

**LA BEAUTÉ EST DANS LA RUE:
ART & VISUAL CULTURE IN PARIS, 1968**

by

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Abstract

Removed from its artistic origins in the French avant-garde during the interwar period, the European based group known as the situationist international is often represented as being solely occupied with politics to the exclusion of all else, particularly art and aesthetics. In what follows I argue that throughout the sixties the anti-aesthetic position was actually the governing model in France obliging the avant-garde to adjust their strategies accordingly. Artists and artists' collectives that placed politics before aesthetics were the norm, enjoying widespread popularity and recognition from both the public and the French State. These overtly partisan groups and individuals sapped art of the power it had enjoyed in the fifties as a venue removed, or at least distanced from, formal politics. In response, the situationists officially rejected the art world, turning to the popular and vernacular culture of the streets in an attempt to get beyond both classical aesthetic principals and the overt propagandistic objectives of groups such as *le Salon de la jeune Peinture*. Turning to the climactic moment of 1968 I track the ways in which these debates informed the posters and graffiti which marked the unfinished revolution, sorting out the various aesthetic positions and political persuasions that dominated the events. My thesis contends that the situationists were not anti-aesthetic, that they simply advocated a different kind of aesthetics: one that rejected traditional notions of beauty for the more active and open concept of *poiesis* or poetry. Beyond words on a page, this notion implied art as a way of life, emphasizing production, creation, formation and action and can be traced back to the groups prewar origins in the Dada and surrealist movements. Moreover, this concept of poetry was not adverse to issues of form being highly dependent on the materiality and physicality of the urban centre, specifically the streets. Finally my conclusion expands upon the similarities between this notion of poetry and the 17th century understanding of beauty, the latter concept being associated with a subtle criticality and strategic wit. It was this interpretation of beauty that defined and produced the art of 1968.

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For my favorite brother

Introduction

Parfum de Grève Générale

To parody a well-known saying, I shall say that a little formalism turns one away from History, but that a lot brings one back to it
-Barthes, *Mythologies*

The poster *La beauté est dans la rue* (Beauty is in the Streets) from which I drew the title of my thesis succinctly sums up the main issue at hand. That is, the unification of high and low: the coming together of the indiscriminate and open character of the street with the usually removed and discriminating notion of beauty (fig. 1). In this poster produced in 1968 at a workshop outside of Paris in Montpellier, the viewer is presented with an image that is neither beautiful nor ugly. Here the concept of classical beauty is reinvented with the power of action and movement across time and space. This beauty is no frozen caryatid holding up some Greek temple high on a mountain top, she is a threat from below, from the streets. In imitation of Delacroix's, "Liberty Leading the People," the swift protagonist, clad from head to toe in anarchist black, is jumping off the gratings that were used as barricades in 1968. There are no flags or guns in this picture, instead she is applying what the European based group know as the situationists called the "irrefutable critique of the brick."

In 1968 the entire postwar order was challenged by a wave of insurrections from America and western Europe to Czechoslovakia and Japan. These movements were not completely successful but they did set an unrivaled precedent, fomenting the beginnings of revolution out of sheer imagination. What made these uprisings extraordinary was that they occurred during a period of prosperity, contradicting Marxist assertions about the prerequisite of insufficient material conditions for instigating crisis. The social upheaval of 1968 was not caused by poverty, it was rooted in the moral outrage provoked by the war in Vietnam and surprisingly, boredom. Moreover it was for the most part, white middle-class kids from privileged sectors of society who instigated the 'events,' as they have

come to be known. Taking their cue from revolutionaries in Cuba, China, parts of Africa, and the ghettos of black America, they created their own opportunities. After the second world war, a revolution in a first world country had been unthinkable. "Be Realistic, Demand the Impossible!" was an important slogan that year.

Keith Reader encapsulates what happened in France in one sentence: "In May 1968, a student protest over restricted visiting rights in university hostels sparked off a movement which brought virtually the whole of France to a halt, yet culminated anticlimactically in an increased Gaullist majority in the July general election." Over ten million people went on strike, shut down Paris for almost two months, and nobody got killed.¹ Social historians argue, and popular opinion dictates that the 'almost revolution,' the general strike, is the most important feature of 1968, but May is also remembered for the cultural explosion that accompanied the action in the streets. In many ways the two are inseparable. The widespread emergence of a new type of poster and a new type of graffiti established 1968 as a watermark, for both politics *and art*. From the beginning of May right through to July, over 600 000 posters were produced with over 500 different silk-screen designs, along side numerous examples of funny, philosophical, and down right sophisticated graffiti.²

One of the leading forces in the events, both political and artistic, was a small group known as the situationist international. Originally composed of a diverse crew of sculptors, painters, inventors, writers, quasi-scientists, philosophers and film makers the situationists had been preparing for May, literally, for over ten years. Established in Italy in 1957, they enjoyed a small but loyal following, sustained by their eponymously entitled journal which was published yearly until the group disbanded in 1972. Over that period close to eighty different individuals have been linked to the situationists, but its

¹Several people were killed during May however their deaths are widely believed to be accidental.

²Today the postera remain the favored emblem of France's most recent revolution, selling for over \$1000.00 (American) at auction.

membership was constantly in flux due to the hard-line nature of their organisation.³ The singular task they set themselves was nothing less than the realization of art, to inject everyday life with the passion and attention normally reserved for painting and sculpture. Not inclined to half measures they were willing to dismantle the entire structure of society to achieve their ends. Although they claimed to have sections throughout the western world, they were largely based in Europe, specifically Paris, and so it is no surprise that was where their ideas had the most resonance, culminating in what some consider to be their ultimate *pièce de resistance*, the events of Paris 1968.

Their theory which they were constantly reworking via their journal and certain concrete exercises, was eventually laid out in two key volumes: Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, published in 1967 (considered to be the inspiration for much of the graffiti in 1968), and Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. Together they devised a revolutionary theory, based around the notion of the spectacle, which they described accordingly: "The Spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation, among people, mediated by images."⁴ This overriding concern with the culpability of the image in situationist texts has been billed in North America as evidence of this groups profoundly anti-art and anti-aesthetic bias. Building on the work of scholars such as T.J. Clark and Thomas Crow in this thesis I argue that this is a misinterpretation stemming from an unfamiliarity with the terrain of postwar art in France. Nevertheless this is not a history of the situationists, rather it is an attempt to track the various aesthetic arguments that informed and produced 1968. Situationist theory developed as a result of, and in reaction to, a strong history of politicized art and debate on the left in 20th century France, and in the poetic tradition of the avant-garde going back to the prewar period they took the contest to a new level, raising the stakes politically, intellectually, and visually.

³For a list of these individuals see Jean-Jacques Raspaud and Jean-Pierre Voyer, *L'Internationale Situationniste: Chronologie, bibliographie, protagonistes (avec un index des noms insultés)*. Paris: Champs Libre, 1972.

⁴Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (New York: Zone Books, 1995), p. 12.

While art historians may secretly believe in beauty they dare not say it out loud. (Especially now when the field known as visual culture has gained so much academic ground.) Any public discussion of beauty is immediately belittled as the term is associated with art history's so-called sordid past of connoisseurship and shameless elitism. Since the late seventies in fact, paralleling the rise of cultural studies, beauty, or rather, the preferred more clinical term, aesthetics, has been labeled as a reactionary notion, aligned with market forces, the canon, and the structures of domination that go with them. In a battle that pits art-for-art's sake, against art as cultural critique, the realm of aesthetics is portrayed as hostile to the vernacular, which is acclaimed as 'the' site of resistance. In the book *Anti-Aesthetic* (1983) Hal Foster goes so far as to say that the critical capacities of aesthetics are illusory if they ever existed at all.⁵

This issue is now an implicit component of the rumpus between art history and visual culture where art history is criticized for being exclusive and visual culture is celebrated for being open and progressive. Recently Thomas Crow has gained notoriety for coming to art history's defense. He argues that art history is by its very nature inclusive, and suggests that its proper subject is, indeed has always been, the examination of the give and take between the two categories of high and low. Unfortunately however, in a rare capitulation to the visual culture camp, he stops just short of explicitly defending aesthetics, let alone mention the now taboo subject of beauty.

In this essay I will bring Crow's argument to a head. Using May 1968 as a case study and building on Crow's thesis, my argument will demonstrate that the vernacular and high art are not mutually exclusive categories and will suggest, moreover, that the notion of beauty, or in this case, poetry (in the Greek sense of the word denoting an emphasis on process), is not simply an anachronistic paradigm inextricable from conservative politics, but that it is rather, a cultural strategy like any other, specific to a

⁵*The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. intro. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press 1983), p. xv.

certain time and place, independent of, but not necessarily antagonistic to, political allegiances of any type.

There are three sections to this thesis. My first chapter explores the situationist theories about art and reasserts the importance of French art history to the situationist proposition of “World-wide proletarian revolution with unlicensed pleasure as its only goal.” Poetry replaced the notion of beauty in situationist writings. Tracing out the history of this notion within French avant-garde circles I delineate the ways this approach differed from mainstream French art of the period, which was solely concerned with its effectiveness as propaganda. Chapter two takes up the posters and graffiti of 1968, comparing and contrasting several examples in an effort to put their various aesthetic and political positions into relief. Again the subject of propaganda features prominently as each form displayed varying degrees of resistance to and comprehension of the artistic and philosophical problems that plague this method. Finally, the last chapter provides an examination of the position of public space in this equation. Explaining the historical significance of the *noir* aesthetic to the French avant-garde in the 20th century, I execute a formal analysis of a photograph of a Parisian street corner covered in posters and graffiti and emphasize the importance of the materiality of the streets to the situationist project. In the conclusion the notion of poetry is aligned with the 17th century notion of strategic beauty which, contrary to contemporary understanding of the term, implied intellectual wit and criticality.

LA BEAUTÉ



EST DANS LA RUE

Fig. 1

Chapter I

Beauty as a Sum of Possibilities

Today, every phenomenon of culture, even if a model of integrity, is liable to be suffocated in the cultivation of Kitsch. Yet paradoxically in the same epoch it is to works of art that has fallen the burden of wordlessly asserting what is barred to politics... This is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems politically dead.

-T.W. Adorno, *On Commitment*

Claude Lorraine's *Seaport with Ulysses Returning Chryseis to her Father*, painted in 1644, depicts a bustling port scene illustrating a story from Homer's *Iliad* (fig. 1). Originally a pastry cook, Lorraine moved to Rome in his teens where he trained as a decorative painter and later helped to establish the genre known as classical landscape. Initially he painted the countryside around the city but as his audience became more sophisticated he met their demands with mythological panoramas evoking the pastoral worlds of the classical age. Chryseis can be seen arriving on the steps of the palace on the left, but it is so far in the distance it can not be considered the main subject of this painting. The great ship upon which she made her journey is much more compelling and immediately calls to mind the line: "...for the present let us launch a black ship into the bright sea."⁶ The beckoning horizon combined with the minutia of everyday port life give this painting an expansive breadth. Warmed by the late evening sun, which casts long shadows along the edge of the water, this painting dramatically captures the infinite number of possibilities contained in a single moment. In 1958 Guy Debord, one of the principal intellectuals associated with the situationists, compared this image to the map of the Paris Metro (fig. 2). He had this to say about pleasant seaside vistas:

I scarcely know of anything but those two harbours at dusk painted by Claude Lorrain - which are at the Louvre and which juxtapose two extremely dissimilar urban ambiances - that can rival in beauty the Paris Metro maps. It will be understood in speaking here of beauty I don't have in mind plastic beauty - the

⁶(141-143; said by Agamemnon to Achilles) *Iliad*, Book I. quoted in: H. Diane Russel. *Claude Lorraine 1600 - 1682*, (National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1982), p. 148.

new beauty can only be a beauty of situation - but simply the particularly moving presentation, in both cases, of a *sum of possibilities*.⁷

The equation of the Paris metro map with beauty would certainly appear specious to some but Debord saw these juxtapositions; the busy port opening to the beckoning horizon, and the potential for inter-neighborhood adventure offered up by the subway map as a stimulus to the urban imagination. And while he dismisses plastic beauty here, it is unclear whether he is completely rejecting formal or pictorial beauty. The crucial part of this assertion is, after all, the idea of beauty as a sum of possibilities and is related to the anarchist celebration of chaos: an idea perfectly embodied in the random circuit articulated by the Parisian subway map.⁸

It could be argued that attempting to place the situationists, a group clearly against both art and capital P politics, into the web of art history, is like trying to jam a square peg into a round hole. Committed to bridging the gap between art and life in the postwar period, the situationists rejected art to launch a movement of unprecedented cultural militancy. They described their position accordingly: "We are artists in so far as we are no longer artists: We come to realize art."⁹ North American scholarship repeatedly asserts that the situationists contribution to the twentieth century was their redefinition of politics; their dismissal of party loyalty and their full on recognition of the cultural potential presented by situations in everyday life. In their prolific writings they rarely address the subject of art and when they do it is only to vent their unbridled wrath.

