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      In addition to contributing crucially to the philosophy that fuelled the student revolts of France in 1968, the Situationist International (SI) sought to undermine the use of spectacle as a commercialised tool of capitalism. Blending their interpretations of Marxism with that of the historical avant-garde, the situationists went to war with the institutions of art and academia. In 1956, Guy Debord proclaimed that "every reasonably aware person of our time is aware of the obvious fact that art can no longer be justified as a superior activity" (Debord, *A User's Guide to Détournement* 1). What was their method of attack on this world of bastardized, commercialized spectacle? Quite simply, it was play.

      Although subversion through theatre and play is hardly a novel idea, the situationists employed play in ways that had never been taken to such extremes. They propagated play without spectacle, or even play as *anti*-spectacle and *anti*-art. The term itself, 'situationism' refers to the *anti-art* they created; or, in other words, the un-commodified, *anti-spectacular* human situations, through which, as Sartre claimed, one could gain freedom (Plant 20). Through these situations, the SI was determined to subvert the institutional uses of language and art using what they termed *détournement*, or "the use of old material for new ends," (Puchner 224). What this amounts to is play in a unique form: play is used to undermine the very institution of language, and therefore both social order and authoritative control. As a result, the SI's influences extended beyond their specific time and place by instigating a re-evaluation of the very relationship between art and politics; a re-evaluation still in process today.

      Any discussion of the Situationist Internationale (or SI), must first deal with the purposefully problematic question of *who* can rightly be termed the SI. During a police interview with Guy Debord, following the first publication of the journal "Internationale Situationniste" (1958), Debord stated that the term refers to "an artistic tendency" (Home 33). At a public meeting of the SI at the ICA London in 1960, Maurice Wyckaert, a spokesman for the SI stated: "Situationism does not exist. There is no doctrine of this name" (Home 37). The meeting

ended abruptly when an audience member asked for a definition of Situationism, to which Debord replied: "We're not here to answer your cuntish questions", and promptly walked out with the rest of the SI members (Home 37).

In hindsight, the logic of objecting to a publicly and institutionally accepted name is two-fold. From a philosophical and theoretical point of view, accepting a name sanctioned by the media and artistic institutions would suggest complicity with a system whose values they sought to undermine. Secondly, and perhaps more practically, how can a coterie of artists, never officially constituted as a group, nor given a proper name, be forcefully disbanded? Relying on the historical propensity of the state to separate art and politics, and the law's inherent reliance on proper names, Guy Debord and his peers were able to circulate numerous texts and pieces of *anti-art* work with the express intent of inciting a cultural revolution.

The formulation of the SI was a collaboration of members from groups all over Western Europe that shared this objective of a cultural revolution. Disparate though their tactics and individual ideas may have been, many had found a common ground and common need that bade the creation of a new division in the neo-avant-gardes. The SI sprung primarily from the Imaginist Bauhaus, COBRA, and Lettriste Internationale (Puchner 220). Ideas and members also overlapped with the German group SPUR, and some of the SI's political theory was based on Debord's brief experience as a member of Socialisme ou Barbarie (Home 32). This mélange of geographically dispersed members made the SI, though based in Paris, truly international and heterogeneous[1].

Likewise, and as Wyckaert claimed at the ICA in 1960, the SI was never united under a single, all-encompassing Situationist manifesto. Instead, their manifesto might be more accurately described as the sum total of their innumerable publications: pamphlets, journals, and individual theoretical texts such as Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* or Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (both published in 1967). Although influenced by the historical

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[1] Read more about these groups in: Home, Stewart. *The Assault on Culture: Utopian Currents from Lettrisme to Class War.* Stirling: AK Press, 1991.

avant-gardes, many of whom had overt manifestos, such as the Futurists and the Dadaists, the SI saw the need for a new kind of manifesto. Writing, they argued, had become a tool of the capitalist state to enslave the masses. In order to fight that enslavement, they needed to "turn the language of the state against the state and even its own tendency toward order and control" (Puchner 223). Their task was to subvert the writing of the state from within using a hybrid form of political and artistic manifesto.

Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* comes closest to meeting this goal, dealing more readily with the theoretical implications of their mission than any other single work that came out of the SI. In this work consisting of 221 paragraphs, each unit of text is designed to provide a brief and succinct assertion of the SI. Yet their coherence under a unified aim is palpable. Debord had become acquainted with the Marxist philosopher Henri Lefebvre in the late fifties, when Lefebvre was a professor of sociology at Nanterre (Home 31). Their collaboration of Marxist and artistic ideas resulted in the development of an overarching aim of the SI: "to base a cultural revolution on a critique of capitalism in its newest, mediatized form": i.e. the *spectacle* (Puchner 221).

