredulously noted, in May the students were not rioting for “more erasers and pencils,” but for “the struggle against imperialism.”³⁰⁹

It was, however, the PCF and the workers’ unions such as the General Confederation of Labour that sought most forcefully to separate the workers from the students during May; the official Left even adopted de Gaulle’s language in labeling the students “*pègres*” and their actions “*chienlit*,” the chaos of senseless troublemakers undermining the unified workers’ movement.³¹⁰ As Debord has it,

the leftist bureaucrats... abstractly separate the workers from the students, whom ‘they don’t need lessons from.’ But in fact, the students have already given a lesson to the workers precisely by occupying the Sorbonne and briefly initiating a really democratic discussion.³¹¹

Indeed, certain “workerist” committees, such as the *Informations et Correspondance Ouvrières*, actively discouraged workers from leaving their occupied factories and from participating in discussions with the students, activities which in their view betrayed the role of the working class during a strike. For Debord, this conception of a “sort of being-in-himself worker who, by definition, would exist only in his own factory, where... the

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 106-7.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 188.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 108.

³¹¹ SI. “Report on the Occupation of the Sorbonne,” in SI 1989, 348.

Stalinists would force him to keep silent,” was an active “dispersion” of “the essential need whose vital urgency was felt by so many workers in May: the need for coordination and communication of struggles and ideas, starting from bases of free encounter outside their union-policed factories.”³¹² And, indeed, in Debord’s account it was the “Stalinists” of the workers’ unions, in their early condemnation of the occupations and their later push to accept mostly marginal settlement conditions, that did more than even the police repression to bring about de Gaulle’s “*retour-à-l’ordre*.”

In contesting the boundaries and channels proper to their sociological stations, participants in May did not undergo a utopian dissolution of identity, but rather established practical lines of communication which opened access to the everyday spaces and experiences from which they had previously been barred. In Ross’ words, these “transgressive displacements across social boundaries, these voyages to ‘the other side,’” enabled both workers and students to know “the pleasure of leaving behind whatever it is one leaves behind—the whole tissue of congealed expectations and habits that anchor one to one’s established place or role.”³¹³ It is precisely in these displacements that Debord’s conception of May as the “*negation* of art” emerged; for Debord, one of the most significant zones cracked open from its specialization and rendered democratic during May was that of aesthetic and creative experience. The event of May itself was not “a work of art,” even less was it an “artistic movement,” but rather, in Debord’s view, it represented the (temporary) end of art as a form separate from everyday life. In the circumvention by workers of official, bureaucratic channels in favour of wildcat strikes, festive demonstrations, dialogue across class boundaries, and even nihilistic violence and

³¹² SI. “The Beginning of an Era,” in *Ibid.*, 239.

³¹³ Ross 2002, 105-6.

destruction of property, Debord saw the spontaneous creation of new forms of self-expression, demands for access to the realm of play and creativity confined to the cultural sector. In refusing the specialized role of the “worker,” explicitly against the proclamations of the unions and the Party, “the workers *gave the lie to the liars* who spoke in their name” and invented radically new means of speaking for themselves.³¹⁴ In this spontaneous “proletarian” creativity, the sector of culture was exposed to its outside, to the exclusions that negatively constituted it as “separate,” and was destabilized or even rendered obsolete in the process. For Debord, the widespread indifference felt on the part of workers to the sacrosanct sector of “culture” was logical because “the nonruling classes have no reason to feel concerned with any aspects of a culture or an organization of social life that have been developed not only without their participation or their control, but even deliberately against such participation or control.”³¹⁵ For a worker to demand the right to create—to “unalienated” labour—was a gesture that destabilized the entire social order, and was as threatening to the Left with its vision of the worker acceding to a state of *being-in-oneself through work* as it was to the State.

In this sense, Debord’s critique is very close to that articulated by Jacques Rancière, a thinker whose intellectual itinerary was directly influenced by his experience “circulating between university halls and factory doors” in May.³¹⁶ Rancière was a student of Louis Althusser’s and co-author of the latter’s *Reading Capital* (1965) until the upheaval of 1968, which precipitated his split from Althusser’s “scientific” Marxism with its pretensions of revealing the hidden truth of the worker’s experience. In the wake of

³¹⁴ SI. “The Beginning of an Era,” in SI 1989, 231.

³¹⁵ SI. “Response to a Questionnaire from the Center for Socio-Experimental Art,” in *Ibid.*, 143.

³¹⁶ Rancière, Jacques. *The Philosopher and his Poor*. Ed. Andrew Parker. Trans. John Drury, Corinne Oster, and Andrew Parker. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004a, xxv.

May, Rancière delved into nineteenth-century French workers' archives partly in the attempt to come to terms with the schism separating the "working class" from the intellectuals who sought to produce knowledge about them. Toward this end, Rancière studied expressions of proletarian self-expression, writing for example on the phenomenon of the Second Empire's *goguettes*, working-class performing spaces where labourers could write and perform their own songs, birthing a minority of "worker-poets" who escaped from the "unbearable role of the worker-as-such" by composing verse and dreaming of becoming "*artistes*."³¹⁷ For Rancière, these worker-poets undermined the official image of working-class culture by developing "capabilities within themselves which are useless for the improvement of their material lives and which in fact are liable to make them despise material concerns."³¹⁸ As such, Rancière writes,

A worker who had never learned how to write and yet tried to compose verses to suit the taste of his times was perhaps more of a danger to the prevailing ideological order than a worker who performed revolutionary songs... With the introduction—however limited, however ambiguous—of aesthetic sentiment into the workers' universe, the very foundation of the whole political order is placed in question.³¹⁹

To transgress the boundaries separating productive labour from the "purposive purposelessness" of aesthetics is not only to undermine the gap between art and life, but also the very foundation of the modern conception of the political, which, for Rancière, derives from the justification of the division of labour found in Plato's *Republic*. Indeed, the *Republic* is absolutely central to Rancière's thought, and he has returned to it on several occasions as a social model where workers would be identified wholly with their own proper *métier* and barred from other activities, a conception essentially intact in the

³¹⁷ Rancière, Jacques. "Good Times, or Pleasure on the Barricades," in Rifkin, Adrian; Thomas, Roger, Eds. *Voices of the People: The Social Life of 'La Sociale' at the End of the Second Empire*. Trans. John Moore. New York: Routledge, 1988, 49.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

late Marx and other forms of “scientific” socialism. Echoing Debord’s expanded definition of the proletariat, Rancière writes that this social model “establishes work as the necessary relegation of the worker to the private space-time of his occupation, his exclusion from participation in what is common to the community” and was, as such, the first instatement of “an idea of society based on the opposition between those who think and decide and those who are doomed to material tasks.”³²⁰ It was precisely this conception of society that was most profoundly unsettled in the joyous and violent “voyages to the other side” of May 1968. For Debord, an authentic revolutionary moment would be an eruption of world-forming creativity, not limited to the specialized sector of “artists” or reified in works of art, but practiced in everyday life as part of the labour of social and individual reconstruction—the ultimate realization of Lautréamont’s poetry “made not by one but by all.”