⁷Guy Debord, "Introduction to a critique of Urban Geography" (originally written in June of 1958) in Ken Knabb, *Situationist International Anthology* (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981). p. 7. Thanks to Anthony Kinik for drawing my attention to this important quotation.

⁸In his book *Situationist City* Simon Sadler argues that Debord was referring explicitly to the "beautiful" content of the map in question, completely negating the obvious formal aspects of the comparison. However he goes on to assert that: "...their appearance reminded the viewer of the new trends in art informel and abstract expressionism like Jackson Pollock's seminal *Autumn Rythm* (1950), which were trying to break away from modernisms hard edge geometry; and, in turn, they evoked the labyrinthine plans for cluster cities drawn by Smithson's and Constant." While I am unfamiliar with the representational history of both of these maps, on a recent trip to Paris and London I noted with amusement the uniform grid like representation of the London subway, compared to the higglety-pigglety Paris map which seems completely unencumbered by any sort of fixed pattern.

⁹"Questionnaire," *Internationale situationniste* 9 (août 1964), p. 25.

As early as 1956 Guy Debord and Gil J Wolman wrote that: "The literary and artistic heritage of humanity should be used for partisan propagandistic purposes," suggesting that art's function was, or should be, solely political.¹⁰ I myself have stated elsewhere that the situationists wanted nothing else than the death of art, to take it out of the galleries and museums and unceremoniously drown it in the gutter.¹¹ Raoul Vaneigem, the situationists' second in command, wrote that: "Only an art armed against itself, against its own weakest side - against its most aesthetic side - has any hope of evading co-optation."¹² An attempt to contextualize the situationists within art history then, to discuss this apparently anti-aesthetic group in terms of aesthetics when they were so obviously concerned with politics to the exclusion of all else, would not only appear to be intellectually fraudulent, but also mischievous, dangerous, high treason: a radical depoliticization of a political project that was originally, authentically radical.

Despite the fireworks, it could just as easily be argued that it was not politics that the situationists redefined, but art. As the sole heirs of the Dadaist, Surrealist, and Lettrist movements, the situationists were actually the most recent embodiment of a long line of radical political dissenters firmly grounded in art. Politics proper was actually a secondary, even negligible concern: a necessary if somewhat embarrassing and tedious chore. In 1958 Guy Debord wrote that victory would go to those who knew how to make disorder without liking it.¹³ Art, the realization of art, was the situationists first passion, politics, the dirty dishes in the kitchen of an authentic life. The phrase "We are politicians in so far as we are no longer politicians: we come to realize politics," never appeared in any situationist text.

¹⁰Guy Debord & Gil Wolman, "Mode d'Emploi du détournement," *Les Lèvres Nues* 8 (Brussels, 1956). I will address this point further in chapter three.

¹¹Victoria Scott, "In Deference to the Word, In defiance of the Wall: The posters and Graffiti of May, 1968," exhibition catalogue *Up Against the Wall MotherPoster!* Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, December 1999. p. 22.

¹²Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Rebel Press/Left Bank Books, 1994), p. 201.

¹³Guy Debord, "Thèse sur la révolution culturelle" *Internationale situationniste* 1 (juin 1958), p. 21.

Either way, art, life and politics become inextricably intertwined in the theory of the situationists, which is ultimately the point. This essay does not set out to prove that the situationists were hard-core aesthetes (as has been argued elsewhere), the objective is to focus on a very small but crucial component of their writings, specifically their aesthetic ideas, in order to bring out the nuanced artistic debates occurring at this revolutionary moment, tracking the way they shifted and changed with and against the times.¹⁴

Surviving numerous translations and interpretations, situationist texts continue to generate heat, even as they exist today, removed from the particular historic and cultural circumstances which gave the ideas their original relevance. As stated above, the paradoxes involved in situating this group within art history are considerable, but it remains an important exercise. Not only because it was the artistic component that made their politics so effective, as has been suggested elsewhere,¹⁵ but also because to unlock the much vaunted universal significance of situationist theory the contexts from which it originated must be duly accounted for.

Since its inception, the position of the situationists has been represented, on this side of the pond, as a direct challenge to notions associated with western art such as quality, formalism, and beauty. Martin Jay, for example, has written that the situationists were not just suspicious of the image, but actively hostile towards visual pleasure.¹⁶ Lately however, this interpretation has undergone close scrutiny by the likes of T.J. Clark and Anselm Jappe.¹⁷ They argue instead that the situationists were not so much appalled by the image writ large than dissatisfied with the level of interpretation and production of

¹⁴Lucy Forsyth "The Suppression of Art," unpublished paper delivered at the Manchester University Conference "The Hacienda must be Built: On the Legacy of the situationist revolt," Manchester, January 1996; quoted in Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City*, (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998), p. 44.

¹⁵T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith, "Why Art Can't kill the Situationist International," in *October* 79, p. 29.

¹⁶Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in twentieth century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 429-430.

¹⁷See Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, with a foreword by T.J. Clark and a New Afterward by the author (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). T.J. Clark and Donald Nicholson-Smith were both part of the English section of the situationists.

images. Clark writes: "...supposing we take Debord's writing as directed not to anathematizing representation in general (as everyone has it) but to proposing certain tests for truth and falsity in representation and, above all, for truth and falsity in representational *regimes*." Anselm Jappe later reiterates this point directing our attention to the foreword of the second volume of Debord's autobiography *Panegyrique*, where Debord writes: "The reigning deceptions of our times are on the point of causing us to forget that truth may also be displayed by means of images. An image that has not been deliberately separated from its meaning can add great precision and certainty to knowledge. Nobody had ever cast doubt on this until these last few years."¹⁸ These writings suggest that Debord believed (much like many art historians) that images, when placed in their full and proper contexts, can be used as reliable indicators of truth. More importantly however, the last sentence alludes to a recent misinterpretation of situationist ideas about images.

Treading with due caution, Clark and Jappe seem to be attempting to correct the postmodern interpretation of situationism. Chipping away at contemporary scholarship which presents the situationists as being defined by a certain asceticism and minimalism, inclined and concerned with writing and the conceptual rather than the visual, this intervention finely tunes the notion of the image in situationist writings, enhancing our understanding of Debord's position.¹⁹ Pushing ahead with this new reading, this essay places the visual front and center in an effort to explore the historical development of situationist aesthetic theory, recontextualizing these idea in their origins in the prewar era, up until their realization in the events of 1968.

Building on the argument presented by Clark and Jappe I will argue that the situationists' ideas regarding aesthetics were based upon the theoretical advancements

¹⁸*Panegyrique*, vol 2. (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1997), "Avis"; quoted in Jappe, p. 134 - 135. Jappe also suggests a re-evaluation of Debord's films here and continues, providing an extended elaboration on his reading of Debord's position on the question of the image.

¹⁹ This description is taken almost verbatim from Simon Sadler's book *The Situationist City*, on p. 4. As Anselm Jappe reminds us Debord's films do much to disprove this argument displaying a virtual glut of highly charged images. Minimal is simply not an appropriate term to describe the situationist output.

achieved by groups such as the Dadaists and the surrealists, and were further developed in the postwar period, with the help of the Lettrists and the Lettrist International, not only as a challenge to classical notions of beauty and form, but also later, as a reaction against the prevailing tenor of mainstream artists working in that period. Several movements which enjoyed success in the sixties were explicitly anti-aesthetic. Celebrated by the French state and showcased at such prestigious events as the Paris Biennial, these artists and collectives actually represented the dominant stylistic discourse. Opposed to the objectives and politics of both camps: the retrograde notions of classical beauty, on the one hand, and shallow politics of the collectives on the other, the situationists cut loose from their progenitors and laid out a body of theory which challenged both aesthetic paradigms, while vigilantly cultivating their own definition of what they considered to be authentic art.

Beauty as Poetry

Social realism has been one of the most enduring and widely practiced artistic approaches of the twentieth century. Simultaneously it has provoked the most important and crucial aesthetic debates of the period. This aesthetic paradigm consists of the application of late 19th century realist techniques to render socially concerned yet objective works of art or literature. The so-called objectivity of this style has proved to be the perpetual sticking point. In the sixties this debate would resurface via disputes about ideology and propaganda, helping to crystallize the differences between mainstream artists such as the *Salon de la jeune peinture* and the avant-garde situationists. To understand what was at stake it is important to locate the roots of this controversy which can be traced back to the interwar era.

Formally introduced as the official aesthetic of the Soviet Union in 1934, social realism was later imposed by communist states throughout the world and continues to thrive today in contemporary art in a variety of different guises. Debates about the social value and meaning of this program began decades earlier, following the first World War in

Germany. There social realism was challenged by artists associated with the Dadaist movement, who criticized it for enforcing the functional bias of society. According to the Dadaists, social realism's subscription to linear perspective fostered a rationalist system which was bound to the logical and utilitarian outlook of western capitalism, an outlook that had, in their view, produced a deadly war machine while reducing the working classes to industrial wage slaves.²⁰ In response they formulated an anti-bourgeois and anti-social realist art form that promoted open experimentation. For the Dadaists, adherence to social realism meant passively accepting the world as it was instead of actively changing it.²¹

The surrealists followed in their predecessors' footsteps and continued to criticize both the visual and political status quo represented by social realism, despite the objections of the French Communists. In total opposition to the party faithful, who exclusively supported art committed to clear working class themes, the surrealists called for an art which addressed concerns beyond material well-being, and were, as a result, repeatedly snubbed by the party for their efforts. Again, taking their aesthetic cue from the performance oriented Dadaists the surrealists formulated an art that encompassed literature, film, and public scandal which strove to surpass the meaningless repetition of happy workers in paintings or posters, producing a movement committed to the revival of the imagination and the exploitation of the possibilities presented by everyday life. Dada and surrealism emphasized the notions of spontaneity and moral commitment. Both movements subscribed to the idea that in order to change reality society must first radicalize its limited vision and predictable verbal formulas.²² The extent to which the world could be changed depended entirely on the capacity of the public's imagination and concurrently that public's ability to express a strong poetic vision. When the surrealists

²⁰ Toby Clark, *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century: The Political Image in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Abrams, 1997), p. 32.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Mary Ann Caws, *The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism: Aragon, Breton, Tzara, Elouard & Desnos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 6.

used the word poetic they had more in mind than simply words on a page, poetry implied a way of life, not simply a manner of expression.²³

Surrealist poetry was not art in the traditional sense, it was the freeing up of relationships between seemingly opposed objects and ideas.²⁴ André Breton acknowledged its relation to romanticism on this account, particularly in regard to the ideas of analogy and correspondence. For him, and all the surrealists, the sublime, the point “where the yes and no meet” declares itself only to those in a constant state of anticipation. Poetry is both the open landscape where the sublime is located and the quality which best describes the surrealists uncompromising attitude, “le comportement lyrique.”²⁵ Surrealist theories and experiments were all directed towards this material and spiritual liberation which was designed to make them completely open to what they referred to as the marvelous.²⁶ The *merveilleux* was the exact embodiment of human freedom: “The relationship which is produced from the negation of the real by the marvelous is essentially ethical, and the marvelous is always the materialization of a moral symbol in violent opposition with the morality of the world in whose center it appears.”²⁷ Beauty was not far behind. One of the defining characteristics of the surrealists was their occupation with the potential of the subconscious indicated by their fondness for automatic writing for instance. Beauty was the switch which could provide access to the subconscious. In opposition to classical conceptions of the term, Breton defined it as an intensely unsettling experience: “Convulsive beauty will embody veiled eroticism, fixed explosions, and circumstantial magic, or it will be nothing.”²⁸ This belief would later find favour with Debord who associated beauty with lived experience;

²³Caws, p. 9.

²⁴Caws, p. 30.

²⁵Caws, p. 18.

²⁶Caws, p. 17.