The fifties and sixties had seen Capitalism reach the height of its influence and affluence, and with it, the explosion of television and film into the Western world (Plant 2). The worker, alienated from the products of his labor was now made complacent by an uninterrupted stream of images: tuning in and tuning out. The sole method of fulfilling desire was the steady consumption of these representations of satisfaction. With the expansion of images, commercials, billboards, etc., every moment in life was accounted for in technicolor. Nothing was left to live firsthand; reality had subsided into a mere representation, mediated by those creating the images to support the capitalist system. As Debord states: "The real consumer becomes a consumer of illusions. The commodity is the factually real illusion, and the spectacle is its general manifestation" (Debord 1983: 47).

The term "spectacle" signified to Debord the totality of what culture had become under capitalism. It connoted the aggregate ideology of the capitalist

system of the post-war, Western world, including the institutions surrounding art and academia (Puchner 221). The text's Marxist foundation is apparent, as Debord claims capitalism is what leads to the alienation of the masses. Yet he takes a step away from orthodox Marxism by introducing the advent of spectacle as the main instrument of capitalist control. The people become alienated from their surroundings and their fellow human beings through the bombardment of false, commercially constructed images of "happy unification" (Debord 1983: 63). Alienation occurs in the workplace, as in Marxism, but also extends into leisure time, and therefore, the totality of one's life experience. Hence, the first paragraph of *Society of the Spectacle* reads as follows:

> In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation (Debord 1).

The *Society of the Spectacle* plagiarizes, reiterates, and borrows from a variety of works and ideas, including those of Marx, Hegel, Lukács, and numerous avant-gardes' manifestos, making it an exhibition détournement; re-appropriating something old or familiar and using it to a new end (Plant 8). Likewise, Debord includes images in *Society of the Spectacle*, but subverts their ideological place using montage, collage, and mock film strips. He challenges contexts of images through juxtaposition with different texts and photographs. At the end of Part IV, 'The Proletariat as Subject and as Representation,' a photograph of a parade, welcoming troops back from a victorious war, has been manipulated. People cheer along the street and confetti falls from the tall buildings as American flags wave and a marching band plays. But riding in the car down the center of the street is a collage of objects including a massive, dominating camera filming the crowd, a bottle of cologne, and what looks like a carton of cigarettes. The adaptation and reconstruction of a familiar image for serious political purposes, although commonplace now, was rather novel and inventive in the sixties. Not only does it manage to manipulate the subject by

adding consumer products and a camera, but also the referent; the collective, social memory of war, which can subsequently be seen as another product of the media and capitalism. In many ways, Debord anticipated the rapid growth that the media would soon experience in terms of its power and importance to the industry of war. In 2002, for example, a media corporation in Venezuela would play a crucial role in staging a coup to oust popularly elected President Hugo Chavez from power using their monopolized ability to broadcast their version of events and their technological ability to omit or manipulate video imagery (Roberts 68).

However, one must remember that Debord was himself a film maker. Perhaps the more impressive images in *Society of the Spectacle* are those that require no manipulation beyond an adjusted shutter-speed. The final full-page image is that of a fence in front of, presumably, some sort of prison or military building. Uniformed guards stand by the entryway, under a sign reading: "Obedience to the Law is Freedom". At first glance, this statement might be read as: "If you had obeyed the law, you would not be imprisoned here." Yet, there is something unsettling about the word 'freedom' combined with that image. Upon further consideration, one finds the opposite of those words to be conveyed by the total effect. Instead, it seems to say: "Complete subjection to the law is mandatory, and therefore inherently imprisoning." And furthermore, if you fail to subject completely, the law will physically imprison you. Freedom does not enter into it.

The situationist project extended beyond printed words and images, including physical and visual events of détournement. In an attempt to rebuild a consciousness of a world outside the spectacle, the situationists employed the dérive, or drift. Although used previously by the dadaists and surrealists, the situationists were concerned with it in relation to their interest in psychogeography, or the impact of the physical environment, natural or man made, on one's psyche (Plant 58). Psychogeography and the study of urban design was pertinent to the SI due to its direct connection with everyday life, an idea taken from the Imaginist Bauhaus, and the original Bauhaus before them

(Puchner 227). However, instead of constructing buildings, as the Bauhaus did, the SI attempted to transform the existing city through consciousness using dérive.

The aim was to drift playfully, not under the will of the subconscious, but to come to a realization of space outside its ideologically imposed position. "To dérive was to notice the way in which certain areas, streets, or buildings, resonate with states of mind, inclinations, and desires, and to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed" (Plant 59). The goal was to mentally deconstruct the city; to remove the center through disorientation and therefore remove the power of the state over the city. To heighten the effect, the situationists employed the use of détourned maps; maps which were torn apart and collaged back together, including annotations, arrows, and sometimes pieces of older maps (Puchner 228). To dérive with a détourned map was to reject the state's very power to designate and institutionalize space. In this way, they hoped, the city itself could become a situation (Puchner 228).