“Je Est un Autre”: The Commune, Rimbaud, and *The Theses on Feuerbach*

For Debord, May ’68 represented “the greatest revolutionary moment in France since the Paris Commune.”³²¹ Debord’s conception of the creative “revolution of everyday life” was, indeed, developed largely in relation to the Commune of Spring 1871, when, in the wake of France’s crushing defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, insurgents took hold of Paris from mid-March until the end of May, establishing popular rule in the form of councils. The significance of the Commune to the SI will now be analyzed in order to establish the historical and theoretical foundation of the Situationist conception of revolution as the fulfillment of art. Against the Marxist orthodoxy, for whom the Soviet

³²⁰ Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill. London; New York: Continuum Press, 2004b, 43-44.

³²¹ SI. “The Beginning of an Era,” in SI 1989, 225.

Revolution of October 1917 was the fullest historical articulation of revolution insofar as it led to the founding of the Soviet Union, Debord, like other thinkers such as Lefebvre, turned to the Commune as a means of emphasizing the liberating *experience* of revolution as opposed to its consolidation in the repressive bureaucracies of state socialism. In this sense, the important text *Theses on the Commune*, written by Debord with Vaneigem and Situationist Attila Kotanyi in 1962, asserts that in the history of the workers' movement, "the apparent successes... are its fundamental failures (reformism or the establishment of a state bureaucracy), while its failures (the Paris Commune or the Asturias revolt) are its most promising successes so far, for us and for the future."³²² For Debord, the very aspects of the Commune which designated it as a failure—its "festive" character, the perceived "irresponsibility" of the Communards, the absence of any leadership, and the seeming lack of concern with seizing and assuming state power—were its most radical features and those which ultimately held the most promise for contemporary oppositional movements. If the criterion of "success" in revolution is the replacement of one state power with another, the Commune—like May '68—was a definitive failure; but, for Debord, those who pass a negative and dismissive historical judgment on the Commune, claiming that it was "objectively doomed to failure and could not have been fulfilled," do so *a posteriori* from a position comparable to the "omniscient viewpoint of God." Conversely, the Commune's true significance lay in the new practices and attitudes toward life improvised by participants in the moment; as Debord claims, "for those who really lived it, the fulfillment *was already there*."³²³ One of the most frequently cited examples of the Communards' mismanagement is the fact that they busied themselves

³²² SI, "Theses on the Paris Commune," in *Ibid.*, 314.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 316.

with largely symbolic gestures such as the destruction of Napoleon III's Vendôme Column, rather than seizing the wealth of the state which lay nearly unguarded in the Bank of Paris.³²⁴ Debord's interpretation of these events is decisive; rather than dismissing their impracticality, Debord read them as a form of directly practiced *détournement*, "the only realization of a revolutionary urbanism to date—attacking on the spot the petrified signs of the dominant organization of life, understanding social space in political terms, refusing to accept the innocence of any monument."³²⁵ In these "irresponsible" gestures there was a fundamental challenge to the structure of work, as Debord and Rancière conceived of it, as workers abandoned their various specialized activities for an active production and transformation of common space as well as of private experience. Kristin Ross, reflecting on the Situationist theses on the Commune in her text *The Emergence of Social Space* (1988), comments,

If workers are those who are not allowed to transform the space/time allotted them, then the lesson of the Commune can be found in its recognition that revolution consists not in changing the juridical form that allots space/time (for example, allowing a party to appropriate bureaucratic organization) but rather in completely transforming the nature of space/time.³²⁶

It was the Situationist insight to inseparably link this revolutionary appropriation of one's own space/time and the concomitant "withering away of the political function as a specialized function," in Ross' words, with the emergence of a new form of creativity, unbound from the tradition of art and opposed to the estrangement of the division of labour.³²⁷

³²⁴ Marx and Engels were in fact among the first to deem this a "serious political mistake." Cited in Ross, Kristin. *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 38.

³²⁵ SI, "Theses on the Paris Commune," in SI 1989, 315.

³²⁶ Ross 1988, 41.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

If workers abandoned their stations during the Commune to participate in the commons, artists too were displaced—or, rather, displaced themselves—from the spaces, practices, and modes of identification associated with their *métier*. The most famous example is undoubtedly that of Gustave Courbet, who, during the Commune, was not to be found painting in his studio, but was rather dedicating himself to political organization, participating in several committees as well as notoriously leading the destruction of the Vendôme Column, an act which would earn him lifelong exile after the Commune came to its violent end. Ross cites the contemporary reaction to Courbet's activities of poet Catulle Mendès, who regretted the loss of the paintings that Courbet could have been producing if he had not been wasting his time with politics. Ross suggests, however, that “Mendès is not really mourning... the unpainted paintings of Gustave Courbet. His anxiety stems from the experience of displacement, from the attack on identity.”³²⁸ While the displacement effected by Courbet was a physical one—from the studio to the streets—a model closer to Debord's was offered by Arthur Rimbaud, whose precise physical whereabouts during the Commune are a matter of debate, but whose desire to destabilize the divisions between artistic and productive labour is expressed through his poetic practice. In his famous *lettres du voyant* dated May 1871, in the heady final days of the Commune, Rimbaud expresses the desire to abandon poetry and in so doing to transgress into the domain of the other, stating, “I will be a worker: that's what holds me back when a wild fury drives me toward the battle in Paris, where so many workers are still dying while I am writing to you! Work, now? Never, never. I'm on strike.”³²⁹ Rimbaud's identification with the worker during the Commune testifies to his refusal to occupy the

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 14-5.

