

Crack Open the Shells

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Inspired provocateurs during May 1968 in Paris, the Situationists are now the stuff of legend: one of those rare avant-gardes whose art and politics were not only radical but also forged together in radical fashion. Yet, as these early letters of the young Guy Debord, the leader of the group, make clear, they were the stuff of legend from the start. In late July 1957, in a little town in the Ligurian Alps called Cosio d'Arroscia, Debord met with a motley crew of seven other alienated souls – including two artists, the Dane Asger Jorn and the Italian Giuseppe Gallizio (aka Pinot), the core of a momentary movement called the Imaginist Bauhaus – in order to found the Situationist International (SI), a grand name for such a small gathering in such a remote place. Even the vote to start it up was not overwhelming: a surviving scrap of paper shows a tally of five in favour – Debord, Michèle Bernstein (his first wife), Jorn, Ralph Rumney (an English 'psychogeographer' who soon goes missing) and Walter Olmo (an experimental composer whose name is followed by a question mark) – with one opposed and two abstaining (including Pinot). Yet, schooled in the history of avant-gardes, Debord seized on this occasion as the requisite origin-myth: 'We should present the "Cosio conference" as a point of departure,' he writes to Jorn a month later, 'and, from now on, move quickly (a new legend must be created immediately around us).'

The first of seven volumes of letters, this translation covers the period from the founding of the SI through to the resignation of Constant Nieuwenhuys, the Dutch painter turned visionary urbanist, who, like Jorn, was a central figure in Cobra, a collective of artists from Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam that was another key predecessor of Situationism. Although Debord later referred to this stage of the SI as 'the supersession of art' – it concluded in 1962 with the purging of all such practitioners – his chief interlocutors here are three artists: Pinot, who is most often addressed in 1957 and 1958; Constant, who is a principal recipient of letters in 1959 and 1960; and Jorn, who appears intermittently throughout. Affectively, intellectually and financially, Debord is closest to Jorn; with a market established for his paintings by the late 1950s, Jorn was able to bankroll many Situ projects, including the two short films made by Debord during that period. It is with real regret that Debord watches him recede from SI activities (he withdraws in April 1961), whereas Pinot is purged for art-world opportunism on 31 May 1960 (after copious letters in which Debord addresses him as 'grande e nobile amico'), and Constant resigns a day later (though Debord entreats him to return to the fold several times). For a stage dedicated to its supersession, then, art is a persistent subject: there is much ado about how to stage a first exhibition of 'industrial paintings' by Pinot in Paris – he 'has found an excellent formula,' Debord writes as the show approaches, 'to cover the entire gallery (the walls, the ceiling, the floor) with 200 metres of painting' – and a survey of Cobra and Situationist manifestations at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (after long and testy negotiations, it is finally abandoned); and also much ado about how to attract artist-collaborators (such as the Spur Group in Germany), how to keep them in line and ultimately how to ditch them. Commentators on the SI, it is often charged, play down its politics in favour of its art and its biographies, and this is true enough; the problem here is that this is what the correspondence is mostly about.

Debord launched his letters like directives, if not missiles. Amazingly, he is only 25 years old when this period begins; already a veteran of the Lettrist movement, another obscure predecessor of the SI, his voice is almost preternaturally cool and in control, except when he is provoked by the cerebral Constant, searches for the peripatetic Jorn (who roams in a near continual *dérive* or drift between Denmark, Alba and Paris), or flames the odd enemy or unsuspecting bureaucrat. At the same time, as Debord pulls together, among a myriad other projects, additional SI conferences in Paris (January 1958) and Munich (April 1959), with a fourth meeting in London on the horizon (September 1960), his letters are often animated by impassioned entreaties, instructions and calls to action (they sometimes serve as sketches for later texts). A few missives are intimate, though none is addressed to the person nearest Debord at this time, Bernstein, who refused her letters to the editor of the volume, Debord's second wife, Alice Becker-Ho.

