Extract from Internationale Situationniste at Context XXI

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The Meaning of Decay in Art

n JOHN SHEPLEY (TRANSLATION) ■ SITUATIONISTISCHE INTERNATIONALE

Bourgeois civilization, now spread all over the planet, and which has yet to be successfully overcome anywhere, is haunted by a shadow: its culture, which appears in the modern dissolution of all its artistic means, is being called into question. This dissolution, first manifested at the starting point for the productive forces of modern society, i.e., Europe and later in America, has long been the prime truth of Western modernism. Everywhere the liberation of artistic forms has signified their reduction to nothing. One can apply to the whole of modern expression that W. Weildé, in 1947, wrote in the second issue of *Cahiers de la Pléiade* about Finnegans Wake: "This enormous *Summa* of the most enticing verbal contortions, this *Ars poetica* in ten thousand lessons, is not an artistic creation: it is the autopsy of its corpse."

Reactionary critics, to support their stupid dream of a return to the stylistic beauties of the past, never fail to point out that behind the inflationary flowering of novelties that can serve only once, the road of this liberation leads only to the void. For example, Emile Henriot *(Le Monde,* February 11, 1959) notes "The turn, many times signaled, that a certain literature of today has taken in the direction of the 'language of forms' for the use of literati specializing in the exercise of a 'literature for literati,' an object unto itself, just as there are experiments by painters for experimental painters and a music for musicians." Or Mauriac *(L'-Express,* March 5, 1959): "The very philosophers whose lesson is that the end of a poem should be silence write articles to persuade us of it, and publish novels to prove to us that one shouldn't tell stories."

In the face of these jeers, those critics who have chosen to be modernists extol the beauties of dissolution, while hoping that it doesn't proceed too quickly. They are embarrassed, like Geneviève Bonnefoi taking not under the title "Death or Transfiguration?" of the ill-starred Paris Biennale *(Lettres Nouvelles,* no.25). She concludes sadly: "Only the future will tell if this 'annihilation' of pictorial language, fairly similar to the one attempted on the literary plane by Beckett, Ionesco, and the best of the current young novelists, foreshadows a renewal of painting or its disappearance as a major art of our time. I have no space here to speak of sculpture, which seems to be in total disintegration." Or else, renouncing any sense of the comical, they loudly take the side of quasi nothingness in formulas worthy to pass into history as the summing-up of the poverty of an era, like Françoise Choay, who *eulogistically* entitles an article on Tapiès: "Tapiès, Mystic of Almost Nothing" *(France-Observateur,* April 30, 1959).

The embarrassment of modernist critics is completed by the embarrassment of modern artists, on whom the accelerated decomposition in all sectors constantly imposes the need to examine and explain their working hypotheses. They bustle about in the same confusion and often in a comparable imbecility. Everywhere one can see the traces, among modern creators, of a consciousness traumatized by the shipwreck of expression as an autonomous sphere and absolute goal; and by the slow emergence of other dimensions of activity.

The fundamental work of a present avant-garde should be an attempt at general criticism of this moment, and a first attempt to respond to new requirements.

If the artist has passed, by a slow process, from the state of entertainer — pleasantly occupying people's spare time — to the ambition of a prophet, who raises questions and claims to impart the meaning of life, it is because, more and more, the question of how to spend our lives looms at the edge of the expanding freedom we have achieved by our appropriation of nature.

Thus the pretensions of the artist in bourgeois society go hand in hand with the practical reduction of his or her realm of real action to zero, and denial. All modern art is the revolutionary claim to other professions, once the current specialization is one-sided, canned expression has been relinquished.

The delays and distortions of the revolutionary project in our time are well known. The regression that has therein manifested itself has nowhere been so obvious as in art. This has been made easier by the fact that classical Marxism had not developed a real body of criticism in this area. In a famous letter to Mehring, written at the end of his life, Engels noted: "we all laid, and *were bound* to lay, the main

emphasis, in the first place, on the *derivation* of political, juridical and other ideological notions, and of actions arising through the medium of these notions, from basic economic facts. But in doing so we neglected the formal side — the ways and means by which these notions, etc., come about — for the sake of the content." Moreover, at the time when Marxist thought was coming into its own, the formal movement in the dissolution of art was not yet apparent. Likewise, it can be said that it is solely in the presence of fascism that the workers' movement encountered in practical terms the problem of the formal "mode of appearance" of a political idea. It found itself poorly equipped to deal with it.