³²⁹ Rimbaud, Arthur. *Illuminations and Other Prose Poems*. Trans. Louise Varèse. New York: New Directions Press, 1957, xxvi-xxvii.

privileged and specialized identity of the poet, a rejection which would be literalized in his total abandonment of writing in 1875, but can be seen in his famous dictum from the same letter “Je est un autre” (“I is an other”), which Ross reads as one of the definitive expressions of the spirit of the Commune. However, Rimbaud’s stated desire to become a worker, to be precisely that what he is not—“un autre”—would seem to be contradicted by his repeated expressions of disgust for all forms of work. In *Une Saison en Enfer*, for example, Rimbaud writes “I have a horror of all *métiers*. Bosses and workers, all of them peasants and common. The hand that holds the pen is as good as the one that holds the plow. (What a century for hands!) I will never learn to use my hands.”³³⁰ For Ross, this paradoxical refusal of work and identification with the worker evinces not a naïve desire to literally *become* a labourer but a critique of a society where each, whether poet or shoemaker, is confined to the norms and practices of their own specialization, which increasingly come to supplant their identity. Ross sees in Rimbaud a writer who “refuses the very structure of work, the social division of labor itself that in the nineteenth century is beginning to be pushed to the limits of overspecialization. He is refusing the narrow horizon resulting from being imprisoned in one’s trade—the *idiotisme*, both in the sense of idiocy and the idiom, of the *métier*.”³³¹ As such, Ross notes,

It is clear that the *élan* propelling Rimbaud toward a structural identification with workers in Paris arises at the precise moment when ‘work,’ as such, has definitively stopped... ‘I *will be* a worker’: it is only at some future moment when the project of new social relations, a radical transformation in the structure of work, has been achieved that Rimbaud will be a worker; now, however, he refuses work.³³²

³³⁰ Rimbaud, Arthur. *Poesies, Une Saison en Enfer, Illuminations*. Paris: Gallimard, 1973, 124. Trans in Ross 1988, 20.

³³¹ Ross 1988, 50-51.

³³² *Ibid.*, 59.

For Rimbaud, to reject the *idiotisme* of work—even of poetic work—was a necessary first step outward, a prerequisite to his visionary poetic project of directly reforming the self and life itself—abandoning work and instead “working to make [himself] a *voyant*” through a hallucinatory “rational disordering of the senses.”³³³ Rimbaud’s search for direct and unalienated modes of poetic experience would lead him to a zone beyond poetry itself—to the supersession and realization of poetry; as he proclaims in the “Vierge Folle” section of *Une Saison en Enfer*, “I will never do any work” but instead seek the formula to “change life.”³³⁴

In Rimbaud’s flight from poetry, Debord saw a deep affinity with Marx’s critique of philosophy, and it is the perception of this link which would be in many ways the founding insight of the Situationist project. First formulated in the *Theses on Feuerbach* of 1845, the young Marx famously writes that “the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to change it.”³³⁵ With this statement, Marx framed his own work as a sort of anti- or post-philosophy, an end of philosophy, which, by substituting the discipline’s contemplative stance for direct *praxis*, designated the class struggle as the historical culmination of the philosophical tradition. As Étienne Balibar puts it, “*The Theses on Feuerbach* hence demand a definitive *exit* (*Ausgang*) from philosophy, as the only means of realizing what has always been its loftiest ambition: emancipation, liberation.”³³⁶ Balibar also importantly notes that “the notion of ‘interpretation’ to which Marx refers is a variant of the idea of representation.”³³⁷ The shared necessity felt by Marx and Rimbaud to move outward from contemplation—

³³³ Rimbaud 1957, Xxvii.

³³⁴ Rimbaud 1973, 136. (My translation).

³³⁵ Marx, Karl. “The Theses on Feuerbach,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*. Ed. Robert C. Tucker. New York: WW Norton & Co. Inc., 1978, 145.

³³⁶ Balibar, Étienne. *The Philosophy of Marx*. Trans. Chris Turner. London: Verso Press, 1995, 17.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

interpretation, representation—to action—revolution, making oneself a *voyant*—informed Situationist theory from its very beginnings. The insight of this particular connection between artistic and political revolution was first seized upon by André Breton, who stated in 1935: “‘Transform the world,’ Marx said; ‘change life,’ Rimbaud said. These two watchwords are one for us.”³³⁸ While the explicitly Marxist orientation of Bretonian Surrealism was to wither away early in the movement’s history, abandoned in favour of an increasing preoccupation with the Freudian unconscious and in the wake of a brief and turbulent alliance with the PCF, it was only with the SI that these interconnections were to be rigorously thought through. In a tract from 1958 entitled “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” Debord writes that the “Situationists consider cultural activity, from the standpoint of totality, as an experimental method for constructing daily life, which can be permanently developed with the extension of leisure and the disappearance of the division of labour (beginning with the division of artistic labour.)”³³⁹ He continues, “Art can cease to be a report on sensations and become a direct organization of higher sensations. It is a matter of producing ourselves, and not things that enslave us.”³⁴⁰ The Situationists thus assert that the artists have only *represented* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.

Communication, Community, and the End of Art

The end of art as a discourse is generally agreed to have begun with Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* when the philosopher proclaimed that art was “no longer the

³³⁸ Breton, André. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972, 241.

³³⁹ Debord, Guy. “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” in McDonough 2004, 62.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

highest mode in which truth fashions an existence for itself.”³⁴¹ To put it schematically, for Hegel, art since Classical Greek sculpture had been in a state of constant decline, and was destined to be displaced by philosophy as the ultimate means of accessing the Absolute. As Fredric Jameson has written, art for Hegel was propelled toward “the abolition of the aesthetic by itself and under its own internal momentum, the self-transcendence of the aesthetic towards... the splendour and transparency of Hegel’s utopian notion of philosophy itself, the historical self-consciousness of an absolute present.”³⁴² For Jameson, however, Hegel’s “seemingly misguided” concept, when read retrospectively through Marx, holds a vision of the end which is richer than it may initially appear:

The dissolution of art into philosophy implies a different kind of ‘end’ of philosophy—its diffusion and expansion into all the realms of social life in such a way that it is no longer a separate discipline but the very air we breathe and the very substance of the public sphere itself and of the collectivity. It ends, in other words, not by becoming nothing, but by becoming everything.³⁴³

In Jameson’s reading of Hegel, the coterminous ends of art and of philosophy imply an infinite expansion onto the terrain of everyday life, a movement abolishing specialization in the discovery of authentic modes of being together, the very substance of collectivity. The Hegelian Marxist framework within which Debord’s thought is situated leads him to echo Hegel’s pronouncement that art “considered in its highest vocation, is and remains for us a thing of the past”,³⁴⁴ further, Debord argues for the necessity of taking “effective

³⁴¹ Quoted in Jameson, Fredric. “‘End of Art’ or ‘End of History’?” in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. London: Verso Press, 1998, 82.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 77. Jameson notes the historical irony of Hegel’s pronouncement, for “far from being a forerunner of a truly philosophical age, Hegel was rather the last philosopher in the tradition” and art as a means of accessing the Absolute would receive a lease on life in the Romantic discourse of the sublime, *Ibid.* 81.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 81-2.