The playful nature of this type of gesture is obvious, yet it is not at all frivolous. On the contrary, what the SI accomplished with play was intensely serious. Détourned maps, dérive, collage, etc.; these tactics were playful without being flippant or trivial. They were done with utmost sincerity, gravity, and extensive fore-planning. The goal of the dérive was to transform the way in which one thought about the most basic everyday actions one takes and how those actions reflect the spectacle of capitalist ideology. The SI's revolution would require a change in consciousness. But how does one spread these ideas and engage in public dérive without becoming a part of that all-encompassing spectacle?

This was an ongoing struggle for the SI, and although Guy Debord would have liked to say the situations they created were invulnerable to being swallowed by the spectacle, this was not entirely the case. Indeed, the SI's numerous publications and anti-art required funding, some of which came from the sale of Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio's 'industrial painting'. The original idea behind this piece of *anti-art* was to paint on a massive rolled canvas and cut pieces from

it like wallpaper to be used for clothing, wall-hangings, mobile architecture, etc. The intention was to expose the capitalist influence on the production and consumption of art and subvert the commodity fetishism surrounding *unique* works of art. The result, however, was rather anti-situationist, as the rolls of paintings found themselves absorbed into the art industry and achieving inflated prices, the profits of which went to fund the SI (Home 33-5).

The anxiety about the situation becoming the spectacle is largely the reason why the SI tended to stray away from theatre beyond theoretical discussion. It was a subject of both abject scrutiny, for its associations with the spectacle, and admiration for its possibilities in the context of their project (Puchner 231). Indeed, the utopian state they attempted to accomplish with situations was actually a form of experimental theatre; it was theatre of the "everyday life" in which one experiences a nonseparate, un-alienated relationship with the world, ideas that were largely influenced by the work of Artaud and Lefebvre. For the SI, this goal of the ultimate situation, the radical antitheatre of the undivided life, remained always an objective to strive toward, as it would require the détournement of constructed situations on a grand scale, a step the SI would never reach (232-3).

So the SI resigned themselves, for the time being, to critiquing theatre and theorizing about its possibilities. They came to admire the work of Allan Kaprow and John Kirby, whose New York Happenings were attempting a similar dissolve of spectacular theatre through *nonmatrixed* performing. This technique pushed the envelope by compartmentalizing areas of performance; blending actors with audience, removing the barrier between the stage and the spectator's space. As Kirby explains in his introduction to *Happenings and Other Acts*:

> Happenings have abandoned the plot or story structure that is the foundation of our traditional theatre. Gone are the clichés or exposition, development, climax, and conclusion, of love and ambition, the conflicts of personality, the revelatory monolog of character. Gone are all elements needed for the presentation of cause-and-effect plot or even the simple sequence of events that

would tell a story (Kirby 4).

Yet the SI itself could never take part in these Happenings, nor could they unreservedly endorse them for reasons easily deduced. Happenings were ensconced from their conception into the art community, the first of these having taken place in the Reuben Gallery as an art exhibit (3). The subversive theoretical aims of the Happenings were clearly congruous with the theory of the SI, yet in practice, the Happenings were somewhat elitist, most definitely commodified, and often only superficially appreciated by the spectacle-hungry audience (1).

Therefore, perhaps a more apt pupil of the SI might be the Brazilian Augusto Boal, whose 1974 text, *Theatre of the Oppressed*, explicitly considers the potential revolutionary power of theatre as a "weapon of liberation" (Boal Foreword). Thoroughly in line with the SI's goal of the all-encompassing *antitheatre* mentioned previously, Boal believes theatre can break down the barriers between the ruling class and the proletariat, escape the commodified spectacle of the dominant ideology, and bring about cultural and political revolution (Boal Foreword). To do this, Boal suggests the systematic breakdown of each barrier in traditional theatre: actor and spectator, chorus and protagonist, etc., barriers which reflect the psychological control of those in power: the aristrocracy versus the masses, the bourgeoisie versus the proletariat. Replacing this, Boal proposes the creation of a new structure based on what he terms the 'Joker' system, which propagates spontaneity, originality of thought from all participants with every performance, and the unequivocal equality of everyone involved (Boal 179). "All theatre is necessarily political," Boal states, "because all the activities of man are political and theatre is one of them. Those who try to separate theatre from politics try to lead us into error" (Boal Foreword). Much like the SI's goal of subverting the spectacle through situations, Boal's project was to turn the oppressive theatre of the state against the state.An example of Boal's theory in action is the use of invisible theatre, in which a scene is made in public without being presented as such, making the onlookers unconscious of the occurrence as spectacle, removing the line between real life and theatre. A

script is agreed upon beforehand, and the surrounding public finds itself, for example, unwittingly immersed in a debate about the value of human labor versus the cost of food while witnessing an argument at a restaurant (Boal 144). The actors use a text to provoke discussion or thought on a given topic, but keep the public unaware of its preconception. Invisible theatre negates the spectacle by removing the possibility of spectators, a tactic the SI would have found admirable.