²⁷Quoted by Patrick Waldberg in *Le Surréalisme: sources, histoire, affinités*, a catalogue published by the Galerie Charpentier, 1964. Caws, p. 20.

²⁸ André Breton, “La beauté sera convulsive,” in *Minotaure* 5, (1934), p. 16.

experience that could satiate an imagination marked by a peculiar combination of indifferent wonder and ruthless skepticism.

The debate about social realism carried over into the postwar period in France but with slightly different players. Reactivated after the *années noires* of the Occupation by the inflammatory politics of the Cold War the conflict was social realism against abstraction.²⁹ Concerned about retaining its title as the World Champion of Art and highly agitated by the debate between realism and the perceived threat of American Imperialist abstraction, France found itself at a loss both spiritually and materially.³⁰ The barrage of propaganda the French had experienced during the war had made the public highly suspicious of representations of any kind (be it a political poster or a work of art) to the point where expression itself was considered a dangerous proposition.³¹ In response, painters like Bram Van Velde, Antoni Tàpies, Jean Dubuffet, and others pursued a tempered detachment. Looking for a way to sidestep the pitfalls of the traditional authoritarian ideological battles they produced an art that put the dominant aesthetic codes into question, creating a small but significant breathing space outside the grand utopic designs of the fascists, capitalists, and communists.³²

These artists were not alone in their endeavors to outmaneuver the dominant ideologies. Activity against the polarization of the intellectual, artistic, and political landscapes made the postwar period in France, and Europe for that matter, an extremely vital decade on many fronts. Taking up where Dada and the surrealists left off, this period produced several important precursors to the situationists, movements such as Lettrism, the Lettrist International, Cobra, Imaginist Bauhaus, and journals such as the Belgian *Les Lèvres Nues*, *Reflex* from Holland, and *Ion* and *Potlatch* from Paris, all of which combined

²⁹By associating American abstraction with American imperialism the communists put an end to any discussion of its varieties, objectives and meanings; lyrical abstraction, geometric abstraction etc. In its place the communists continued to advance an apparently more accessible painting which was concerned with the message, rather than the quality of the work itself.

³⁰Serge Guilbaut, "Matières à réflexions, les murs d'Antoni Tàpies (1955 - 1960)," in *Voir, Ne Pas Voir, Faut Voir*, (Nîmes: Éditions Jacqueline Chambon, 1993), p. 170.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 73.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 86.

the artistic ambition of the avant-garde with an intellectual commitment and engagement outside the aegis of traditional party politics.

Postwar France saw the rise of state led modernization brought on by the Cold War, and the reallocation and reorganization of public space around the exigencies of the automobile. New technological innovations, new appliances, and the proliferation of new forms of advertising through television and glossy magazines attempted to give Paris a total make over, supplying it with a shiny new wrinkle-free face. Resisting this phenomenon, what Henri Lefebvre referred to as the colonization of the everyday life, avant-garde artists called for the end of painting and a return to the back-alleys of the city spaces which had provided them with so much inspiration in the prewar period. Turning to the material and matter of street culture, these movements took up newspapers, posters, signs, words, headlines, the very streets themselves, and even entire neighborhoods as the shared ground for their endless adventures.

Confusion between text and deed is characteristic of this era. It is hard to tell where words end and actions begin. With the rise of groups like the Lettrists and movements such as Concrete Poetry, both which privileged the word over the figure, images and/or “visual texts” were no longer presented as finite descriptors, but rather as open models, or ongoing experiments, designed, in the case of Lettrism for example, to belie the so-called transparency of the word. Altogether what can be observed in the art of this period is a tendency towards words and action, and a withdrawal from the auspices of traditional art, such as figurative painting and sculpture. A concern with print, text, and words characterized these movements which took up the conventions of popular culture such as comics, graffiti and street posters as a way to mark themselves out as distinct from mainstream artists such as André Fougeron who continued to make paintings in a social realist vein.

Foreshadowing the situationists predilection for words, the Lettrists rejected realist figuration and focused on letters and signs, what they called hypergraphy.

Lettrism was founded in Paris in 1945 by Isidore Isou, a Rumanian communist. Important members included Maurice Lemaître, Roland Sabatier, and Gabriel Pommerand.³³ Like Dada and surrealism before it, the movement aspired to engage all fields of culture, from painting and poetry to economics and philosophy. Lettrism was based on a poetic and pictorial concern with sound, letters, and signs. Debord, who was not impressed with the Freudian bent of the remaining surrealists, took up with the Lettrists but almost immediately broke it off over a scandal involving Charlie Chaplin (he preferred the Marx Brothers).³⁴ In 1952 Debord went on to found the Lettrist International with Jean Louis Brau, Serge Berna and Gil. J. Wolman. Five years later, in 1957, this group would join up with Asger Jorn and Michèle Bernstein and found the situationist international in Turin Italy.

Concrete Poetry, another movement manifesting similar concerns as those of the Lettrist and the Lettrist International, was formulated by Max Bill and Eugen Gomringer. Launched in 1956 in São Paulo as part of an exhibition of Concrete Art, by a group of Brazilian poets and designers, they also conceived of the poem as an object in and of itself, and consciously used graphic space to buttress its structure, along lines first set out by Stéphane Mallarmé and Guillaume Apollinaire. But their concerns extended beyond words on a page, like the preceding movements in Europe, they were also interested in the verbal and vocal nature of words, the materiality of noise.

The withdrawal from painting proper can also be observed in the work of the Danish artist Asger Jorn. Recently this artist has begun to receive attention from established North American art historians. His painting *Paris by Night* (fig. 3) opened up

³³The Lettrist continue to enjoy a wide following and are still publishing books and participating in exhibitions in Paris and abroad.

³⁴In Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces* he tells the story of how Charlie Chaplin came to Paris to promote his new film *Limelight*. Recently barred from the US, and fresh from England where he had been received by Queen Elizabeth II, performing the requisite bow, "Charlot" was warmly welcomed by everyone. Certain members of the Lettrists however, Serge Berna, Jean-Louis Brau, Guy Earnest Debord, and Gil. J Wolman made a big stink at his press conference disseminating a leaflet entitled "No More Flat Feet" denouncing Chaplin as a fascist among many other expletives. Isidore Isou was not impressed and subsequently the group split and Lettrist International was born. p. 340 - 341.

Thomas Crow's survey text *Rise of the Sixties*, while T.J. Clark's latest book, *Farewell to an Idea*, praises him as nothing less than "...the greatest painter of the 1950s."³⁵ Jorn was a founding member of the situationists and the only artist associated with the group to make a significant name for himself outside of his situationist activities.³⁶ Guy Atkins, has described him as a catalyst and team leader: a warm blooded situationist who patched up the animosity caused by Debord's lack of diplomacy.³⁷ Jorn based a large part of his work on ready made paintings he acquired at flea markets, reworking them in a critical and playful manner to unravel and uncover hidden meaning and latent jokes. While he is perhaps best known for these altered images, Jorn was also a prolific writer who produced volumes of musings on subjects ranging from political economics to Norse graffiti.³⁸ Of concern here, however, are his writings on what he termed, artistic problems. These would later form the back bones of many of the situationist ideas regarding aesthetics.

Jorn summed up his position on aesthetics in a series of texts first printed between 1954 and 1957 in his book entitled, *Pour la forme*.³⁹ Disputing the widely held view born of art academies, that works of art should be judged solely by formal criteria distinct from their moral, political, or religious utility, Jorn argued for a new system of aesthetics that would surpass classical notions of harmony and beauty without sacrificing the joy and pleasure traditionally associated with these categories. In opposition to general assumptions which proposed that artistic value was somehow inherent in the object itself, Jorn stated that notions of timelessness and quality were applied categories,

³⁵T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, (London: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 389.

³⁶Jorn was also a member of Cobra, a group of painters (mostly) which took its name from the home cities of its participants: Copenhagen, Brussels, and Amsterdam respectively.

³⁷Guy Atkins, *Asger Jorn, The Crucial Years: 1954 - 1964* (1977) quoted in Knabb, p. 391.

³⁸For more on Jorn's writings see, *A Bibliography of Asger Jorn's Writings*, Silkeborg Museum, 1988.

³⁹Asger Jorn, *Pour La forme: Ébauche d'une méthodologie des arts*, (Paris: Internationale Situationiste, 1958).

and that the true objective of a work of art was to affirm human beings as the essential source of value.⁴⁰

Jorn suggested that beauty was a concept worth salvaging, but only if it could be disassociated from its historic allies. "We must prepare ourselves for a new goddess born of reason, distinct from miracles and mystery, and far away above all, from the formulas of philosophers and aestheticians who have been ardently accumulating their petty theories since antiquity."⁴¹ Calling for a deregulation of aesthetics he argued for the reinstatement of ugliness as the essential component of this paradigm. It was ugliness, not beauty, he wrote, which was the true barometer of aesthetics. Beauty did not even exist, according to his analysis, except as a function of ugliness. The domain of aesthetics proper, he proposed, should not be concerned with the overriding concept of beauty, but rather, the tension between the two categories. Beauty itself could not be dismissed completely, however, because ugliness would have to be abandoned also. Jorn maintained that boredom was the opposite of aesthetics. A rejection of aesthetics necessarily endorsed apathy. Consequently, an era without ugliness was also an era without progress. Jorn also held similar ideas about morality. Good was nothing without evil, and vice-versa. Morality was about the interplay between the two states without which there would only be neutrality.⁴²

Although he makes no formal suggestions about what exactly would replace classical aesthetics, he does briefly allude to poetry. I should point out here that like the surrealists, Jorn is using this term in the Greek sense of the word. In Jorn's text, poetry does not simply denote verse as opposed to prose, but rather the art of composition: an emphasis on creation, production, and formation. Instead of being exclusively concerned

⁴⁰Asger Jorn, in "Critique de la politique économique." in *Internationale situationniste* 4 (juin 1960), p. 20.

⁴¹Jorn, *Pour la forme*, in *Documents relatifs à la fondation de l'internationale situationnistes 1948 - 1957*, (Paris: Éditions Allia, 1985), p. 443.

⁴²Ibid., p. 447-448.

with words on a page, the latter definition implies action taking place across time and space.⁴³

Le Pourissement Consommable, Le Pourissement du Consommable: Different Package Same Shit

By the sixties modern consumer culture had completely insinuated itself into French life and the differences between state capitalism and state communism were becoming less and less tangible. As the critique of high art which had been developed in the previous decade gained ground, some groups chose to reject art completely while others persevered, producing a diverse array of paintings, happenings, and sculptures. Largely uninterested in the possibilities of the street and the problems regarding expression itself that had engrossed the avant-garde in the fifties, the mainstream painters of the sixties continued to struggle with the aesthetic debates of the past and tried to invent a new visual code distinct from both social realism and abstraction. Heavily influenced by American Pop, which was ubiquitous in France at this time, they turned their eyes upwards, replicating the smooth surfaces, clean lines and bright colors of the “ready-made” images and objects of the new visual order.⁴⁴

While the artists associated with *Nouveau Realisme* such as Arman and Martial Raysse, fastened together consumer objects in sealed constellations that hovered between shop displays, neon signs, oddball collections, and plain refuse, other artists, such as those connected to the *Salon de la jeune peinture*, many of whom were also involved with *La Figuration Narrative*, and *La Nouvelle Figuration*, participated in politically committed collectives which discussed current events, as well as issues pertaining to art and culture. Loathe to leave France’s legacy of high art behind, these latter movements took their politics and their painting very seriously, in that order. In the name of so-called transparency and accessibility these artists renounced any pretensions to aesthetics and

⁴³Ibid., p. 447.

⁴⁴Catherine Millet, *L'Art Contemporain en France*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), p. 83.

embraced what they saw as the effectiveness of the commercial poster or political banner, shamelessly producing what amounted to artful, if somewhat incoherent, propaganda.

For the artists associated with the *Salon de la jeune peinture*, the sole function of art was to shape public opinion. Established in 1950, the *Salon des jeunes peintres* (which subsequently became the *Salon de la jeune peinture* in 1954), took pride in their complete negation of aesthetics. At no time did they judge their work according to skill or plastic qualities, as a result all formal concerns were sacrificed to political exigencies.⁴⁵ Key issues for the members of the *Salon de la jeune peinture*, were whether or not the ideas they were trying to communicate were politically correct, and if so, whether or not their painting conveyed these messages accurately.