As McKenzie Wark suggests in his helpful introduction, Debord serves as 'secretary' of the SI in the sense of both party head and general assistant: philosopher and disciplinarian, he is also publicist and agent, debating with collaborators and tracking strays, promoting events and arranging rendezvous, sometimes at a clip of a couple of letters a day. Yet his own preferred designation, 'strategist', is also appropriate: the letters are laced with the rhetoric of battle (Debord was a devoted reader of Clausewitz, and with Becker-Ho he later devised a board game called *Game of War*). 'Strategist' has the right ambiguity, too, for the lines between actual politics, group positioning and individual posturing are not always clear to a reader now – were they, one wonders, to Debord then? What is clear, however, is his keen sense of how to make a movement that was more than an artistic 'ism'; the SI might be the last avant-garde in Europe with a real claim to be an avant-garde at all – that is, again, one that articulated artistic and political revolt together, the one whetting the other (if momentarily so).

At the same time the SI could not but emerge in a field defined by artistic groups, and Debord is not above old art-world tricks. 'The paintings must be the most *stunning*, the most *shocking* possible,' he tells Pinot in January 1958 in the long run-up to his Paris première; only 'show the paintings in which the search for *new materials* has been pushed farthest,' and ensure they are 'very different from each other'. So, too, he is not reluctant to pit Situationism against other avant-gardes. First in this order come the historical precedents of Dada and Surrealism, to which the SI had a split Oedipal relationship, as Bernstein once remarked: 'There was the father we hated, Surrealism. And there was the father we loved, Dada.' For Debord both fathers, ideological complements, had failed, and Situationism was born to overcome them dialectically, as he puts it later in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967): 'Dadaism sought to *abolish art without realising it*; Surrealism sought to *realise art without abolishing it*. The critical position since developed by the Situationists demonstrates that the abolition and the realisation of art are inseparable aspects of a single *transcendence of art*.' Less distant from the Situs, given the presence of Jorn and Constant among them, was 'St Cobra' (as Debord calls it in one letter), which he values for its commitment to 'experimental research' (its journal was punctuated by explorations of prehistoric art, folk motifs and universal forms like the spiral), but questions for its tendency to formalist 'neoprimitivism' (like other avant-gardes before it, Cobra emulated the impulsive picture-making of children and naïfs). In the end Debord views St Cobra as a forerunner, an artistic St John to the political SI, a pivot to launch Situationism, which should be presented, he writes early on to Jorn, as 'the necessary transcendence of that era'. However, Situationism as such does not emerge very distinctly in these letters, largely because, in these early years, its definition was at once unstable for insiders and hermetic for outsiders. The primary thing to know, Debord writes in late summer 1957, is that 'Situationism, as a body of doctrine, does not exist and must not exist.' In part this occlusion was protective: 'Yesterday, the police questioned me at length,' he writes a year later; they 'want to regard the SI *as an association in order to set about its dissolution in France*. I protested then and there ... Not being declared, the SI cannot be officially dissolved.' Yet this stance was also philosophical, in keeping with the Situ desire to be alert to the radical possibilities in any conjuncture. 'Of course, never any *doctrine*,' Debord reiterates in late autumn 1958; only 'perspectives. A solidarity around these perspectives.' This is inspiring, but how can solidarity be achieved with points of view that often shift and rarely intersect? Centrifugal in spirit, the SI was centripetal in design, and the letters show Debord struggling to inhabit – to embody – this centre. Only eight months into the SI he has begun to insist, 'We should emphasise the centralised aspect of the movement,' and by the time Constant resigns in summer 1960, Debord is defensive (albeit defiantly so) about his treatment of comrades (he has just expelled two Dutch architects for designing, of all things, a church): 'I am with the SI and, as long as I am in it, I will keep a minimum of discipline that precludes all collaboration with uncontrollable elements.' This prompts the question: if there was no doctrine, why so many apostates?