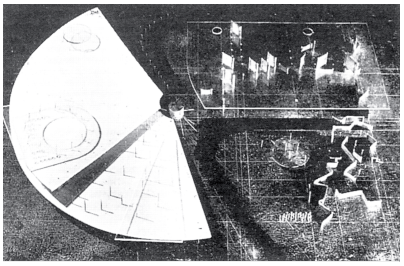
Independent revolutionary thinkers themselves show a certain reluctance to become involved in today's cultural problems. When we look at the endeavors, from more than one angle, of such intellectuals as Henri Lefebvre — in recent years — and Lucien Goldmann, we find in them the common trait of having amassed a number of positive contributions, important appeals to progressive truth at a moment when the ideology of the left is lost in a sense of confusion, to whose advantage it is all too clear, while at the same time being absent or insufficient when two kinds of questions come up: the organization of a political force, and the discovery of cultural means of action. These questions are indeed two essential and inseparable elements of the transitory action that would be needed from now on to lead to that enriched praxis usually offered to us as an external image, entirely separate from ourselves, instead of being linked to us by the slow movement of the future.

In an unpublished article of 1947 ("Le matérialisme dialectique, est-il une philosophie?"), included in his book *Recherches dialectiques,* Goldmann gives a good analysis of the future result of the cultural movement that lies before his eyes. "Like law, economics, or religion," he writes, "art as an independent phenomenon separated from other realms of social life will be led to disappear in a classless society. There will probably no longer be art separated from life because life will itself be a style, a form in which it will find its adequate expression." But Goldmann, who traces this very long-term perspective on the basis of the overall forecasts of dialectical materialism, does not recognize its verification in the expression of his time. He judges the style or art of his time in terms of the classical/romantic alternative, and in romanticism he sees only the expression of reification. Now, it is true that the destruction of language, after a century of poetry, has come about as a consequence of a deep-seated romantic, reified, petit-bourgeois tendency, and also — as Paulhan had shown in *Les Fleurs de Tarbes* — by postulating that the inexpressible thought was worth more than the word. But the progressive aspect of this destruction, in poetry, fiction, or all the plastic arts, is that of being at the same time the testimony of a whole epoch on the insufficiency of artistic expression, of pseudocommunication. It is the practical destruction of the instruments of this pseudocommunication that brings to the fore the question of inventing superior instruments.

Henri Lefebvre *(La Somme et le Reste)* wonders "if the crisis of philosophy does not mean its decline and end, as philosophy," while forgetting that this has been the basis of revolutionary thought since the eleventh of the *Theses on Feuerbach.* He has offered a more radical criticism in *Arguments,* no. 15, considering human history as the successive traversal and abandoning of various spheres: the cosmic, the maternal, the divine, as well as philosophy, economics, and politics, and finally "art, which defines man by dazzling flashes and the human by exceptional moments, thus still external, alienating in the attempt at deliverance." But here we are back with the science fiction of revolutionary thought that is preached in *Arguments,* as daring in engaging thousands of years of history as it is incapable of proposing a single new element from now to the end of the century, and naturally bewitched in the present by the worst fumes of neo-reformism. Lefebvre is well aware that each realm collapses in explicating itself, when it has reached the end of its possibilities and its imperialism, "when it has proclaimed itself a totality on the human scale (thus complete). In the course of this development, and only after this illusory and extreme proclamation, the negativity already long contained in this world asserts itself, disowns it, corrodes it, dismantles it, casts it down. Only a finished totality can reveal that it is not a totality." This scheme, which applies rather to philosophy after Hegel, perfectly defines the crisis of modern art, as can be easily verified by examining an extreme trend: for example, poetry from Mallarmé to Surrealism. These conditions, already dominant beginning with Baudelaire, constitute what Paulhan calls the Terror, which he takes to be an accidental crisis of language, without considering the fact that they apply equally to all the other artistic means of expression. But the breadth of Lefebvre's views is of no avail to him when he writes about poems that are, as far as their date is concerned, on the historical model of 1925, and as for the effective level attained by this formula, at the lowest. And when he proposes a conception of modern art (revolutionary-romantic), he advises artists to come back to this style of expression — or to others still older — to express the profound feeling of life, and the contradictions of men ahead of their time, i.e., both of their public and of themselves. Lefebvre would prefer not to see that this feeling and these contradictions have already been expressed by all modern art, and indeed *up to and including the destruction of expression itself.*