This retreat from high art and the accompanying foray into politics and mass or popular culture was taken to more extreme lengths by the situationists.⁴⁶ In 1962 the situationists eliminated all the official artists from their group, most notably Asger Jorn, and turned their attentions towards other projects.⁴⁷ Throughout the sixties they focused their energy on developing their theory, publishing their ideas in their journal and experimenting with different forms of public intervention maintaining that historical and political circumstances had reached a point where traditional aesthetics, whether they be classical or modern, no longer had the power to effect profound social transformation. According to the situationists, for three centuries, efforts to produce a normative classicism, or neoclassicism had resulted in a series of successive failures.⁴⁸ Any modest victories had been quickly assimilated by the official discourse whether it be the monarchy, the revolutionary bourgeois, or the state.⁴⁹ Despite their antipathy towards

⁴⁵Bernard Rancillac, one of the more well known members of the collective, actually went so far as to produce some paintings that were only words: Long Live the Populist Communist Republic of China, and Make Revolution, Promote Production!, Millet, p. 93.

⁴⁶I will return to the debate about what actually constitutes popular and/or mass culture in Chapter two.

⁴⁷Painting, collage, film-making and other traditional forms of art continued to be practiced by members within the group but in a much more limited, unofficial capacity.

⁴⁸Guy Debord, *Society of Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, (New York: Zone books, 1995), p. 134.

⁴⁹Ibid.

classical and modern aesthetics, the situationists did not however, deny the existence of the category of aesthetics, or the fact that they themselves subscribed to their own particular version. When asked by the Center of Socio-Experimental Art about their opinion on this matter the situationists responded that, they were not only attempting to get beyond aesthetics, they were also trying to overcome the *negation* of aesthetics itself.⁵⁰

In an article entitled: "All the King's Men," published in 1963 a detailed account of the meaning the situationists ascribe to the word poetry is provided. Taking their inspiration from Jorn and writers associated with *Les Lèvres Nues* such as Paul Nougé, the situationists explained the importance of this idea to their overall theory.⁵¹ According to its anonymous author, poetry holds the entire world in its gaze. It "...invariably wants to reorient the world and its whole future to its own ends. As long as it lasts, it allows no compromises. It brings back into play all the unsettled debts of history."⁵² The situationists considered poetry to be the anti-matter of consumer society, that unlike beauty, which presents itself solely for consumption, poetry defies all co-optation. The author continues: "Poetry must be understood as an immediate communication with reality and as a real alteration of reality. It is nothing other than liberated language, language recovering its richness, language which breaks its rigid signification and simultaneously embraces words, music, cries, gestures, painting, mathematics, facts, acts."⁵³

In his book *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, Raoul Vaneigem asserted that poetry is the act which brings new realities into being; a gesture which reverses perspective. "The *materia prima* is within everyone's reach. Poets are those who know how to use it to

⁵⁰Q: Do you think your aesthetics would be different if you lived in a socially, politically and economically different society? A: Certainly. When our perspectives are realized, aesthetics (as well as its negation) will be superseded. "Response to a questionnaire from the center for Socio-Experimental Art," in *Internationale situationniste* 9 (août 1964), p. 42.

⁵¹Paul Nougé, "Notes sur la poésie," in *Les Lèvres Nues* 3, (octobre 1954), p. 8 - 13.

⁵²Anonymous, "All the Kings Men," in *Internationale situationniste* 8, (janvier 1963), p. 32.

⁵³Ibid., p. 30.

best effect.”⁵⁴ At the same time, the poetic experience was not without risk or danger. The poet puts herself at risk to incite other people into action.⁵⁵ Vaneigem continues: “Poetry is the organisation of creative spontaneity the exploitation of the qualitative in accordance with its internal laws of coherence. Poetry is what the Greeks call poiesis, ‘making,’ but ‘making’ restored to the purity of its moment of genesis - seen in other words, from the point of view of totality.”⁵⁶ Totality was an important concept for the situationists and warrants explanation. Lucian Goldmann defined the term with the following words:

Totality is the idea that a phenomenon can be comprehended only by first inserting it in the broader structure of which it is part and in which it has a function, the latter being its objective meaning independently of whether or not the men acting and creating it are conscious of it. It is the category of meaningful structure, which can be comprehended only by inserting it in a meaningful structure and the whole of history.⁵⁷

T.J. Clark has recently described totality as inhabiting the very bones of painting.⁵⁸ While another eminent art historian, Arnold Hauser, believed that art was seized by nothing less than a mania for totality: that through art it seemed possible to bring everything into relationship with everything else, that everything seems to include within itself the law of the whole.⁵⁹ Totality was also associated by the situationists with ideas about quality. In their writings they maintained that the industrial revolution had destroyed individuality and artisanal production, knelling the death toll for human mastery, or skill.⁶⁰ Industrialization, which emphasized quantity over quality,

⁵⁴Vaneigem, p. 200.

⁵⁵This is why the poetic problem is inseparable from questions regarding morality.

⁵⁶Ibid., p. 199.

⁵⁷Goldmann, “The dialectic of Today” in *Cultural Creation in Modern Society*, p. 112. quoted in Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 325.

⁵⁸Clark, p. 270.

⁵⁹Arnold Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, Vol. 4. trans. Stanley Goodman (New York, 1958), p. 237. quoted in Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, p. 289.

⁶⁰Jorn, “La fin de l’économie et la réalisation de l’art,” in *Internationale situationniste* 4 (juin 1960), p. 20.

extinguished any pretensions manufacturing may have had for formal issues.⁶¹ In their statements about the dubious satisfaction obtained from consumption, they suggested that the active consumer was cursed from the outset because the so-called freedom to choose was really only the freedom to settle or compromise.⁶² Again, in the vein of surrealist principals, poetry provided a glimpse of the possibilities of the immanent future of global reversal. Quality was the secret password to this reordered universe: "The qualitative encapsulates and crystallizes these possibilities; it is a direct communication of the essential. Only the qualitative permits a higher stage to be reached in one bound."⁶³

The tool which the situationists used to facilitate this conceptual leap was *détournement*. *Détournement* consisted of taking an existing art form and inverting the social significance of the medium by rearranging its elements to change the over all meaning. Asger Jorn's re-configured flea market paintings, or the commercial gags that decorated copies of *Les Lèvres Nues* (fig. 4), which made use of readily available second rate bourgeois images and then added to them to reorient their purpose, are some early examples. Debord described *détournement* as a technique which restored subversive qualities and critical judgments to ideas that had deteriorated into respectable and hardened truths.⁶⁴ He continued emphasizing that *détournement* was the antithesis of quotation; that it was a reinsertion of the object into its proper context, into the overall frame of reference of its period, and a rectification of the precise signification that it constituted within that framework. More than that it was the fluid language of anti-ideology.

The situationists defined ideology as a false consciousness of reality which produced real and distorting effects. The spectacle was the materialization of ideology,

⁶¹The situationists are using formalism here in the general sense of the word, denoting attention to form, rather than form for form's sake. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 26.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶³Vaneigem, p. 127.

⁶⁴Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 146.

the triumph of the fragment. Total ideology was the despotism of the fragment imposing itself as the whole truth. "The spectacle is the acme of ideology, for in its full flower it exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life."⁶⁵ The situationists did not necessarily believe that they could escape ideology, but they did believe that its mechanisms, the way it functioned, could be exposed. Whether or not an art form can totally transgress ideology, the situationists believed it could be anti-ideological. This is what the situationists meant when they described *détournement* as a "...communication containing its own critique."⁶⁶ *Détournement* is an effort to betray the lie of the fragment with the truth of the totality. When the fragment presents itself as the totality it dismisses the importance of the act of interpretation. It alleges that interpretation is redundant and claims complete innocence. It declares, most insidiously, that there is no need for interpretation because its aims and objectives are obvious to everyone. The only thing that was completely resistant to the reign of the fragment was poetry: "No poetic sign is ever completely turned by ideology."⁶⁷

The situationists criticized general art practice in the sixties for not living up to its potential. Believing it to be phony and contrived they summarized it as formal repetitions attractively packaged and publicized, completely divorced from the original combativeness of their models. Much of what was being produced during this time, according to the situationists, was a disingenuous continuation of modern art, and could be diagnosed as a symptom of the indiscriminate consumption of cultural leftovers. This resulted in the proliferation of artistic movements that were completely indistinguishable from one another. The situationists described this as the realization of modern marketing strategies in the art world where one brand is sold as many different products under rival

⁶⁵Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 151.

⁶⁶"Réponse a une enquête du centre d'art socio-expérimental" *Internationale situationniste* 9 (août 1964), p. 41.

⁶⁷Vaneigem, p. 102.

trademarks.⁶⁸ They reserved a special venom for American brands: "...pop art, a form of consumable putrefaction, is also an expression of the putrefaction of consumption."⁶⁹

The vogue for so-called "collective projects," showcased at prestigious events like the Paris Biennial, was also severely criticized by the situationists for encouraging the most backward tendencies of communism.⁷⁰ While they believed in artists coming together to realize a common goal they contended that a certain level of rigor, discipline, and individualism was essential for success.⁷¹ Motley collections of indifferent and politically unfocused artists were preventing the elimination of the real problem, the barrier between art and life. Finally however, the spiritual and material exhaustion of western art, its irrelevancy, had made it, at best, a secondary concern anyway.⁷² The predominance of advertising through posters, radio, magazines, and now television, was ultimately much more interesting to the situationists. While both modern art and advertising were considered to be equally vacuous, advertising, at least, was judged to have greater public relevance. As an unadulterated form of propaganda, unencumbered by any artistic concerns, it was entirely more adept at manipulation, making it a much more compelling social force.

Guy Debord and the situationists were not against images or even visual pleasure, they were against ideology. It is misleading to say that the situationists were against painting. They were however, unquestionably critical of what art and painting in France had become. Indeed, in that highly charged moment of the late sixties all images were susceptible to manipulation; nothing could remain innocent. Consequently, the situationists denounced images, not because they didn't believe in aesthetics or were against form, or beauty, but because they believed that freedom, what the surrealists defined as the marvelous, could not be contained by images alone.

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 44.

⁶⁹Vaneigem, p. 123.

⁷⁰"Réponse a une enquête du centre d'art socio-expérimental" p. 40 - 44.

⁷¹Thanks to Serge Guilbaut for pointing out the issue of individualism.

⁷²Ibid.

I have illustrated that while the situationists did not subscribe to classical notions of beauty, they did develop an aesthetic system, drawn from the Dadaists, surrealists, and later the Lettrists and Lettrist International which was constructed around the concept of poetry. This notion was realized in the situationist theory of the *dérive*. *Dérive* meant to roam or drift in the city without any kind of pre-ordained objective. It was the actualization of *détournement* across space and time and was concerned with taking advantage of chance, particularly the random juxtapositions opened up by the urban landscape. Cutting loose from the boundaries of physical space, the *dérive* also implied the ability to travel over psychological distances.⁷³

Thus whereas surrealism in the heyday of its assault against the oppressive order of culture and daily life could define its arsenal as “poetry without poems if necessary,” it is now a matter for the SI of poetry necessarily without poems. What we say about poetry has nothing to do with the retarded reactionaries of some neoversification, even one based on the least ancient of formal modernisms. Realizing poetry means nothing less than simultaneously and inseparably creating events and their language.⁷⁴

In order to ensure that the revolution did not betray its own project the situationists broke away from their predecessors, the surrealists, who put poetry at the service of revolution, and instead, put revolution at the service of poetry.⁷⁵ This meant that art was no longer bound to serve politics, now it was politics that was to be the servant of art.

⁷³ Guy Debord, “Théorie de la *dérive*,” in *Internationale situationniste* 2 (décembre, 1958), p. 19.

⁷⁴p. 115.

⁷⁵p. 116.



