Extract from Internationale Situationniste at Context XXI

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Contribution to a Situationist Definition of Play

n REUBEN KEEHAN (TRANSLATION) ■ SITUATIONISTISCHE INTERNATIONALE

The notion of play can only escape the linguistic and practical confusion surrounding it by being considered in its movement. After two centuries of negation by the continuous idealization of production, the primitive social functions of play are presented as no more than decaying relics mixed with inferior forms that proceed directly from the necessities of the current organization of production. At the same time, the progressive tendencies of play appear in relation to the development of these very forces of production.

The new phase of affirmation of play seems to be characterized by the disappearance of any element of competition. The question of winning or losing, previously almost inseparable from ludic activity, appears linked to all other manifestations of the tension between individuals for the appropriation of goods. The feeling of the importance of winning in the game, that it is about concrete satisfactions — or, more often than not, illusions — is the wretched product of a wretched society. This feeling is naturally exploited by all the conservative forces that serve to mask the atrocious monotony of the conditions of life they themselves impose. One has only to think of all the claims *détourned* by competitive sports that are imposed in their precisely modern form in Great Britain with the expansion of the factories. Not only do crowds identify with professional players or clubs, which assume the same mythic role as movie stars and statesmen making all the decisions; but the infinite series of results of these competitions do not let their observers feel any of their passion. Direct participation in a game, even between those requiring a little intellectual exercise, ceases to be interesting as soon as competition for its own sake enters the framework of fixed rules. Where the idea of play is involved, nothing arouses so much scorn these days as the declaration that opens [Sawielly] Tartakower's *The Chess Bible:* "The game of chess is universally recognized as the king of games."

The element of competition must disappear in favor of a more authentically collective concept of play: the common creation of selected ludic ambiances. The central distinction that must be transcended is that established between play and ordinary life, play kept as an isolated and provisory exception. "Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life," writes Johan Huizinga, "it brings a temporary, a limited perfection." Ordinary life, previously conditioned by the problem of survival, can be dominated rationally — this possibility is at the heart of every conflict of our time — and play, radically broken from a confined ludic time and space, must invade the whole of life. Perfection will not be its end, at least to the degree that this perfection signifies a static construction opposed to life. But one may propose to push to its perfection the beautiful confusion of life. The baroque — elegantly described by Eugénio d'Ors as "the vacancy of history" — and its *organized beyond,* play a major role in the coming reign of leisure.

In this historical perspective, play — the permanent experimentation with ludic novelties — appears to be not at all separate from ethics, from the question of the meaning of life. The only success that can be conceived in play is the immediate success of its ambiance, and the constant augmentation of its powers. Thus, even in its present co-existence with the residues of the phase of decline, play cannot be completely emancipated from a competitive aspect; its goal must be at the very least to provoke conditions favorable to direct living. In this sense it is another struggle and representation: the struggle for a life in step with desire, and the concrete representation of such a life.

Due to its marginal existence in relation to the oppressive reality of work, play is often regarded as fictitious. But the work of the situationists is precisely the preparation of ludic possibilities to come. One can thus attempt to neglect the Situationist International to the degree that one easily recognizes a few aspects of a great game. "Nevertheless," says Huizinga, "as we have already pointed out, the consciousness of play being 'only a pretend' does not in any way prevent it

from proceeding with the utmost seriousness. ...”

Situationist International: Situationistisch / Situationist: All das, was sich auf die Theorie oder auf die praktische Tätigkeit von Situationen bezieht. Derjenige, der sich damit beschäftigt, Situationen zu konstruieren. Mitglied der situationistischen Internationale.
Situationismus: Sinnloses Wort, missbräuchlich durch Ableitung des vorigen gebildet. Einen Situationismus gibt es nicht — was eine Doktrin zur Interpretation der vorhandenen Tatsachen bedeuten würde. Selbstverständlich haben sich die Anti-Situationisten den Begriff „Situationismus“ ausgedacht.

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