Extract from Internationale Situationniste at Context XXI

(http://contextxxi.org/nostalgia-beneath-contempt.html)

extracted on: 19 November 2026
Date of this contribution: December 1958

Nostalgia Beneath Contempt

n REUBEN KEEHAN ■ SITUATIONISTISCHE INTERNATIONALE

We live subject to change, because — if I am permitted to say this — it is the law of the countries we inhabit.

Bossuet

In a text entitled 'Poetry Above All,' Benjamin Péret opens the first number of the surrealist bulletin *Bief* with an attack on the situationists, to whom he attributes the idiotic project of placing poetry and art under the 'guidance' of science.

Motivated by the grotesque intention to propagandize against the situationists, Péret's confused declarations cruelly reveal a mode of thinking from another century: an incapacity to comprehend the problems of the present, an incapacity that renders even more laughable his pretense to combat those who pose them. 'Nuclear fission and its consequences,' he says, 'won't provide a new way of feeling, any more than they will generate an original poetry.' True. But who is it that wants to 'feel' passively? And who is it that expects 'an original poetry,' with or without a nuclear pretext? We smile at this rhetoric of the pre-eminence of scientism over poetic sensibility, and conversely, these polemics that remind us Sully-Prudhomme. [1] We don't want to renew expression in itself, and certainly not the expression of science: we want to bring passion to everyday life. To this end, poetry can no longer be of any use. We're not about to patch up poetic language and artistic expression for them to end up being loved unconditionally by a generation of dadaist has-beens. As the song goes: your youth is dead and so are your loves.

What, then, is our goal? The creation of situations. Although there can be no doubt that people have attempted direct interventions into their surroundings at various times in their lives, such constructions did not possess the unified means for their qualitative and quantitative extension, remaining isolated and fragmentary. The failure to realize these desires was for a long time palliated by the distractions of religion and, at a later stage, the spectacle of art. However, going hand in hand with the material development of the world — which must be understood in its broadest sense — the disappearance of these distractions is now easy to verify. The construction of situations is not directly dependent on atomic energy; nor even on automation or social revolution, since experiments can be carried out in the absence of certain conditions, conditions that will no doubt come to fruition in the near future. But while a number of sectors lag behind the total advance of our time, depriving us of means we would like to have at our disposal and leaving the present somewhat dull, a proper perspective of this order has been able to appear for the first time in history, and lesser pleasures thus seem unworthy of our attention.

Péret is the prisoner of a false richness of memory, of the vain task of preserving the emotions associated with the collector's items of others.

Péret and his friends are the conservators of an art world whose time is up. They are on the side of those who sell it condensed in Malraux's imaginary museums. [2] They are on the side of those who want to prolong its "nobility" while decorating their refrigerators with modern paintings. But this nobility died with the *anciens régime* of culture, leaving them on the side of nothing but nostalgia. Dreams, which they praised so much, are only good for those who would rather to sleep forever.

We are the partisans of forgetting: forgetting the past, living in the present. Our contemporaries cannot be found among those satisfied with too little. In April 1958, the SI's Belgian section hurled at the International Assembly of Art Critics a slogan that summed up our little step forward perfectly: "the classless society has found its artists."

This combination of blue ribbons, ladies, armor, violins in the hall, and trumpets in the square produced a spectacle more often seen in books than anywhere else.

Retz

[1] René-François-Armand (Sully) Prudhomme (1839-1907), French poet and leader of the traditionalist Parnassian movement, who studied science before turning to poetry.

[2] A reference to Le Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale *by André Malraux (1901-1976), the French novelist and art historian who served as de Gualle's minister for culture from 1958 to 1968.*

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.

License of this contribution
Public domain
Public domain