— Fig. 1

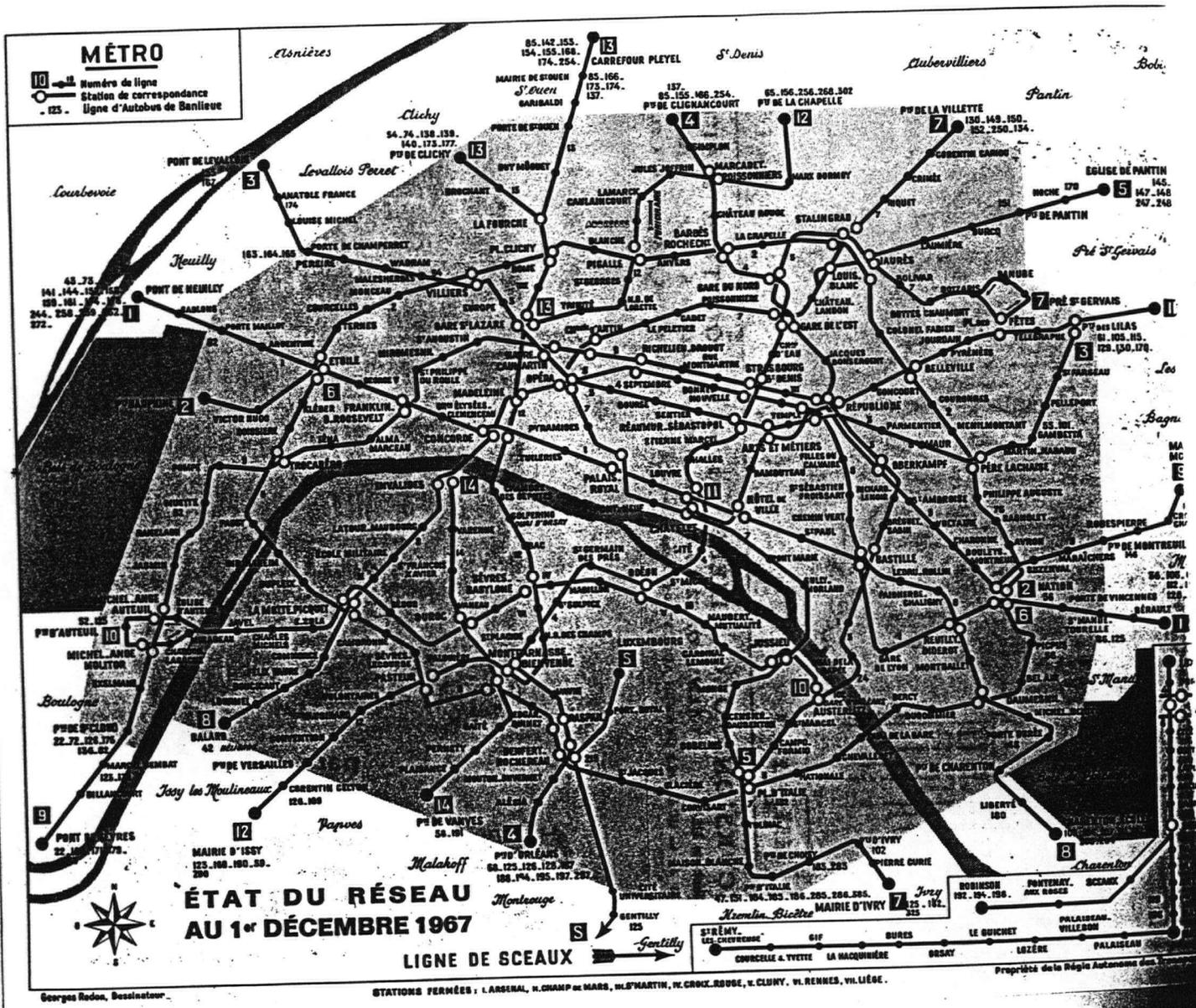
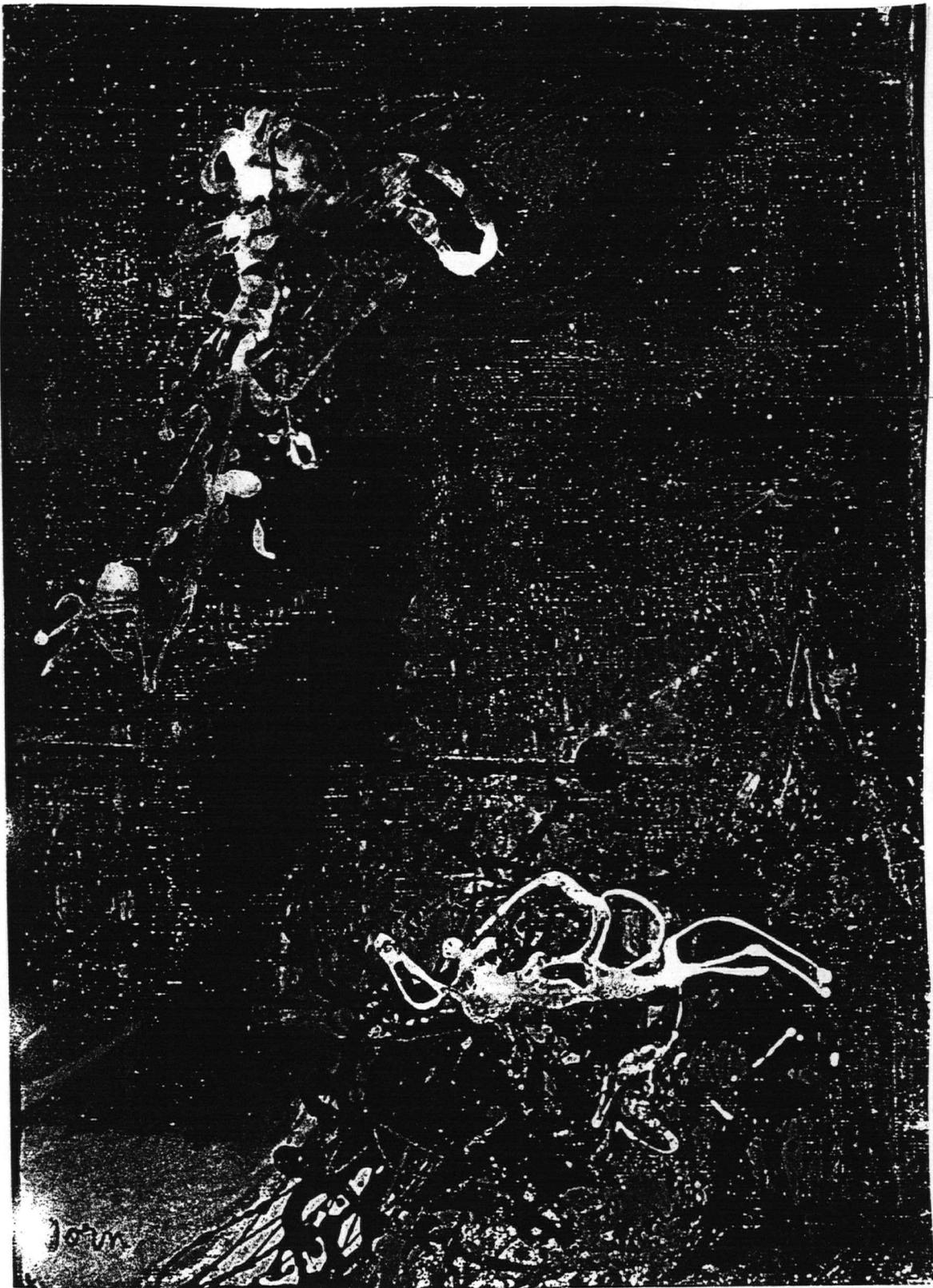


Fig. 2



— Fig. 3

DROIT AU CIEL



par **SABENA**
AIR FRANCE

Plus de mèches engluées ! Plus de cheveux attrape-poussières ! Plus d'oreillers sales !



Silvikrine
fait **TABLE** rase

AVANT APRES

AVOIR ÉTÉ



GRACE A
MAX FACTOR HOLLYWOOD



Pour une mort plus Rapide...

Coca-Cola
MARQUE DÉPOSÉE

Ne soyez plus



VICTIME DE




OMEGA
la Dernière des



CONTRE LE MAL DU SIÈCLE

Esso **BP**

1914-1918 : 8.676.000 morts
1939-1945 : 78 millions de morts

L'ESSENCE
de l'Histoire

clac... clac... RATÉ



Kodak



PHILIPS

AUX germes microbiens

EMPOISONNE

IBBS

supprime radicalement **LES DENTS**



la **Seule** qui donne **l'Eczéma**

POND'S
LIND CREAM
VANILIN CREAM

GARANTIT

LA VIEILLESSE DU VISAGE

et la

BEAUTÉ

RIDES

SANDEMAN

CERTES, *Mais...*

Attention à votre intestin!



MARTINI

L'APERTIF

Pied de

Fig. 4

Chapter II

Les Identités Scandaleuses: The Art of Cultural Subterfuge

In the current intellectual skirmishes between art history and visual culture the same arguments are played out over and over again, high art is criticized for being exclusionary and rigid, while visual culture is portrayed as inclusive and politically progressive.⁷⁶ Recently Thomas Crow has gained attention for his ardent defense of the comprehensive nature of art history suggesting that it is not, nor has it ever been, an either/or situation.⁷⁷ This position, which was first outlined in his article, "Modernism and Mass Culture in Visual Art," maintains that Art history's proper subject is the examination of the mechanisms through which different combinations of high and low produce new cultural effects at certain historical junctures.⁷⁸ According to Crow, modernism's leading feature is the disruption it causes to established hierarchies: it operates by constantly playing the categories of high and low off one another, creating situations in which differences are heightened, laying open new possibilities for change.⁷⁹

To develop this argument he uses the example of painting in late nineteenth century France. Painting from this period had surrendered itself to the formal demands of the academy and the exigencies of the market.⁸⁰ In response, the avant-garde turned to mass culture and introduced the conventions of popular culture into their paintings, such as cheap signs or carnival back drops.⁸¹ Not only did this parody and critique what art had become, it also deftly redefined the audiences for these paintings, bringing the schism between the bourgeoisie and the 'dangerous classes' into focus.

Crow continues, suggesting that despite current debates that set visual culture against art (and by extension art history), the theory of one has always been the theory of

⁷⁶"Visual Culture Questionnaire," *October* 77, Summer 1996, pp.25-70.

⁷⁷Thomas Crow, CAA session "Whatever Happened to Social Art History?," 2000.

⁷⁸Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," in *Modern Art in the Common Cultures*, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1996).

⁷⁹*Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, p. 3.

the other, and that: "...the most powerful moments of modernist negation have occurred when the two aesthetic orders, the high cultural and the subcultural, have been forced into scandalous identity."⁸² His point is that it is the tension between the two which is the real site of interest, and that this shifting of signs can occur in both directions: not only can art appropriate the codes of visual culture, visual culture can display the depth of meaning and influence usually associated with high art. Of particular relevance to my project are the circumstances that caused the two systems to exchange their jurisdictions during the General Strike in Paris, in May and June of 1968.

Over that short two month interim high art completely adopted the formal conventions normally associated with visual culture. Or, perhaps you could say that visual culture was suddenly possessed by the contents usually ascribed to high art. Either way, for a brief moment in time, for a privileged few (those who frequented the Latin Quarter) the apparently banal graffito, 'I love Gilda,' took on the kind of consequence traditionally reserved for painting and sculpture. While, as I have already demonstrated in the previous chapter, paintings and sculpture, completely bottomed out, reaching new lows rarely seen in the history of French art.

Unlike the 19th century when artists were beholden to the demands of the market, in the sixties many French artists acquiesced to the various political forces of the moment. Believing that the value of art should only be measured by its propagandistic force these artists rejected any formal concerns in a bid for accessibility. Like the Impressionists, they also turned to mass culture via advertising and Pop art, but without the same compelling results. A new strategy was provided by the situationists who answered the party loyalty of these artists (be it communist or otherwise) by retreating from high art altogether, taking cover instead, under the auspices of radical politics and grass-roots popular culture, specifically posters, and graffiti.⁸³ As stated in the previous chapter the

⁸²Ibid., p. 26.

⁸³Later in this essay I will expand on the origins and various definitions of the term popular culture.

situationists were interested in putting politics in the service of art, not art in the service of politics, therefore when they retreated from high art proper to engage in radical politics, it was not a refusal of art per se, but rather a move towards what they considered to be a more *authentic* art grounded and produced, in and across the small politics of the back-alleys and gutters of the streets. The story of why this happened, the reasoning behind this happy subterfuge between art and visual culture, will form the bulk of my argument here and allow me to explain the differences between popular culture and mass culture, and finally, the significance of Crow's use of the term modernism.

De ces Fous on s'en Fiche, Des Affiches on s'en Fout: The Art of Posters in 68

Aside from those produced by the state, the political posters most commonly seen in Paris up until 68 were those of the French Communist Party. Employing social realism and French humour, these professionally designed posters were conceived with the intention of keeping their audiences up to date on international affairs and the latest foibles of American Imperialism. Taking their place in the streets, on the official Hastings only, their safe slogans and staid images battled it out on a daily basis with the spiffy oversized advertising billboards which had appeared shortly after the war, known as *Affiche Américaine*.