³⁴⁴ Quoted in Geulen, Eva. *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumour After Hegel*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2006, 10.

possession of the community of dialogue, and the playful relationship to time, which the works of the poets and artists have heretofore merely *represented*.³⁴⁵ Debord's end of art therefore substitutes for Hegel's metaphysical Idea or Absolute a strictly materialist ideal of community and social dialogue; it is in the shift from interpretation/representation to *praxis*—read as a call for revolution—that art realizes its historical mission as a search for authentic communication and, in the process, abolishes itself as a separate discipline. Rather than any simplistic subordination of art to politics—or vice versa—this vision implies a dialectical relationship between the two, with each containing the truth of the other; one particularly beautiful passage in the *IS* from 1963 asserts,

Between revolutionary periods when the masses accede to poetry through action, we might imagine that circles of poetic adventure remain the only places where the totality of revolution lives on, as an unfulfilled but immanent potentiality, as the shadow of an absent individual.³⁴⁶

Debord was acutely aware that historical interrelationships between culture and politics had generally been troubled and usually brief. The supreme example for Debord was the simultaneity and consonance of the artistic revolution of the German Dadaists with the social revolution of Rosa Luxemburg's Spartacist League in the years directly following the end of World War I. An editorial from 1962 claims that “the genuine dadaism was that of Germany... [to the extent that] it had been bound up with the rise of the German revolution after the 1918 armistice.”³⁴⁷ However, this cross-pollination of the proletarian revolt with the Dadaist critique of cultural, moral and intellectual mores was to be short-lived; with the torture and murder of Luxemburg and the Spartacist leaders by

³⁴⁵ Debord 1995, thesis 187. This desire to realize *directly* in life what art could only represent has its precedent not only in the Surrealists, Rimbaud, and Marx and Hegel, but in the wildest dreams of the Romantic poets; it was Hölderlin, for example, who wrote in 1794, “If we must, we shall break our wretched lyres and *do* what the artists have only *dreamed* of doing!” Quoted in Jappe 1999a, 70.

³⁴⁶ SI. “All the King's Men,” in McDonough 2004, 155.

³⁴⁷ SI. “Priority Communication,” in *Ibid.*, 132-33.

the German police in January 1919 and the subsequent quashing of the German revolution, the Dadaists found themselves “immobilized,” as Debord states in the *Society of the Spectacle*, “trapped within the very artistic sphere that they had declared dead and buried.”³⁴⁸ For Debord, the “formal annihilation” of the Dadaists had expressed *negatively* what the modern revolutionary movement had to discover *positively*, namely that “the language of real communication has been lost” and that “a new common language has yet to be found... in a praxis embodying both an unmediated activity and a language commensurate with it.”³⁴⁹ In this sense, with the end of the Dadaist project, the Situationists insisted that the meaning of avant-garde culture was no longer to be found in the sector of art—and definitely not in the neo-avant-garde’s celebration of “anticommunication”—but in the “spontaneous revolt” of oppressed people across the world, from Algeria to the Watts ghetto of Los Angeles. As such, the Situationists could state in 1962 that the struggle of the Congolese against Belgian colonial rule in the summer of 1960 was “Dadaism’s most worthy sequel, its legitimate heir” in that it constituted the appropriation of the “foreign language of the masters as poetry and as a form of action” on the part of a people “held, more than anywhere else, in a state of childhood.”³⁵⁰ In the synthetic view of the Situationists, such outbursts of self-determination across the world were fundamentally allied with the “*inseparable*, mutually illuminating project” represented by,

all the radicalism borne by the workers movement, by modern poetry and art in the West (as preface to an experimental research toward a free construction of everyday life), by the thought of the period of the supersession and realization of philosophy (Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx) and

³⁴⁸ Debord 1995, thesis 191.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, thesis 187.

³⁵⁰ SI. “Priority Communication,” in McDonough 2004, 133.

by the emancipatory struggles from the Mexico of 1910 to the Congo of today.³⁵¹

All were directed toward the discovery that “communication... in all cases, accompanies intervention in events and the transformation of the world” and the denunciation of “all unilateral ‘communication,’ in the old art as in the modern reification of information.”³⁵² In the contemporary opposition to the society of the spectacle, it was communication which had to be fostered above all, for “communication... is the ruin of all separated power” and “where there is communication, there is no State.”³⁵³

The Situationist project in all its facets is oriented toward the rediscovery of an “authentic” experience of life hidden by the false consciousness of the spectacle. Indeed, Debord is frequently led in his writing to somewhat vaguely stage the spectacle as the opposite of “life”; in the first ten theses of the *Society of the Spectacle*, the spectacle is alternatively defined as a collection of “images detached from every aspect of life,” “a concrete inversion of life... the autonomous movement of non-life,” and “a negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself*.”³⁵⁴ Philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy—for whom the Situationist project is “the last great form of radical critique”—has reflected at length on the dichotomy established between alienated appearances and “authentic” subjectivity, writing that Debord’s spectacular subject is above all “a subject of representation, that is, a subject reduced to the sum or flux of representations which it purchases.”³⁵⁵ Nancy identifies the corrective or the obverse offered by Debord to the non-life of spectacle as the “free creation of the situation,” “the appropriating event abruptly removed from the logic of the spectacle,” which refers to “a paradigm of artistic creation that is nonaesthetic

³⁵¹ SI. “Address to Revolutionaries of Algeria and of all Countries,” in SI 1989, 149.

³⁵² SI. “Priority Communication,” in McDonough 2004, 133; SI. “All the King’s Men,” in *Ibid.*, 154.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁴ Debord 1995, theses 2, 10.

³⁵⁵ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *Being Singular Plural*. Trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O’Byrne. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000, 54; 50.

or maybe even antiaesthetic.”³⁵⁶ However, for Nancy, this sort of thinking leads to a metaphysical aporia because,

the denunciation of mere appearance effortlessly moves within mere appearance, because it has no other way of designating what is proper—that is, nonappearance—except as the obscure opposite of the spectacle. Since the spectacle occupies all of space, its opposite can only make itself known as the inappropriable secret of an originary property hidden beneath appearances. This is why the opposite of deceitful ‘imagery’ is creative ‘imagination,’ the model for which is still something like the Romantic genius. According to such a model, the artist plays the part of the productive-subject, but still according to the structure of an ontological presupposition that involves no specific interrogation of the ‘common’ or ‘in-common’ of Being, nor of the meaning of Being that is in question.³⁵⁷

For Nancy, thus, the “artistic” opposite to the spectacle is an “egoistic appropriation” based in “self-deployment and self-satisfaction,” rather than a vision of Being as that which is “in-common”;³⁵⁸ however, Debord’s theory of the end of art rejects precisely such individualistic conceptions of creativity and of the subject, which it opposes to the multilateral communication of the situation: “One must lead all forms of pseudocommunication to their utter destruction, to arrive one day at real and direct communication (in our working hypothesis of higher cultural means: the constructed situation).”³⁵⁹ It is this aspect which must be emphasized in order to avoid thinking the Situationist critique as a substitution of alienated spectacular exteriority in favour of a privileged individualistic interiority (even one which is playful and “artistic,” like that of Romanticism). In Debord’s consistent rejection of “separation”—“the alpha and omega of the spectacle”—he posits a vision of Being which is fundamentally decentered.³⁶⁰ In this sense, Debord is again very close to Marx, who asserted in the *Theses on Feuerbach* that

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

³⁵⁹ Debord, Guy. “Theses on Cultural Revolution,” in McDonough 2004, 65.