In these moments Debord the swashbuckler, the romantic hero of art schools to this day, comes centre-stage, and the letters are a fine study in the art of enmity. With a near aristocratic touch Debord sprinkles ridicule liberally on his pages, but at times he goes low and nasty. 'Small-time hoodlum,' he addresses one miscreant, and telegrams another, a journal editor who had sent him a token fee for an article: 'save your nine florins imbecile it was a gift!' For pseudo avant-gardists and rogue associates alike, Debord insists on 'a clear attitude of insult and contempt', and as the letters pile up, so do the bodies. At one point or another he deems such critics and artists as Michel Tapié, Georges Mathieu, Yves Klein and Simon Hantaï, not to mention all the Angry Young Men, 'apolitical and fascistic', and even the once-recruited Spur artists are soon dismissed as 'ridiculous'. Sentiments like this one – 'we already have amongst us too many young artistic elderly who have missed out on their own 19th century' – also anticipate the purge of artists to come. That even a close ally like Jorn could feel the heat is evidenced by one letter included in the notes: 'The economic surplus that my social situation as a painter offers me finds its best place in the situationist movement,' Jorn writes in a self-critique of masochistic generosity, 'even if the same movement is obliged to attack me so as to attack a situation from which I cannot escape, but which disrupts the movement.'

Yet Debord is hardly the show-trialling and Gulag-sentencing Situ-Stalinist that his detractors make him out to be. Nearly all of the ruptures remarked in his letters serve to clarify what is at stake in the SI – and to clarify the SI itself as a stake. This is true, for example, when Debord responds to Constant after his resignation, which followed hard on the purging of Pinot and the Dutch architects. 'Let's clearly distinguish the manner of the break,' Debord writes.

I am sure that, here, we had reached the point where the SI had to make an instant choice (or had to be abandoned). Because you know well that I have always thought that 'there are moments at which it is necessary to know how to choose'; that you don't have to teach me this; and that, if there has been a certain opportunism in the SI, I have been among those (you, too) who have counterbalanced it.

'What primarily constitutes the SI,' Debord concludes, 'is this group control, expressed by expulsion – or, more rarely, resignation.' Sadly, Debord might be right here – 'what is revolutionary organisation?' is an implicit question throughout this volume – but so too is Constant in his reply: 'In what presently remains of the SI, it

would be too ridiculous to speak of expulsion or of resignation.’ In its 15 years of life – the SI dissolved in 1972 – it had a grand total of 72 members.

The pathos of these letters is that Situationism is falling apart even as it is coming together, and that, in the complicated machinations of his scattered group, Debord is able to perform as many acts of friendship as he does of malice. To borrow the title of the film he made in 1959 about his Lettrist friends, the letters trace a ‘passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time’, a tracing again triangulated by three comrades above all – Pinot, Jorn and Constant. Along with Debord’s own essay-films, in which he montages found images and hidden citations with home movies and pithy aphorisms, these three figures also represent key practices of the SI in this period.