For revolutionaries, there can be no turning back. The world of artistic expression, whatever its content, has already lapsed. It repeats itself scandalously in order to keep going as long as the dominant society succeeds in preserving the privation and scarcity that are the anachronistic conditions of its reign. But the preservation and subversion of this society is not a utopian question: it is the most burning question of today, the one governing all others. Lefebvre should pursue the thought on the basis of a question he raised in the same article: "Has not every great period of art been a funeral rite in honor of a vanished moment?" This is also true on the individual

scale, where every work is a funeral and memorial celebration of a vanished moment in one's life. The creations of the future should shape life directly, creating "exceptional moments" and making them ordinary. Goldmann weighs the difficulty of this leap when he remarks (in a note in *Recherches dialectiques,* page 144): "We have no means of *direct* action on affects." It will be the task of the creators of a new culture to invent such means.



We need to find operative instruments midway between the global praxis in which every aspect of the total life of a classless society will one day dissolve and the present individual practice of "private" life with its poor artistic and other resources. What we mean by *situations* to be constructed is the search for a dialectical organization of partial and transitory realities, what André Frankin, in his *Critique du Non-Avenir,* has called a "planning of existence" on the individual level, not excluding chance but, on the contrary, "rediscovering" it.

Situations are conceived as the opposite of works of art, which are attempts at absolute valorization and preservation of the present moment. That is the fancy aesthetic grocery of a Malraux, of whom it might be remarked that the same "intellectuals of the left" who are indignant to day at seeing him at the head of the most contemptible and imbecile political swindle once *took him seriously* — an admission that countersigns their bankruptcy. Every situation, as consciously constructed as can be, contains its own negation and moves inevitably toward its own reversal. In the conduct of an individual life, a situationist action is not based on the abstract idea of rationalist progress (which, according to Descartes, "makes us masters and possessors of nature"), but on the practice of arranging the environment that conditions us. Whoever constructs situations, to apply a statement by Marx, "by bringing his movements to bear on external nature and transforming it… transforms his own nature at the same time."

In conversations that lead to the formation of the SI, Asger Jorn put forth a plan for ending the separation that had arisen around 1930 between avant-garde artists and the revolutionary left, who had once been allies. The root of the problem is that, since 1930, there has been neither a revolutionary movement nor an artistic avant-garde to respond to the possibilities of the time. A new departure, on both sides, will certainly have to be made to bring together problems and responses.

The obvious obstacles of the present have produced a certain ambiguity in the Situationist movement as a magnet for artists ready to embark on a new course. Like the proletarians, theoretically, before the nation, the Situationists are encamped at the gates of culture. They do not want to establish themselves inside, they *decline* to inscribe themselves in modern art, they are the organizers of the absence of that aesthetic avant-garde that bourgeois critics and which, forever disappointed, they are prepared to greet on the first occasion. This does not go without the risk of various retrograde interpretations, even within the S.I. Decadent artists, for example at the last fair held in Venice, are already talking about "situations." Those who understand everything in terms of old-hat artistic ideas, as tame verbal formulas destined to assure the sale of tamer little paintings, may see the S.I. as having already achieved a certain success, a certain recognition: that is because they have not understood that we have gathered at a great turning point *still* to be taken.

Of course, the decay of artistic forms, while indicated by the impossibility of their creative renewal, does not immediately involve their actual disappearance in practice. They can go on repeating themselves with various nuances. But everything shows "the upheaval of this world," as Hegel says in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Mind:* "The frivolity and boredom that are invading what still exists, and the vague presentiment of something unknown, are the preliminary signs of something else that is on its way."
We must keep moving ahead, without attaching ourselves to anything either in modern culture or its negation. We do not want to work toward the spectacle of the end of the world, but toward the end of the world of spectacle.

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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