³⁶⁰ Debord 1995, thesis 25.

“the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.”³⁶¹ That is, Marx’s vision of the “human essence” is one which is “transindividual,” in Balibar’s terms, one which exists only practically *between* individuals and not as a transcendental *a priori*.³⁶² Debord likewise asserts that “community... is the *true social nature* of man, human nature,” and postulates a revolutionary model of communication as that which opens up interiorities and abolishes the boundaries between specializations.³⁶³

The case of May 1968 is a privileged opening onto the question of communication, for in the councils and discussions of May, Debord finds simultaneously “the *recognized desire* for dialogue, for completely free expression, and the taste for real community.”³⁶⁴ Twenty years onward, Maurice Blanchot would recall his experience of May, participating with Marguerite Duras in the *Comité d’action étudiants-écrivains*, in similar terms: “Everybody had something to say, and, at times, to write (on the walls)... Poetry was an everyday affair.”³⁶⁵ This ebullient communication, which occurred between people contesting the traditional distinctions between classes and *métiers*, constituted a form of community which, though based on an ethos of free self-expression, rejected both “separated” individualism and assimilation into any mythical “Class,” “Mass,” or “People.” The open communities established in May, always splitting and reconstituting themselves, were, for Debord and Blanchot, based upon an ideal of communication as that which dissolves unilateralism in dialogue. Blanchot, writing in a bulletin distributed by

³⁶¹ Marx 1978, 145.

³⁶² Balibar 1995, 31.

³⁶³ Debord, Guy. “The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy,” in SI 1989, 160.

³⁶⁴ SI. “The Beginning of an Era,” in *Ibid.*, 226.

³⁶⁵ Blanchot, Maurice. *The Unavowable Community*. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988, 30-31.

his action-committee in May, claimed that the primary goal of the movement should be to perpetually “affirm the break”:

What break? The break with the powers that be, hence with the notion of power, hence everywhere that power predominates. This obviously applies to the University, to the idea of knowledge, to the language relations to be found in teaching, in leading, perhaps to all language, etc., but it applies even more to our own conception of opposition to the powers that be, each time such opposition constitutes itself to become a party in power.³⁶⁶

Blanchot’s words evince the same suspicion expressed by Debord regarding the inherent betrayal of a revolution in its assumption of power, in the bureaucratization of “spontaneous” communication. Blanchot returns to the metaphor of the book with all its Mallarméan implications intact to describe May ’68, stating that “everything in the history of our culture and in history itself that has constantly destined writing not for the book, but for the absence of the book, has constantly anticipated, and at the same time prepared for, this upheaval.”³⁶⁷ May, in order to retain its vitality, had to resist the book as a metaphor for “completion, finishing off”; in this sense, Blanchot states that

in May there is no book about May... This stop [*arrêt*] put to the book, which is also a stop put to history, and which, far from taking us back to a point preceding culture indicates a point lying way beyond culture, is what is most provocative to authority, to power, to the law... No more books, never again, for as long as we remain in contact with the upheaval of the break.³⁶⁸

Blanchot’s claim that May ’68 indicated an opening to a zone outside culture resonates profoundly with Debord’s conception of the end of art and the Situationist project as a whole; Debord, indeed, stated in 1963 that “we [the SI] place ourselves beyond culture. Not before it, but *after*. We say it is necessary to *realize* culture by transcending it as a

³⁶⁶ Blanchot, Maurice. “Disorderly Words,” in *The Blanchot Reader*. Ed. Michael Holland. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1995, 200.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 204.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

separate sphere.”³⁶⁹ Though it is unclear to what extent Blanchot was familiar with Debord or Situationist theory, the literary theorist and the revolutionary anti-artist both saw in May’s open and communicative nature the realization of the trope of the end of art/culture.³⁷⁰

The Situationist practice of *détournement*—as discussed in Chapter Three—was conceived of as a means of producing an *open* work, one which denied individual authorship and definitive interpretation; this critical action *within* culture was insisted upon as a prelude to the transcendence of culture, Mallarmé’s impossible Book written by all directly in life. It was through this artistic and literary tradition that Debord, as well as Blanchot, read May ’68 as similarly open—a revolution with no definite project, no leaders, based upon polyvocal and spontaneous communication rather than bureaucratic, “univocal” representation. Similarly, in his text *La Communauté Désœuvrée* (translated as *The Inoperable Community*), Nancy seizes upon the word *désœuvrement*—perhaps best and most literally translated as “unworking”—as a means of reinvigorating thought about community. *Désœuvrement*, in the French, signifies unemployment, to lack a project, but has also been employed by Blanchot in relation to the Mallarméan refusal of the *oeuvre* or of the *ouvrage* of the artist. It is in this sense that Nancy proposes an “unworked” conception of community, profoundly inimical to the thinking of community *as a work*—which is to say a harmonious whole or totality, oriented toward a particular end—as well as being *constituted through work*—as in the Platonic and Communist models of the balanced society where everyone does their job. Community, for Nancy, is that which,

³⁶⁹ SI, “The Avant-Garde of Presence,” in McDonough 2004, 149.

³⁷⁰ The two had in fact crossed paths in 1960, when Debord and Bernstein co-signed Blanchot’s “Manifesto of the 121” declaring a “right to insubordination” against the Algerian War.

before or beyond the work, withdraws from the work, and which, no longer having to do either with production or with completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension. Community is made of the interruption of singularities, or of the suspension that singular beings *are*. Community is not the work of singular beings, nor can it claim them as its works, just as communication is not a work or even an operation of singular beings, for community is simply their being—their being suspended upon its limit. Communication is the unworking of work that is social, economic, technical, and institutional.³⁷¹

The conception of community as a “work” or as the product of work is untenable because it presupposes, for Nancy, that “the common being, as such, be objectifiable and producible (in sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions, symbols: in short, in subjects).”³⁷² This is why Nancy, in accord with Debord, argues that “community cannot arise from the domain of *work*” because “one does not produce it, one experiences or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude.”³⁷³ May ’68 stands as an example of a mode of community opposed to “work,” one that emerged as a function of a break, on the part of thousands, with the institutions, discourses, and practices which had heretofore constituted the ground of their identity, not for the purpose of forming a unified “figure” or completing a common “project,” but for the experience of the break itself. Echoing Blanchot’s identification of May 1968 as “without project,” Nancy asserts that “a community is not a project of fusion, or in some general way a productive or operative project—nor is it a *project* at all.”³⁷⁴ Rather, “Being-in-common” is profoundly irreducible to any teleological end or absolute, whether in the form of the “Idea, History, the Individual, the State, Science, the Work of Art, and so on,” and is opposed to the “metaphysics of the *absolute* in general, of being as ab-solute, as perfectly detached,

³⁷¹ Nancy, Jean-Luc. *The Inoperative Community*. Ed and Trans. Peter Connor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991, 31.