Indeed, one might even consider Boal the closest living inheritor of the SI project. But Boal's system is not without its shortcomings. The formula, described in detail, explains how to use theatre as a sort of therapy; a system designed to change people mentally from spectators to protagonists. This is theoretically problematic as it imposes a hegemonic system of values in ways not unlike the bourgeoisie. The use of Boal's technique leads to a monopolization of power into the hands of those in charge of the implementation. This group or individual then dictates not only the particular issues under discussion, but also how they will be discussed, in what context, and by whom. For example, invisible theatre subverts the notion of spectators, but the performance of its carefully prepared scripts in a deliberately chosen setting is also a form of coercion and blatant manipulation, without consent of the very people Boal's theories attempt to liberate.

Furthermore, one can easily discover parallels between Boal's techniques and devices used in advertising, like attractive people paid by liquor companies to order a certain brand of alcohol in bars, or rival corporations creating negative publicity by hiring actors to complain about a product in public. Similarly, and perhaps even more importantly, many of Boal's therapeutic techniques to transform spectators into players have also been adapted into team-building exercises used to indoctrinate staff of large corporations. Although this might be construed as validation for the situationist's fears about theatre, one cannot blame Boal for the misuse and reinterpretation of such techniques. Like the historical avant-gardes, the SI's moment in time was brief and turbulent. They did not survive long after the student revolts of May 1968, but their legacy, the impact of their accomplishments, extends beyond what even Debord might have

imagined. One finds remnants of situationist philosophy in Baudrillard's analysis of commodities in *Le Systeme Des Objets* (1968) and Barthes' discussion of *jouissance*; and though they moved in very different directions, situationist ideas inspired, provoked, and/or served as a starting point for the work of Lyotard, Foucault, Deleuze, and the work of many other post-structuralists (Plant 183).

But in fairness to Debord and the original situationists who abhorred the academic system the aforementioned critics and philosophers inhabited, one does better to consider performance artists Yuan Chai and Jian Jun Xi as closer to the situationist's legacy. Chai and Xi are best known for their act entitled: 'Two Naked Men Jump into Tracey's Bed,' in which they leapt into artist Tracey Emin's *My Bed* exhibit. The exhibit consisted of the artist's soiled, slept-in bed, empty vodka bottles, used tissues, and other personal articles. Emin was nominated for the Turner Prize in 1999 and the bed was on display in the Tate Gallery when Chai and Xi decided to take the concept a step further. Naked from the waist up, the two men had words written on their bodies in both English and Chinese, including "Communism," "Anti-Stuckism," "Optimism," and "Freedom" (Wallace, Monday 25 Oct 1999). As Chai stated, their purpose was to "push the idea further … [and] make the people think about what is good art and what is bad art" (ibid). Chai explained further that although they enjoyed Emin's work, they felt it was too "institutionalized" (ibid). By staging the unauthorized performance in the museum, Chai and Xi drew attention to the fact that the museum and the curators were alienating the artwork from the its artistic purpose. A soiled bed is about corporeality, scent, touch, the experience of illness, sex, etc. It is art for those reasons, and to sterilize it by making it untouchable is to make it no more than a visual spectacle.

Chai and Xi do not have a manifesto yet, and perhaps they never will. But one cannot discount the fact that their art is politically charged and their acts take after the détournement of the situationists. They have *play* with *purpose* in a time when groups like Improv Everywhere walk around pretending to use bananas as cell phones and bring desktop computers into Starbucks, then broadcast YouTube videos of public reactions (http://improveverywhere.com/).

Groups such as these are abundant and many have more members than the SI did even at its height. But although they publicly interrupt a few ideological norms of society, their events lack seriousness and are only a source of entertainment. There is no theory or philosophy behind their actions and no attempt to change anything. They provide proof that the Spectacle has absorbed certain facets of détournement and invisible theatre and turned them into bona fide YouTube commodities. The Situationists understood the need for any revolutionary movement to be constantly in a state of re-invention.

> This world tries to bring the most radical gestures under its wing: the avant-garde of its subculture serves to make it appear that the S.I. competes with, and is thereby equal to, Regis Debray who equals the Panthers who equal the Peace and Freedom Party which equals the Yippies who equal the Sexual Freedom League which equals the ads on the back which equal the price on the cover. The *Barb*, the *Rat, Good Times*, and so on – it makes no difference. Same old show, new markets ("The Practice Of Theory" by the American section of the (specto) Situationist International qtd. Home 3).

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