In May and June, however, political posters made a clean break with their predecessors. In conjunction with a general strike that put 10 million workers and students into the streets, artists descended from their studios, and along with students and others, took over the art schools throughout France and turned them into collectively run poster workshops (fig. 1). The two original *Ateliers*, as they are known, were based in Paris: the *Atelier des Beaux Arts* which later became known as the *Atelier Populaire*, printed the first posters on May 15th, and the *Atelier des Arts Décoratifs*, which went into production on May 29th.

Symptomatic of the recent rush on these posters by collectors, much has been made about the formal differences between the two main workshops. It is profoundly ironic, that these posters, which were designed with the intention of conveying political messages above all, have been written about solely in terms of their formal characteristics.⁸⁴ While vague celebratory pieces praise the posters for their embodiment of the general spirit of the sixties, nothing has been written about the explicit politics that informed the posters themselves. By situating these groups in the artistic and political landscape of the sixties in France and comparing the output of the *Ateliers*, with posters produced by a subcommittee of the situationists, the *Conseil pour le Maintien des Occupations* (the Council for the Maintenance of the Occupations - also known as the CMDO), the very different agenda of each group can be explained, putting the aesthetics and audiences of these posters into perspective.

In the beginning, it can not be said that workshops were conscious of launching any kind of campaign. This happened afterwards.⁸⁵ In fact, the creators of the first posters had simply intended to sell them to collect money for the movement. They were prohibited from doing so by students who intervened and convinced the artists to hand the posters over so that they could be plastered freely throughout the city.

It is not particularly surprising that the artists involved tried to sell their posters, many of them were used to selling their work. As a natural extension of what had by then become an established movement in France, the workshop collectives included many members that had been participants in similar organisations prior to May. Artists such as Gilles Aillaud, Eduardo Arroyo, Pierre Buraglio, Henri Cueco, Gérard Fromager, Julio Le Parc, Bernard Rancillac, Gérard Tisserand, Martial Raysse, and Nikki de St. Phalle were

⁸⁴I owe this keen observation to Maggie Milne.

⁸⁵The *Atelier des Beaux Arts* which subsequently became known as the *Atelier Populaire* represents itself as a politically coherent and organized radical art group, but this myth was invented by the group themselves, via the various publications printed after the events through titles such as *Atelier Populaire: Présenté par lui-même* (Paris: U.U.U., 1968) & *Mai 68 Affiches*. ed. Jean Cassou. (Cogerg: Tchou, 1968).

all involved in the workshops at one time or another, in a variety of capacities.⁸⁶ And, as had been the case with collectives like the Salon *de la jeune peinture*, in the *Atelier des Beaux Arts* many of the discussions and debates in the workshops focused on the social and political concerns of the day, both national and international, instead of visual problems. For these artists the key issue, which they took up via their continuous general assemblies, was the efficacy of their propaganda.⁸⁷ Their celebrated rough and ready style which brought together the cartoon images of popular culture with catchy political slogans can be seen as a result of this predilection for politics over aesthetics.

Nevertheless the posters and their slap-dash graphics, apparently embody and exemplify the famous union between communism, and anarchism, not to mention the spontaneity and humour, which were all credited for having made the almost revolution so successful.⁸⁸ One of the characteristic traits of the posters, for instance, is a strong anti-authoritarian streak. This combined with the non-competitive cooperation between individuals from all kinds of political camps within the workshops, and the fact that none of the workshop posters, from either location, were ever signed, despite the participation of many established European artists, is repeatedly offered up as proof of the posters' revolutionary credibility. However, contrary to their reputation, the workshop posters were, all things considered, relatively moderate, rather than radically revolutionary.

⁸⁶Catherine Millet, *L'Art Contemporain en France* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), p. 96.

⁸⁷See *Atelier Populaire: Présenté par lui-même*, p. 10.

⁸⁸Although it is not widely acknowledged, anarchism has played a significant role in French history. One of the most important developments of 1968 in France was the coming together of the black and red flags, signifying the unification of the anarchists and the communists respectively. This not only symbolized the alliance of two distinct political camps, but also in a more abstract way, the effective (yet historically uneasy) union between the individual, signified by anarchism, with the collective bent of communism. While being careful not to essentialize any of these movements, all of which contain a broad spectrum of political positions within their perimeters, it is none-the-less important to note that this coalition or, in some cases, disinterested alliance, had far reaching implications, not just for the movement as a whole, but for individuals and groups struggling to find their place in the workshop movement itself. Furthermore, this union was considered a direct threat to the state. De Gaulle and his supporters were so outraged by this occurrence that they went so far as to print their own posters, showing the red and black flags flying together above mounds of rotting garbage (the trash collectors were also on strike during May), with the slogan, "Jamais Plus Ça!" (Never Again!).

The two main workshops are often differentiated according to their approach to images and text. The posters from the *Atelier des Beaux Arts* are said to emphasize slogans, while those produced by the *Atelier des Arts Décoratifs* were concerned above all, with graphics. “La Chienlit c’est lui!” (He’s Chaos!) for example, was realized on May 20th by the *Atelier des Beaux Arts* as in response to De Gaulle’s famous speech “Reforme: Oui! Chienlit: Non!” (Reform: Yes! Chaos: No!) which was delivered over the radio on May 19th (fig. 2). In this poster the grand gesture of the general’s signature victory salute is reduced to a pathetic S.O.S., his arms flailing about in an ridiculous puppet-like effort to gain our attention. However, despite the effect of the image itself, without the slogan this poster would make no sense. In high contrast, the gagged and mummified student which illustrates “*Une jeunesse que l’avenir inquiète trop souvent...*” (Youth too often Worried about the Future), which was produced by the *Atelier des Arts Décoratifs*, could easily stand on its own (fig. 3). Moreover, the title, unlike that which decorates the previous poster, is not a slogan per se, but was more akin to express social commentary, articulating the frustration young people were experiencing as they struggled against an aging society unwilling to hand over the reins of power.

These differences are moot. Taken altogether the posters make manifest the unsophisticated marxism and limited imagination gripping the workshops. Members of the *Atelier des Arts Décoratifs* have claimed that its concentration on the visual aspect of the posters made it somehow less dogmatic. This is true to some degree. As I have discussed, the images of the *Atelier des arts Décoratifs* did manage to avoid, for the most part, the pitfalls of sloganeering. Never-the-less, many workshop posters display a high degree of self-righteousness as if their raw execution makes them somehow more authentic, pure even. Like the *Salon de la jeune peinture*, they are painfully earnest and voice a hackneyed yearning to be one with the workers. Some of them are very funny, but in a patronizing way, relying on the syrupy cuteness of the cast of cartoon-like characters which populate them: the “little” workers (fig. 4), King de Gaulle (fig. 5) his side-kick the

goofy police man (fig. 6), and France's own answer to Robin Hood, or, as the case may be, Che Guevara: Daniel Cohn-Bendit, also known as: "Danny the Red" (fig. 7).⁸⁹

During May 68 the situationists morphed into an ad hoc committee called the *Conseil pour le maintien des Occupations* (CMDO) which proposed to expand the student and worker movements through a program of councilist democracy. Composed of approximately 40 people, 10 of whom were situationists (among them Debord and Vaneigem), the CMDO worked out of the basement of the National Pedagogical Institute.⁹⁰ In collaboration with strikers from friendly print shops they produced a variety of publications all of which were virulently anti-union and pro workers councils (i.e. workers coming together to decide for themselves about working conditions, standards of production, wages and so on, without unions or similar representation).⁹¹ At the end of May however, the CMDO was forced to move, for political reasons, next door to the basement of the *Atelier des Arts Décoratifs*.⁹² It was from this location that they created posters based on the graphic design of the *Série Noire* (fig. 8).⁹³

⁸⁹Daniel Cohn-Bendit was a student activist of Jewish and German origin who many consider to be *the* leader of the movement.

⁹⁰*Enragés et situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 167-169.

⁹¹The CMDO published many posters, manifestos, comic strips, and a few revolutionary songs. Thanks to occupied printers, who put their material and machines at the CMDO's disposal, they managed to print between 150 000 and 200 000 copies of their principal texts. Translations of which were made in English, German, Spanish, Italian, Danish and Arabic. *Enragés and situationnistes dans le mouvement des occupations* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 176 & Pascal Dumontier, *Les situationnistes et mai 68: théorie et pratique de la révolution 1966-1972* (Paris: Éditions Gérard Lebovici, 1990), p. 137.

⁹²"L'Atelier des Arts Décoratifs. Entretien avec François Miehé and Gérard Paris," in *Mai 68: Les Mouvements étudiants en France et dans le monde* (Paris: Collection des Publications de BDIC, 1988) p. 192.

⁹³Roberto Ohrt. Telephone interview. June 23, 1999. Ohrt told me on this occasion that many presume that these posters were designed by Guy Debord himself, however the only person who can answer that question is Debord, and unfortunately he is dead, - not to mention the rumour that Michèle Bernstein was working in advertising layout and so one could imagine that she might also have had a hand in their conception. (Incidentally it has been suggested to me that the fact that Bernstein might have worked in the advertising industry demonstrates some kind of betrayal of 'the movement' and that it deserves to be more than a mere footnote. I am not quick to judge on these matters and believe there is nothing to be gained by playing cop. In his interview with Kristin Ross in *October* 79 Henri Lefebvre said Bernstein made her living writing horoscopes for race horses.) According to Roberto Ohrt, Debord and Gil Wols planned to make a film entirely composed of the covers of *Série Noire* books in 1952. The sound would be provided by someone reading texts from the 16th century French writer, Bassouet. Unfortunately they never managed to make it.

Inspired by the all-black graphic design of this extremely popular series of crime novels and pulp fiction, the CMDO printed seven text-based offset posters whose professional layout was surpassed only by their direct, terse, and compelling messages. A challenge to established anarchism and French communism, they could be read straight, as a sort of seven commandments of revolution, or as a set of intriguing titles for a series of crime novels with an open-ended narrative beckoning the masses into the streets to embark on the ultimate criminal adventure.

While the workshops demanded an end to what they called the endless routine, the CMDO called for an end to class society (fig.s 9 & 10).⁹⁴ When the workshops demanded open university, or popular university, as they put it, the CMDO shot back a demand for the end of the university (fig.s 11, 12 & 13). And finally, while the workshops expressed their tacit support for the unions, the CMDO raged: "All Power to the Workers Councils!" (fig. 14) While the workshop extolled the virtues of "Popular Power" (fig. 15) the CMDO asked: "What can the revolutionary movement do now? Everything! What will it become in the hands of political parties and unions? Nothing! What does it want? The realization of a classless society through the power of workers councils!" (fig. 16). The CMDO posters left no room for misinterpretation, nor for collaboration.⁹⁵

Consistent with situationists aesthetics which I laid out in the previous chapter, the CMDO chose a politics of complete refusal: a refusal to create a concrete static vision of freedom that could be summed up in a picture or naïve propaganda. The CMDO

⁹⁴There are some important precedents for these posters. From 66 to 68, SI supporters initiated a campaign to rid the French *Fédération des Anarchistes* (FA) of the sclerotic authoritarian anarchists who had taken control of the institution. As part of a slate of different tactics, a series of four text-based posters with the situationists' trademark deadpan layout were designed with the intention of initiating debate, not only about the objectives of the FA, but also to promote infighting, and ultimately, the disintegration of the FA itself. Scandal and sabotage were among the situationists favorite tools and they were adverse to resorting to outright lies to get what they wanted. While they did not succeed in dismantling the FA, they did create a lively debate which gained attention from the national newspapers, most notably by spuriously claiming that the FA had indeed collapsed. For more information on this see Roland Biard, *Histoire du mouvement Anarchiste 1945 - 1975* (Paris: éditions galilée, 1972) & *La f.a. et les situationistes ou mémoire pour discussion dans les familles après boire* (éditeur responsable Guy Bodson, 1969?).

⁹⁵Thanks again to Serge Guilbaut for this insight.

posters were a sly, tongue in cheek, commentary on the very methods that plague this method as they parody sloganeering at its worst while simultaneously delivering a transgressive message. They play off their own officiousness almost to the point of being facetious. These posters are complicated and layered, ironic, compromised, yet conscientious. They were an attack on what art in France, and the left in general, had become, but also, what the SI considered to be the nebulous demands for “popular power,” over revolution. The situationists understood that slogans are not conducive to truth, that truth is, rather, wholly contingent on the audience and situation at hand. Furthermore they were not really interested in truth: they wanted to change things.