³⁷² *Ibid.*

³⁷³ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

distinct, and closed: being without relation.”³⁷⁵ Likewise, the Situationist critique of separation asserts that various forms of “being without relation,” from ever-increasing disciplinary specialization to individualism as such, are the institutional and ideological motors driving the spectacle; it is in this way that the spectacle’s fundamental effect, as well as its primary means of self-perpetuation, is “to *restructure society without community*.”³⁷⁶ Community, in this view, is conceived and experienced as a perpetual “unworking,” a never-ending rupture with monolithic categories of identity—whether an institutional unity such as the Party or a conceptual unity such as “the masses”—a mode of being together which “*does not complete a figure*,” but is instead grounded in multilateral communication, remaining open and never ceasing to reconstitute itself; it is the end of art as the rediscovery of authentic community, set against all forms of closure and “work.”³⁷⁷

The most utopian aspects of Debord’s theory, his opposition to “work”—to the specialization of the *métier*, to the conception of revolution as *work* or as *a work*, and to the work of art—and his unwavering desire for authentic communication—conceived of as the social action which unsettles identity, whether of the Individual or the People, as well as outmodes unilateral forms of communication such as art—perhaps form a necessary and eminently desirable condition of a political and cultural (anti-)philosophy whose aim was to “write the negative” of the society that produced it. As T.J. Clark has written, “political writing is always instrumental as well as utopian. Debord’s is no exception. Only sometimes writing has to reconcile itself to the idea that its time of

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

³⁷⁶ Debord 1995, thesis 192.

³⁷⁷ Nancy 1991, 79.

instrumentality—its time as a weapon—lies a little in the future.”³⁷⁸ It was, indeed, precisely these “utopian” currents that, free from any direct models of determination or influence, found their explosive realization and application in Paris during the month of May, 1968. The councils, democratic discussions, demonstrations, and abundance of flyers, leaflets, posters and graffiti that constitute the primary practices and forms of May were practical experiments in radically redefining the nature of community, of inventing new ways of being together. The imperfect, temporary, and at times violent nature of these “communitarian” tendencies testifies to the profound historical rupture they evinced, as well as to their very foundation *in* rupture; indeed, during May, community manifested itself in opposition to the dogma of official Communism, instead embracing a model closer to Blanchot’s definition of communism as “that which excludes (and is itself excluded from) any already constituted community.”³⁷⁹ Though each active participant in May arrived at the events by a different path, it was Debord’s hybrid inheritance from the avant-gardes of the end of culture—Rimbaud to the Dadaists—to the philosophy of the end of philosophy—Hegel to Marx—that allowed him to grasp the nature of an open community which would perpetually affirm its break from all modes of “being-without-relation,” all separations. This community, the obverse of the spectacle, would be grounded not in the mythical plenitude of the Individual nor in the fusion of the mass, but in the principle of free social communication between atoms. For Debord, it was precisely the protest against alienation and the search for authentic modes of communication that occupied the highest historical ambitions of art; as such, the Situationists asserted that in a society devoted to the active production of community as the human essence, art should

³⁷⁸ Clark, T.J. “Forward,” in Jappe 1999a, x.

³⁷⁹ Blanchot 1995, 203.

overcome its own alienation to become the very communicative fabric of everyday life. In May, to paraphrase one of its most famous slogans, these desires were taken for reality (fig. 16).

Conclusion

The Precipitous and the Belated Situationist Ends of Art

Writing recently on the Hegelian “rumour” of the end of art, the aesthetician Eva Geulen has stated that “as long as one speaks of an end, the relation of speech to its object remains untimely; speech is either precipitous or belated... For either the end has already occurred or it is still to come. In the meantime, which the end displaces either forward or backward, the notorious talk of the end circulates.”³⁸⁰ The Situationist instantiation of the end of art is no exception; however, Debord uniquely insists on *both* temporal poles of the end at once: art is already dead *and* in need of its punctual and authentic end. In this way, Debord’s theory of art rests upon a dual conception of the end, establishing, as it were, a *good* end of art and a *bad* end of art. The latter is the condition of all culture in the spectacle, where the corpse of art is artificially preserved as an institution but with its “highest vocation” voided; for Debord, while the great works of the past are entombed as dead objects of veneration in the museum, the most up-to-date artistic currents infuse the oppositional practices of the avant-gardes with aesthetic positivity, celebrating the breakdown of communication and the “beauty of nothingness.” The *good* end, conversely, was that end broached but aborted by the Dadaists and early Surrealists, who sought to critique the norms and boundaries of bourgeois culture as a means of breaking with what had heretofore been considered art; it was in the historical lineage of these tendencies, as well as in that of the Marxist critiques of alienation and the commodity, that the Situationists developed their conception of the sublation of art, a revolutionary appeal for the destruction of art as a specialization separate from everyday life. The two halves of

³⁸⁰ Geulen, Eva. *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumor After Hegel*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2006, 1.

this study have respectively concerned themselves with the belated and the precipitous ends of art as developed in Situationist theory, moving from the critiques of the spectacular regime of the image and of neo-avant-garde art to the Situationist prognoses for self-critical action within culture and revolutionary action opening onto a zone beyond it. For the Situationists, as Debord stated in his *Panegyric*, “the sole principle admitted by all was that there could precisely no longer be either poetry or art, and that something better had to be found.”³⁸¹ This study has taken as its operative principle the belief that the practical critiques as well as the most utopian dreams of Guy Debord and the Situationist International do not suffer from being removed from the realms of myth in which they have languished for decades; on the contrary, it is only through the difficult process of historicization that their true significance and importance for the present can be established. As Debord himself stated in his final film, *In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni* (1978), “a voyage through the cold waters of history has in no way dampened these passions of which I have presented such fine and sad examples.”³⁸²

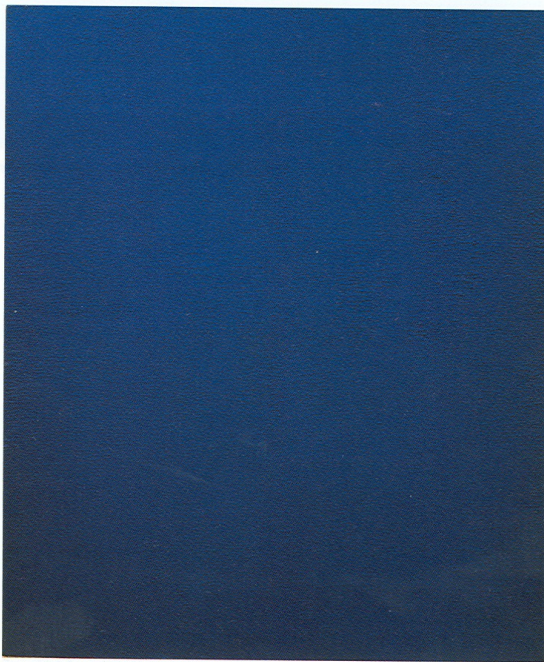
³⁸¹ Debord, Guy. *Panegyric Volumes I & II*. London: Verso, 2007, 26.