Both the ‘industrial paintings’ by Pinot and the ‘modifications’ of found paintings by Jorn came to a head in May 1959 when the two had shows in Paris. Pinot covered the Galerie René Drouin with rolls of canvas painted in lurid colours as if automatically; he then added lights, mirrors, sounds and smells to create a total environment. A ‘shrewd mix of chance and mechanics’, as Bernstein once described it, ‘industrial painting’ was intended to prefigure a world of play that automation, once diverted from capitalism, would allow; at the same time it parodied the current world of capitalist production and consumption, for not only were the canvases made on a mock assembly line with paint machines and spray-guns, but they could also be cut up and sold by the metre. The Jorn ‘modifications’ bear the stigmata of capitalism in another way. The source pictures were kitschy landscapes and city views, produced for petit-bourgeois decoration, that he scavenged in flea markets and painted over with primitivist figures and abstract gestures à la Cobra. ‘Painting is over,’ Jorn writes in a statement for the 1959 show. ‘You might as well finish it off. Détourn. Long live painting.’ Like kingship, Jorn suggests, painting is dead, but it might live again in a new guise: ‘Our past is full of becoming,’ he concludes, ‘one needs only to crack open the shells.’ Finally, the ‘unitary urbanism’ advanced by Constant developed two practices dear to the Lettrists and the Situationists alike: the *dérive*, defined in the SI journal as ‘a transient passage through varied ambiances’; and ‘psychogeography’, defined as ‘the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment’. In effect, ‘universal urbanism’ was a radical proposal for new modes of collective experience in metropolitan space, as exemplified by the ‘New Babylon’ project in which Constant models the future city of automation as a stage for nomadic movement and mass play, with high-tech elements refitted by residents like giant toys. Ultimately, all these practices were specific variations on the Situationist theme of *détournement*, or ‘the integration of present or past artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu’. Derived from avant-garde models of collage and montage, *détournement* extended from the refashioning of individual words and images to the reimagining of entire cities; it was a general theory of radical culture that anyone might practise.

These techniques were never ends for Debord. ‘If we fail to *effectively use* the new experimental conceptions that we have already defined,’ he warns one comrade in early summer 1958, ‘we will always fall back into the art market, yet another pseudo-school of the same outdated artistic kind.’ In the same vein, he writes to Constant in early autumn the same year, ‘if the artistic present does manage to make some of its values prevail within the SI, the true cultural experiences of the period will be undertaken elsewhere.’ So it is that Debord cast the SI as ‘a total project’, not in the old Modernist sense of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but as a movement that transcends art altogether so to intervene in the social world at large. ‘Our necessary activity is dominated by the question of the *totality*,’ he cautions Constant in spring 1959. ‘Take note of it.’ A Hegelian Marxist in the line of Georg Lukács, Debord looked for art to be superseded not by philosophy but into praxis. ‘Nothing has ever interested me beyond a certain practice of life,’ he comments more than once in these letters, and clearly he does not mean at the level of individual or group alone. ‘When one feels powerless about other things,’ Debord writes in an implicit critique of existentialism and phenomenology, ‘there is a tendency to remain on a level of a *discourse on experience*.’ This discourse was obviously insufficient for him: first and last, ‘a practice of life’ involved political practice. ‘What can intellectuals do without ties to an enterprise that brings comprehensive change to social relations?’ he asks Constant.

‘The SI,’ Debord writes towards the end of this volume, ‘possesses nothing – except its demand for totality.’ Philosophically as well as politically, Debord made his greatest contribution here, but in a way that has attracted the criticism of others on the left (Althusserians, Foucauldians, feminists, neo-Gramscians) ever since. I mean his theory of ‘spectacle’, which recovers Lukács on ‘the riddle of the commodity-structure’ in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), first translated into French in full in 1960. ‘The problem of commodities,’ Lukács writes early in his essay, is ‘the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them.’ Debord agreed, but he also understood that in consumer capitalism ‘the phantom objectivity’ of the commodity had grown exponentially, and that it had effectively merged with media-forms in such a way as to produce a world of spectacle, which he defines in his 1967 text as ‘capital accumulated to the point where it becomes an image’. This commodity-image had also proliferated like mad, colonising once protected areas of social life, and it was in these fields that the SI took up the fight – in ‘the battle for leisure’, above all – using strategies first sketched in these letters. The Situationists,

Debord writes in June 1958, must indicate *'the transition between the artistic commodity-object of today and the free experimental activity in a new dimension of culture'*. But how to do so? Here as elsewhere Debord tended to swing between calls for immediate action – 'a direct construction of a liberated, affective and practical existence', as he puts it in *On the Passage of a Few People ...* – and hopes for dialectical magic: 'the alienating satisfactions of the spectacle can at the same time be outlines, in negative, for a planned development of affective life.'