At least one artist working in the *Atelier des Arts Décoratifs* has cited the CMDO posters as an important influence, even suggesting that they were the posters against which everything else was judged, but many more claim they never even noticed them.⁹⁶ “Nobody knew what a workers council was,” asserted one artist involved with the *Atelier des Beaux Arts*.⁹⁷ The CMDO posters were not distributed nearly as widely or produced in the same numbers as those of the workshops and they did not find much favor with the general public who did not understand them. Despite being professionally printed on quality paper, the slick, strategically located, CMDO posters were largely ignored by the various audiences they were attempting to mobilize. Those who did understand however, were not impressed. The French communists for instance, having strong ties with France’s biggest union, the *Congrès Général du Travail*, were not keen on what they considered to be a premature revolution and denounced the situationists as revolutionary dilettantes. The situationists were indifferent: in the CMDO’s replication of headline typography and the techniques of commercial posters, such as heavy lettering and stark

⁹⁶ In Jade Linaard, “Trente ans après mai 1968, des murs et des cerveaux propres,” *Inrockuptibles* Mai, 1998 - No. x 152, p.136 Phillipe Bistères suggested that the situationist posters set the standard, in most of the interviews I conducted however many said they did not see them, and if they did they did not understand them.

⁹⁷Gérard Fromager. Interview. June 21, 1999.

contrasts, acknowledged their real competition, the rise of the commodity image and the new urban order.

In the anarchist tradition, individually many artists were, and remain, fiercely proud of their anonymity within the poster collectives. Yet as a whole, workshops were highly competitive with one another, to the point of being openly hostile. "Like Cats and Dogs!"⁹⁸ one participant has suggested. And though the artists didn't sign their names, each workshop did mark their posters with a stamp so there would be no mistaking their origins for posterity. Furthermore, the inclusive composition and political openness of the workshops, is contestable.⁹⁹ The workshops may have brought many different people together, however, their populist politics ultimately turned against them and detracted from their capacity to put into play any truly interesting ideas, artistic or political.

The workshops' support for the Unions, for instance, was a serious mistake, as it is widely believed that it was the cooperation between the unions and the government which ultimately sold out the movement. The first poster ever printed, which appeared on May 13th was: "*Usines Universités Unions*" but it was not exactly a successful alliance.

On May 22nd, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, one of the more important student leaders, was prevented from re-entering France after a lecture tour abroad. In protest, on May 24th, there was widespread rioting and *La Bourse*, the French Stock Exchange, was set on fire. It was only a gesture and *La Bourse* still stands today but symbolically it was quite

⁹⁸François Miehé. Interview. July 1, 1999.

⁹⁹One poster is repeatedly cited as evidence of the censorship at work in the *Ateliers*. As an act of protest against the refusal to let Daniel Cohn-Bendit back into France after a lecture tour abroad on May 22nd, a poster was created which read: "We are all undesirables!" Originally this poster bore the more contentious inscription: "We are all Germans and Jews!" (Cohn-Bendit was an important student activist of both German and Jewish origin). In the streets this slogan became the even more political "We are all German Jews." However, less known is the story told about censorship told by Gérard Fromager in an interview with Laurent Gervereau. There he speaks of having made many posters depicting a French Flag, with the red section running down like blood. Apparently all copies simply disappeared. Gervereau, *Mai 68: les mouvements étudiants en France et dans le monde* & Interview. Gérard Fromager, June 21, 1999. A later version of this work became very famous, but it used an American Flag instead of a French one.

effective. Shortly thereafter on May 27th the Unions, and the State, thanks to the help of a young ambitious secretary by the name of Jacques Chirac, signed the Grenelle Agreement, thereby diffusing the crisis. No one was very impressed, however, except the signatories themselves and the workers did not completely return to work until late June. Nevertheless the *Atelier* posters refrained from any overt criticism of actions of the unions even after they made the deal with the government to end the strike. In opposition to the workshops, the CMDO was clear on their politics from the beginning. Critical of the Unions, the University, the established French communists and French Anarchists, the situationists left no stone unturned.

Mots Sans Culottes: The Art of Graffiti

While postering had been illegal in France since 1881 it still enjoyed more credibility with the general public than graffiti. Propaganda posters were established political tools of both the left and right, while graffiti remained suspect because of its connections to the criminal world and its status as a last refuge for those with no formal means to broadcast their ideas and opinions. Nevertheless, from the Paris Commune in 1871, to World War II, walls in France were an important venue for debate and discussion. French graffiti was perceived by others, less as a crime against property than as a forum where people could express their solidarity in coded, or, not so coded messages. Associated with the Resistance, graffiti was even considered, in some circles, as a proud tradition.

The Lettrists believed that cities could be read like poetry and in the early fifties took to adding their own chalk inscriptions to supplement the city's signage, "adding to the intrinsic meaning" to selected Parisian street names.¹⁰⁰ As early as 1948 the artist Constant, who would later become a member of the situationists wrote: "The chalking on pavements and walls clearly show that human beings were born to manifest themselves;

¹⁰⁰Internationale lettriste, "Réponse à une enquête du groupe surréaliste belge," *Potlatch*, no. 5 (Paris, July, 1954), reprinted in *Potlatch 1954-1957*, pp. 37-38; quoted in Simon Sadler, *The Situationist City*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998), p. 96.

now the struggle is in full swing against the power that would force them into the straitjacket of clerk or commoner and deprive them of this first vital need.”¹⁰¹ Later Vaneigem would reiterate this sentiment: “What sign should one recognize as our own? Certain graffiti, words of refusal or forbidden gestures inscribed with haste.”¹⁰²

Baroque and philosophical scribblings first appeared in 1968 on the walls of the Latin Quarter on May 6th, almost two weeks before the posters, and are often accredited to the situationists.¹⁰³ Noted for their heat, humour and poetry, these graffiti addressed their communities on every available surface, both inside buildings and out, working with both the function of the building, the architectural components, and any accompanying posters and signage. On the whole, they were more general than personal, although there are some exceptions, and unlike previous forms of graffiti in France, these examples were notably more libertarian than leftist, many being adapted from the works of revolutionary poets, philosophers and comedians.¹⁰⁴ This gave them a pronounced ‘cultural’ character and differentiated them from the monotonous political slogans offered up by the established left.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹Constant, “Reflex Manifesto,” *Reflex* (Amsterdam, 1948), trans. Leonard Bright in Willemijn Stokvis, *Cobra* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), pp. 29-31; quoted in *ibid.*, p. 97.

¹⁰²Raoul Vaneigem, “Commentaires contre l’urbanisme,” *International situationniste* 6 (août 1961), pp. 33-37; quoted in *Ibid.*

¹⁰³“On May 13th, the first night the Sorbonne was occupied, Rene Viénet, a member of the Enragés (a radical student group associated with the situationists), inaugurated the practice of mural inscription, in writing on one of the frescos in the Sorbonne, a word bubble reproducing the well known formula (well known in France that is): ‘Comrades! Society will not be happy until the last bureaucrat is hung by the guts of the last capitalist!’ The majority of the occupants in the Sorbonne did not approve of the slogan which was a detournement of a phrase of the curé Meslier, cited by Voltaire: ‘Humanity will not be happy until the last tyrant is hung with the guts of the last priest’), decided to efface the graffiti. Nevertheless, it reappeared again - this time on the salon beside stairway A. In the next three days they took full possession of the walls. The responsibility for this turn of events can be laid at the feet of the situationists, and the young enragé, Christian Sébastiani, nick-named ‘poète des murailles’” Pascal Dumontier, *Les situationnistes et mai, 68: théorie et pratique de la révolution 1966-1972*, (Paris: Éditions Gérard Lebovici, 1990), p. 118-119.

¹⁰⁴Walter Lewino, *Imagination au pouvoir: les photographes de Jo Schnapp*, (Paris: le terrain vague, 1968), p. 3.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*

Shying away from the traditional formulas then, these graffitos rarely made any allusions to the political players that animated the workshop posters.¹⁰⁶ Themes related to education were also absent, as were any references to American imperialism or Vietnam.¹⁰⁷ Although considered controversial at first, as they were equated with violence and vandalism, slogans like: “Je prends mes desirs pour la réalité car je crois en la réalité de mes desirs,” (I take my desires for reality because I believe in the reality of my desires) “*L’humanité ne sera heureuse que le jour où le dernier bureaucrate aura été pendu avec les tripes du dernier capitaliste*” (Humanity will only be happy when the last bureaucrat is hung by the guts of the last capitalist) and “Ne travaillez Jamais” (Never work), quickly amassed a devoted following. I will look at two examples here, the aforementioned: ‘Never work,’ and the less conspicuous, but perhaps more important: ‘I love Gilda.’

Despite appearing more than any other graffiti on May 6th, unlike many popular slogans from 68, “Never work” or popular variations thereof such as: “People who work get bored, people who never work, never get bored,” “Crime doesn’t pay but neither does work,” and “Never work, never take a holiday” never appeared on any poster. Possible reasons for this could have been that the situationists were loudly being criticized in the press for being adventurists. If “Never work” became an official part of their campaign they may have believed that they would be taken even less seriously by the general public.¹⁰⁸

More of an ironic playful order than a political call to arms, this graffito is rarely discussed and easily misunderstood. Although it may seem at odds with the CMDO’s demands for workers’ councils, the idea of the abolition of work had always been an

¹⁰⁶ Political slogans, in the historic sense of the term, were nowhere to be seen. Not one allusion to Pompidou, Fouchet, Mitterand, of the director Roche. The Communist Party (other than Down with Stalinist Dead Meat!), and de Gaulle are hardly mentioned. American imperialism, along with the war in Vietnam are completely forgotten. This is very different again from the posters where de Gaulle is constantly featured, occasionally accompanied by his aforementioned cronies.

¹⁰⁷Lewino, p. 7.

¹⁰⁸Laurent Gervereau. Interview. June 16, 1999.

integral part of situationists' theory, and has roots that go back to the Paris Commune, the Russian revolution and, more recently surrealism.

In 1933 André Thirion, a communist surrealist wrote: "I say shit on all those counter-revolutionaries and their miserable idol, WORK!"¹⁰⁹ Anselm Jappe traces the demand for a liberation from work to Rimbaud's "I will never work" (in the poem *Qu'est-ce pour nous*"), and also the fourth issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste* (July 1925), which declared a "War on Work!"¹¹⁰

"Never Work!" first appeared on the walls of Paris in 1953 (fig. 17). It was written by Guy Debord in chalk on the *Institut de France* at the end of the rue de Seine, which is the seat of the *Académie Française*, a body of writers and scholars whose mission it is to safeguard the purity of the French Language. The institute is also attached to the *Hotel des Monnaies*, which was redesigned as the mint in the eighteenth century.¹¹¹ Using this particular location as a ground for this slogan produces a variety possible meanings from the connection between language and the spectacle, to the uncontrollable nature of language and so on, but the timing is also important. "Never Work," should also be seen as a challenge to *Arbeit macht Frei* (work makes you free), the motto that hung over the gates of the Nazi labour camps. In this case freedom through work meant, freedom through death.¹¹² Again Vaneigem reiterates this point lining up Hitler with other conspicuous figures of the twentieth century: "...whenever submission is demanded, the

¹⁰⁹"...It was not until 1933 that Breton broke with the party despite his support for Trotsky, his rift with Louis Argon over the subordination of art to party politics, and his increasing exasperation at the cult of labour in the soviet union.(After leaving the party his line remained constant, in 1942 "Prolegomena to a third surrealist Manifesto or not," he explains that theoretical systems "can reasonably be considered to be nothing but tools on the carpenters workbench. The carpenter is you. Unless you have gone stark raving mad, you will not try to make do with all those tools except one, and to stand up for the plane to the point of declaring that the use of hammers is wrong and wicked." André Therion, *Revolutionaries without Revolution*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Macmillan, 1975), quoted in Peter Wollen, "Bitter Victory: The Art and Politics of the Situationist International," in *On the passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time: The Situationist International, 1957 - 1972*, (Boston: MIT Press, 1989), p. 36.

¹¹⁰Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 98.

¹¹¹Thanks to Alice Debord for this information.

