

Extract from **Internationale Situationniste at Context XXI**

(http://contextxxi.org/letters-from-afar.html)

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Letters from Afar

Ivan Chtcheglov participated in the ventures that were at the origin of the situationist movement, and his role in it has been irreplaceable, both in its theoretical endeavors and in its practical activity (the *dérive* experiments). In 1953, at the age of 19, he had already drafted — under the pseudonym Gilles Ivain — the text entitled “Formulary for a New Urbanism,” which was later published in the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste*. Having spent the last five years in a psychiatric clinic, where he still is, he reestablished contact with us only long after the formation of the SI. He is currently working on a revised edition of his 1953 writing on architecture and urbanism. The letters from which the following lines have been excerpted were addressed to Michèle Bernstein and Guy Debord over the last year. The plight to which Ivan Chtcheglov is being subjected can be considered as one of modern society’s increasingly sophisticated methods of control over people’s lives, a control that in previous times was expressed in atheists being condemned to the Bastille, for example, or political opponents to exile.

■ GILLES IVAIN ■ REUBEN KEEHAN
(TRANSLATION) ■ KEN KNABB
(TRANSLATION)

I am in a good position to study the group and the role of the individual in

the group.

The *dérive* (with its flow of acts, its gestures, its strolls, and its encounters) was to the *totality* exactly what psychoanalysis (in the best sense) is to language. Let yourself go with the flow of words, says the psychoanalyst. He listens, until the moment he rejects or modifies (one could say *détourns*) a word, an expression or a definition. The *dérive* is certainly a technique, almost a therapeutic one. But just as analysis unaccompanied by anything else is almost always *contraindicated*, so continual *dériving* is dangerous to the extent that the individual, having gone too far — not without bases, but without defenses — is threatened with explosion, dissolution, dissociation, or disintegration. And thus the relapse into what is termed ‘ordinary life,’ that is to say, in reality, into ‘petrified life.’ In this regard I now take back the *Formulary’s* propaganda for a *continuous dérive*. It could be continual like the poker game in Las Vegas, but only for a certain period, limited to a weekend for some people, to a week as a good average; a month is really pushing it. In 1953-1954 we *dérived* for three or four months straight. That’s the extreme limit. It’s a miracle it didn’t kill us. We had a constitution — a bad constitution — of iron.

One factor — which verifies our basic theories only too well — has played an enormous part: for several years, the clinic was installed in a castle with gargoyles, a portcullis, thick, reinforced wooden doors, floors (and not tiled floors: most hygienic), a high tower, antique furniture, fireplaces, coats of arms, etc. Since then, however, they

have moved us to a modern clinic. Of course, this is easier to maintain, but at such a price! It is practically *impossible* to struggle against architecture. More and more, they’re saying “clinic” instead of “castle” and “patients” in place of “guests.” And so on ... *The words work*.

On a whim, I accepted the role of the butcher in Audiberti’s “*L’Ampelour*.” It’s a small role, but it’s exhausting! Nothing is more tiring than taking the stage when one isn’t well.

In my good moments, when I remember the *insufficiency* — and yet the perfection — of the *Formulary*, I pull in my horses. And as much for the each issue of *I.S.* So much could be made of so little:

Of time — of chance — of health — of money — of thought.

(And also) of good humor — of our hearts in our work — of love — and of precaution.

But the entourage! The standards! The others! The splits! It’s complicated.

And this is always the insane demand of the world: be possessed of genius, yes, but live as we do. It’s madness. And still they want me to conform to a new label on their files.

Since we are involved in a sumptuous potlatch, here is a title: “*Des êtres se recontrent*” by J.A. Schade, by far the greatest novel of the twentieth century, unfortunately very hard to come by. Maybe if you look in the classifieds ... It ends with the little song “that we sang when we were children”:

The rich, they go to market by carriage,
The poor, they go by foot.

Us, we amuse ourselves.

It's tough being in this dump and knowing *the stakes*. I too am becoming a symbol, and even here they agree. Will I stay, will I go, will my speech return or will I lose my memory again?

But I've had enough of angst. I want to change the topic of my text to *the meaning of happiness*; de Chirico is certainly a precursor from an architectural point of view, but an *anxious* architectural point of view. We will discover more cheerful things. Or we might demonstrate and denounce de Chirico's angst. In any case, my text wasn't clear enough.

There is nothing left for me to do but to get over this illness, seeing *the impossibility of looking after yourself in the clinic* ... It's doubtful; it's been ten years. We are never really animals, not animals at all. Regardless of whether the impossibility of looking after yourself in the clinic is the indefensible opinion of the boss, I nevertheless maintain, absolutely in accord with K., that it is impossible to look after oneself in here. Which one of us the home destroys is not an issue to them. Not on purpose, of course. But who will it be?

I engage in situationist propaganda with one or two of the members of staff. Why not?

And how do I get over this thing? How can I trust anyone enough to get me out? It's virtually impossible.

Getting over it! They scare me! I'm happy to fantasize: *they* found a way to panic me so they could cart me off. In 1959, two busloads of cops were called (as far as I can remember). In all, 24 cops for your comrade. ... But you don't think I could be that bad, do you? No one would send 24 cops. *Besides, it never happened!*

What else can I write, my dear Guy? I am ill. I am complaining: the 400 wishes, the loathing, the delirium, the curses, the "fatal and jealous love," the dangers, the childish impulses, L's [1] prophecies of misfortune, and W's [2] "listen to your mother."

Now the festivals are a sorry sight. I don't think you'll miss your chance. It's nowhere near as dreadful as everyone else's festivals. Festivals are the best thing here.

On the exclusion of AK, [3] what more can I say? ... *These exclusions have to*

stop. I know it isn't easy: developments have to be foreseen, suspicious characters ought to be rejected in advance. That would be ideal, right? These exclusions have become part of the situationist mythology.

[1] Gaëtan Langlais

[2] Gil J. Wolman

[3] Attila Kotányi

Gilles Ivain: Geboren 1933 in Paris als Ivan Chtcheglov, gestorben 1998 ebenda. Er war beteiligt an den frühen Unternehmungen der *Situationistischen Internationale*, namentlich an der Entwicklung der Theorie der *Psychogeographie* und des praktischen Konzepts der *dérive* (des Umherschweifens).

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