³⁸² Debord, Guy. *Complete cinematic works : scripts, stills, documents*. Translated and edited by Ken Knabb. Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2003, 193.

Illustrations



Figure 1) Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920. India ink, coloured chalks, and brown wash on paper. Collection of The Israel Museum Jerusalem.



2 • Yves Klein, *Monochrome Blue IKB 48*, 1956

Figure 2) Yves Klein, *Monochrome Blue IKB 48*, 1956. Oil on wood.



Figure 3) Yves Klein, *Photograph of Iris Clert, Guy Debord and Asger Jorn at the exhibition Yves Klein: Propositions Monochromes, Galerie Colette Allendy, Paris, 1957.*



Figure 4) Yves Klein, *Propositions Monochromes, 1957. Installation view, Galeria Apollinaire, Milan.*

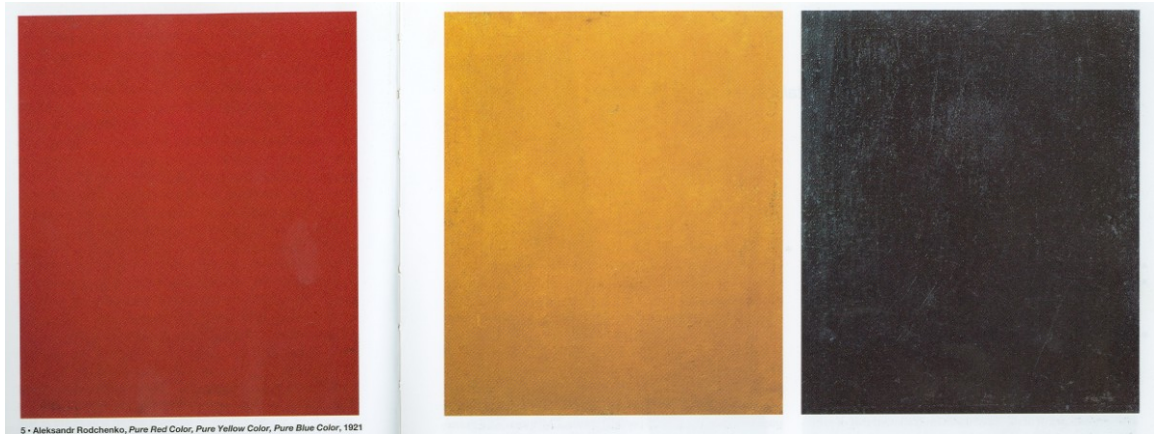


Figure 5) Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, Pure Blue Color*, 1921. Oil on canvas.



Left: Figure 6) Arman, *Home Sweet Home*, 1960. Gas masks in a Plexiglas case. Collection of the Centre Pompidou, Paris.



Right: Figure 7) Daniel Spoerri, *Kishka's Breakfast, no. 1*, 1960. Wood chair hung on wall with board across seat, coffee pot, tumbler, china, egg cups, eggshells, cigarette butts, spoons, tin cans, etc. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

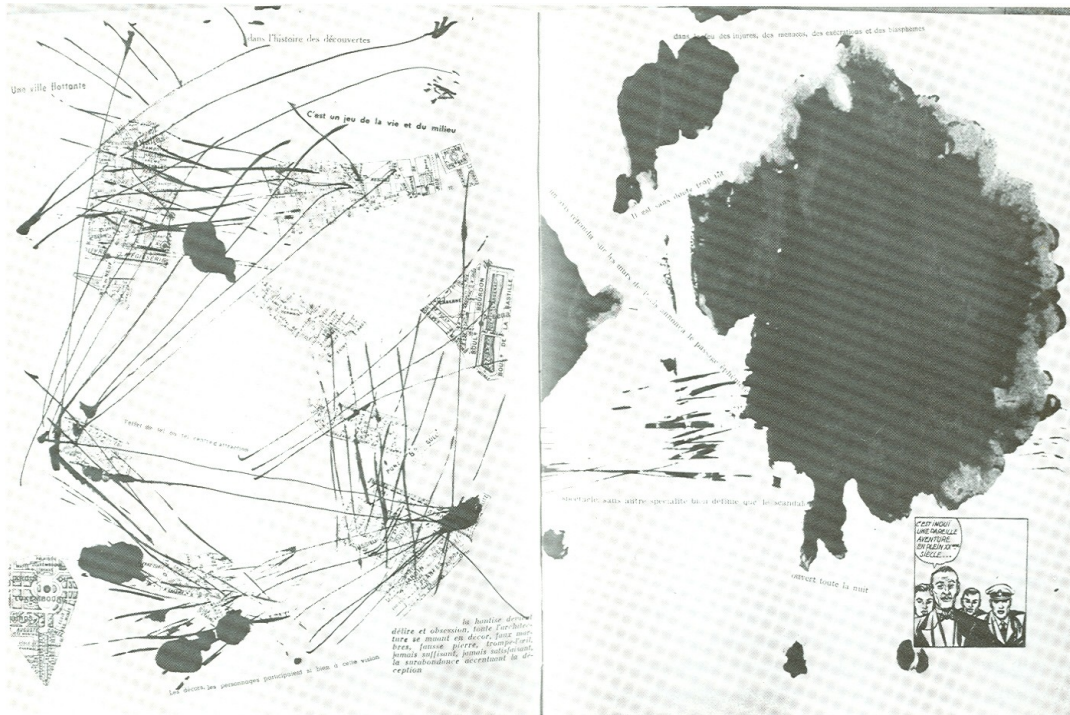


Figure 8) Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, spread from *Mémoires*, 1958. Photolithograph.