Sometimes in these letters Debord seems overwhelmed by the very totalisation that he otherwise seeks to achieve, in a way that produces blockages that he then blames on the 'non-achievement' of the age at large; here his critics on the left have what salience they do. At these moments a note of resignation sounds in his letters, and it is heard intermittently from *On the Passage of a Few People ...* (evoked here as a 'realistic description of a way of life devoid of coherence and importance') through his 'anti-memoir' *Panegyric* (1989/97) until his suicide, after a difficult illness, on 30 November 1994. A telling scene in *All the King's Horses*, a roman à clef about this period written by Bernstein in 1960 to make money for the SI (it has also been newly translated into English), captures this feeling of futility, leavened a little by a sense of absurdity.^[*] In the scene, the mistress Carole enters the lair of Gilles, the protagonist modelled on Debord, for the first time; the narrator, based on Bernstein, is also present. Carole begins the conversation:

'What are you working on, exactly? I have no idea.'

'Reification,' he answered.

'It's an important job,' I added.

'Yes, it is,' he said.

'I see,' Carole observed with admiration. 'Serious work, at a huge desk cluttered with thick books and papers.'

'No,' said Gilles. 'I walk. Mainly I walk.'

Of course not all was resignation in the SI, certainly not in the early days chronicled in these letters. 'Neither Paradise, nor the end of history,' Debord writes in December 1958. 'We will have *other misfortunes* (and other pleasures), that's all.' And again in June 1959: 'Life in France is still heading in a very unpleasant direction. But we have our fun too.' At one moment in May 1960 Debord has to rebut a charge levelled by Henri Lefebvre that the SI indulges in 'revolutionary romanticism'. Surely some of us today remain interested in the SI for its critique – after all, if spectacle is alive and well, its diagnosis must be too – but there is romance here as well, and in part it is one of failure. Early in *Lipstick Traces* (1989), his 'secret history of the 20th century' in which the Situationists figure centrally, Greil Marcus limns a phantom community in the shadows:

Is history simply a matter of events that leave behind those things that can be weighed and measured – new institutions, new maps, new rulers, new winners and losers – or is it also the result of moments that seem to leave nothing behind, nothing but the mystery of spectral connections between people long separated by place and time, but somehow speaking the same language?

In this sense the SI is not finished.

Then, too, there is the move, sometimes made by Debord and associates, whereby failure is recouped as success, as, for example, in the 'Thesis on the Paris Commune', published in 1962: 'Theoreticians who examine the history of this movement from a divinely omniscient viewpoint (like that found in classical novels) can easily prove that the Commune was objectively doomed to failure and could not have been successfully consummated. They forget that for those who really lived it, the consummation was *already there*.' This seems to hold for Debord and company too. Yet even here there is a fatalism that contradicts the Situ language of 'situation' and 'construction'. This fatalism is voiced most vividly in a scene from the movie *Mr Arkadin* (1955), which Debord would use to conclude his own film version of *The Society of the Spectacle* (1973). Played by Orson Welles, the lordly Arkadin tells his guests at a ball in his castle the parable of the scorpion who asks a frog to carry him across a river. 'Why should I risk it?' the frog replies. 'You'll sting me.' The scorpion responds that all logic would prevent such an outcome, for he too would then perish with his partner. Convinced, the frog agrees to assist the scorpion, but midway across he feels a deadly sting. Arkadin takes over from here: "'Logic?'" cried the dying frog as he started pulling the scorpion down with him. "Where is the logic in this?" "I know," said the scorpion, "but I can't help it, it's my character.'" 'Let's drink to character!' Arkadin cries, while on the screen Debord shows us found footage of a doomed cavalry charge. In these letters Debord is sometimes the scorpion and sometimes the frog – and always the cavalry charge.

[*] *All the King's Horses* by Michele Bernstein, translated by John Kelsey (Semiotext(e), 128 pp., £9.95, October 2008, 978 1 58435 065 1).