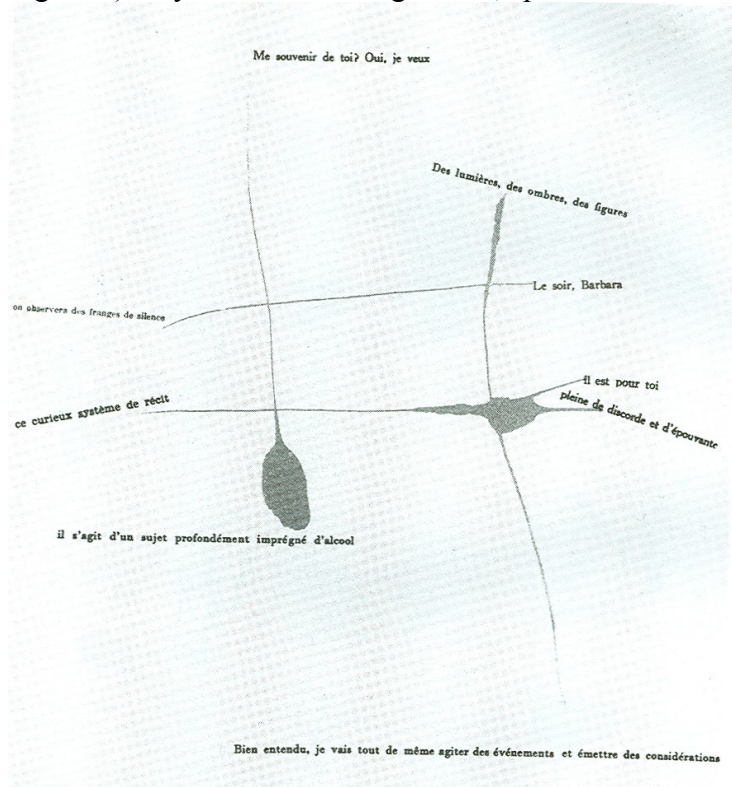


Figure 9) Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, page from *Mémoires*, 1958. Photolithograph.



*Left: Figure 10) Guy Debord, *Le temps passe, en effet, et nous passons avec lui*, 1954. Photomontage.*



Right: Figure 11) Guy Debord and Asger Jorn, page from *Mémoires*, 1958. Photolithograph.

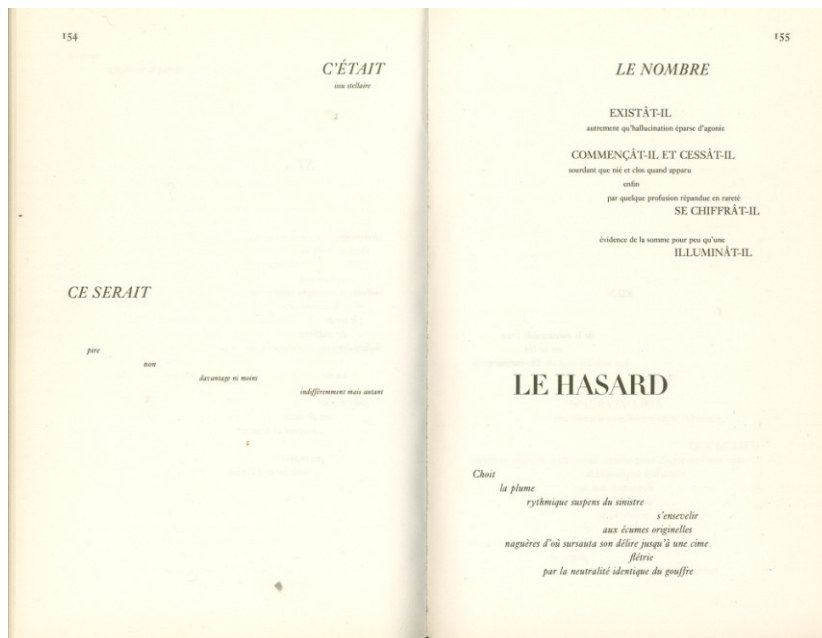


Figure 12) Stéphane Mallarmé, Spread from *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira le Hasard*. 1896.

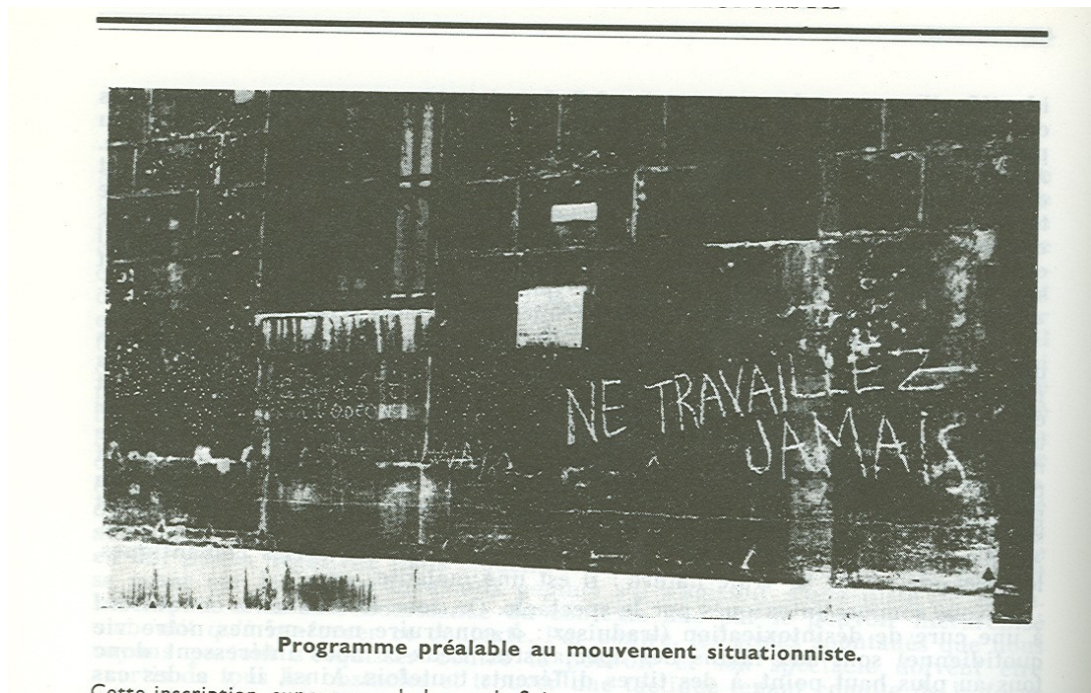


Figure 13) Guy Debord, *Ne Travaillez Jamais*, 1953. Photograph published in *Internationale Situationniste*, n. 8, January 1963.



Figure 14) Jo Schnapp, *May '68 Graffiti*, 1968. Photograph.



Figure 15) Anonymous, *Occupied Sorbonne Courtyard*, 1968. Photograph.



Figure 16) Jo Schnapp, *May '68 Graffiti*, 1968. Photograph.

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