¹¹²*The Bataille Reader* ed.s Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992). p. 26.

stale fart of ideology makes headway, from the *arbeit mach frei* of the concentration camps, to the homilies of Henry Ford and Mao Tse-tung.”¹¹³ Spray-painted fifteen years later in 68 on the walls of both Nanterre and the Sorbonne by the young *Enragé*, Christian Sébastiani, the words took on a new meaning. Placing the idea on a historical trajectory, it brought out the situationist thesis that society’s source of meaning and self-justification, the point of reference from which individuals derived their identity, was in the process of shifting from work to so-called leisure activities.¹¹⁴

Situationists were not against work per se, but rather wage-labour. Beyond that, “Never work,” was also an attack on activists who have the same relationship with activism as workers have with their jobs. It was a critique aimed at the ideology of work, and working for an ideology. Not content to work for a boss some activists work for a political ideology and are consequently doubly alienated, not just by their employers but by their own political/philosophical outlook.¹¹⁵ As Raoul Vaneigem put it: “...work to transform the world? Bullshit. The world is being transformed in the direction prescribed by the existence of forced labour; which is why it is being transformed so badly.”¹¹⁶

Another graffiti that covered the Latin quarter in 68 read: “Gilda,” or, “*Gilda Je T’aime*.”¹¹⁷ Unlike “Never work,” “I love Gilda” was free from any overt political allusions. This graffito, which was restricted to the Latin Quarter, seems at first, like an innocent overture to a lover but Gilda also happens to be the title of a famous film *noire* made in 1947. Directed by Charles Vidor, starring Glen Ford and Rita Hayworth as a pair of star-crossed American ex-pats down and out in Argentina. This scenario, which subsequently became a myth in France, is about the deceptive nature of appearances and also the compromised role of the US in World War II.

¹¹³Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life* (London: Rebel Press/Left Bank Books), p. 54.

¹¹⁴Jappe, p. 99.

¹¹⁵Yves Manach, *Si nous sommes humains* (Paris: Séries Pravda, 1996), p. 8.

¹¹⁶Vaneigem, p. 53.

¹¹⁷Thanks to Marie-Thérèse Huerta and Kader el Janabi for this information.

Rita Hayworth was an American film star and pin up girl in the forties (fig. 18). Celebrated for her red hair and her long legs, her most famous role was that of the enigmatic Gilda, a woman with two identities. The reason she brought so much intensity to this role was perhaps because she herself led a double life. Rita Hayworth, was originally Marguerita Carmen Cansino. Only after dying her hair and undergoing electrolysis did she become the great Rita Hayworth. As Judy Burchill once said in her book, *Girls on Film* the best blondes are always brunettes.¹¹⁸ Again, like the *Série Noire* books, Gilda exhibits a nuanced fascination with America's disintegration: the b-side of the American dream, or the blond red-head, as the case may be.

Noir protagonists, whether they appear in film or pulp fiction, are typically sympathetic male characters who commit crimes or act violently and irrationally for reasons they can not control and do not understand. They are: "...deep, dark, mysterious and agitated," as one character simply phrased it in the film D.O.A.¹¹⁹ Women in film noir are rarely allowed this kind of subjectivity. Contradiction is off limits for female characters who are either absolutely good or absolutely evil. In Gilda, Rita Hayworth sings the song, "Put the Blame on Mame," an old show tune from the thirties which assigns the accountability for a series of natural disasters; storms, earthquakes and fires to the sexual prowess of one woman. In Hayworth's hands, the song becomes a poignant parody of her own role in the film: the well-worn cliché of the femme fatal.¹²⁰

"Never work," articulates itself, necessarily, in opposition to a particular political outlook, i.e. the centrality of work to the identity of the individual, whether it be in a communist or capitalist society. Nevertheless, the words remain dry and dutiful, forced and over determined.¹²¹ Strangely, at the end of the day, "Never work," seems too bossy,

¹¹⁸Judy Burchill, *Girls on Film* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).

¹¹⁹Micheal Leja, "Narcissus in Chaos," in *Abstract Expressionism: The Critical Developments*, (New York: Abrams, 1987), p. 259.

¹²⁰Ibid. The song itself was actually sung by Anita Ellis.

¹²¹One individual I interviewed informed me that he had documents that proved that the situationists had been funded by Soviet Communists, and that Guy Debord's commitment to this brand of politics was evident in his vocabulary which demonstrated a stern classic style consistent with orthodox Russian

overbearing, and entirely without poetry. Ironically, somehow the meaning and emotion conveyed by "Never work," becomes far too much, *like work*. "Gilda," or "*Gilda Je T'aime*," is not obviously bound to any such task. It can be read as an apolitical expression of open-ended desire for the mesmerizing Hollywood pin up girl and also, as a simultaneous critique and celebration of individualism. Executed with the unselfconscious distance of a true fan, it alludes to this outlawed sentiment at a time when expressing any kind of interest or deference to America was strictly forbidden, on both the traditional left and right. As such the ambiguous Gilda attempts to put the slip on both ideology and propaganda, and while it may not entirely succeed in evading these circumstances, it is profoundly anti-ideological, in the situationist sense, bringing the overarching influence of propaganda on this period, into sharp focus. Again, the graffiti Gilda tries to make that seemingly impossible space outside politics and ideology, so sought after in the fifties, possible. And, at the same time, it also manages to express a profound skepticism that such a possibility even exists. After all, maybe the graffiti is just about some woman, "I love so-and-so" being the original manifestation of this art form.

The Restraints Imposed on Posters, Excite the Pleasures of Graffiti without Restraint¹²²

Forsaking aesthetics for the political demands of propaganda, and bound by the constraints involved in collective processes, the workshop posters were completely outdone both philosophically and artistically by those created by the CMDO. It is not that the workshops weren't asking the right questions they just couldn't provide fast effective answers to the questions posed by the problem of democratic propaganda. The graffiti however wasted no time in pin-pointing the contradiction of trying to make artful

Communism. "Never Work!" is not perhaps the best example of this, but nevertheless demonstrates a seriousness absent in "I Love Gilda" or any of the other more playful slogans. Interview. François Le Tailléur. July 8, 1999.

¹²²This is a play on a graffiti from 68 that can be traced back to Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life* which read the constraints imposed on living, excite the pleasures of living without restraint.

propaganda, simultaneously demonstrating its own unparalleled effectiveness and sophistication.

The few workshop posters that did address aesthetics explicitly demonstrated that the collectives continued to conceive of themselves as radical militants and *artists*. For example, one poster, in imitation of situationists text-based series, asks: “Who creates, and for whom?”¹²³ (fig. 19) While another announces: “The art school is closed but revolutionary art is born!” (fig. 20)¹²⁴ Here, in another take off of Delacroix’s “Liberty Leading the people,” Liberty’s bayonet is replaced by a pallet and brushes. Where previously she raised the flag of republic, now she defiantly waves a notably unintimidating pallet knife. “*La police s’affiche aux beaux arts, les beaux arts affichent dans la rue,*” is yet another example (Fig. 21). Hinging on a play of both words and images, this poster attacks police presence in the art schools and celebrates the resistance of the artists. The French verb “*afficher*” means to poster, but the self-reflexive form “*s’affiche*,” means to pose or flaunt oneself. Hence the poster can be translated as: the police trespass on the artists turf, and in turn the artists take the streets. In the poster a skull, wearing a CRS (riot police) helmet carries a paint brush between its teeth. This is a variation on an anti-communist poster which first appeared in 1919 portraying a ‘red barbarian’ holding a knife in a similar fashion. In this way the historic fear mongering against communism is neatly equated with the conservative outcry against the actions of the students. In “Art in the service of the people” (fig. 22) a strong arm, labeled “the people” grasps a hammer, whose head is labeled with the word “art.”

Though perhaps it was not explicitly conceived with this intention, the image immediately brings to mind the hammer and sickle of the Russian flag, and also the aforementioned “cult of labour” associated with Russia which was so heavily criticized

¹²³Guilbaut pointed out to me here that in the particular example that I have used the poster has been *détourned* by a right wing religious militant. When the poster asks: Who creates? and For Whom? it is answered with the scrawling words: “ God...for man.”

¹²⁴Thanks go to Jeans-Louis Violeau for bringing these posters to my attention.

by some of the surrealists, and later the situationists. This image blatantly associates art with hard labour. The situationists conceived of authentic art, or in their words “poetry,” as the complete antithesis of work. According to Jorn, and others, art was an invitation to expend energies with no preordained objectives. The slogan itself “Art in the Service of the People” can be traced back to the communist slogan, “Art for the people, by the people, of the people.” As previously mentioned that slogan was *détourned* by the French surrealists in the thirties into the phrase, “Poetry in the service of Revolution” and then again by the situationists who made: “Revolution in the service of poetry,” their personal motto.

The CMDO posters never explicitly addressed the question of aesthetics. One notable exception, however was “*À suivre*” (fig. 23) Part of their original series, and following the format taken from the *Série Noire* novels, this poster stands out as a variation on their established layout: a giant white A, on a black background, takes up the entire surface of the poster. In the right foot of the almost figurative letter, the word *suivre* is written in the same type, this time, in black. The visual simplicity and stark elegance of this poster is very misleading as it contains a variety of ironic in jokes and allusions privy only to those in the know.

To begin with A is the universal sign for anarchism. While the situationists were highly critical of the established anarchist groups functioning in France at that moment, they could not deny their own origins in a particularly French form of libertarian anarchism strained through surrealism.¹²⁵ Viewed in this manner, the poster becomes a public acknowledgment of their roots, despite their reservations about the local brand. Including the small word *suivre* which means to follow, they are making a joke about the principals of anarchism: there are no leaders in anarchism, and hence no followers. The problem of leading a movement with no leaders is then manifested in the formal concerns of the work itself where the A towers over and dominates the smaller letters which spell

¹²⁵Thanks to Serge Guilbaut for this insight.

out the word *suivre*. "*À suivre*" can also be translated as "To be continued..." which was the common closing refrain of serial soaps or detective stories aired on radio and television shows of the fifties and sixties. In an ironic dig, here the CMDO admits the failure of their anarchist inspired revolution, but predict its certain return and continuation. Finally, "*À suivre*" also means to look, or follow closely. As I stated, this is not an outright manifesto of aesthetic guidelines, however it none-the-less advocates and at the same time confirms the importance of close visual interpretation.¹²⁶

The inability of the workshop posters to overcome their own limitations can be attributed to one important fact that is largely unaccounted for in the various histories of 1968: that is, the enormous influence of Maoism and its largely unacknowledged effect on aesthetic debates of the period.

In the sixties the two terms mass culture and popular culture became very confused, both in America and France. For the French the term mass culture signified capitalist culture, television culture, while in America mass culture signified communist culture, in the meantime the original meaning of popular culture, as distinct from pop music, got lost in the shuffle. The general bewilderment over what exactly constitutes popular and/or mass culture, the widespread denial that what makes up these categories has always been more of a political debate, than a universal given, is generally smoothed over in North American scholarship. This phenomenon can be traced back to the sixties and early seventies.

During this period if you were on the right in America and you were critical towards communism, you would be against mass culture as it was imposed from the top down, and perhaps in favour of high culture, like Clement Greenberg, for instance. If you were unimpressed with high culture, and mass culture, of both the capitalist and communist varieties, you might be a big fan of popular culture, a culture that was genuinely grassroots, built upon dialogue and agency. This latter definition comes from

¹²⁶And again here.

the French meaning of the term, and can also be linked to certain anarchist philosophies going back to the nineteenth century. On the other hand, if you were on the left in America, and you thought communism was a good idea, you might be all for mass culture, and maybe go so far as to say that mass culture *was* popular culture, and that high culture was imposed from the top down. This tendency can be observed in the work of such American critics such as Susan Sontag and Richard Poirier who wrote for the Partisan Review during the sixties. Both were advocates of the 'new sensibility' which denied distinctions between high and low and proclaimed film and rock and roll as important art forms of the twentieth century (In France film had always been considered an art form where film journals and clubs have prospered since before the war). Mass culture then became a term of praise, whereas high art was seen as elitist and artificial.

This latter position was the typical position of Maoist intellectuals all over the world in the sixties and was an important yet largely unacknowledged part of the *gauchiste* platform in France. In 68 Maoism was equated with a grass roots position, and the cultural revolution was widely believed to be a movement genuinely led by the people, for the people. Little was known at the time about the murderous realities of Mao's reign, and unlike the little red book, criticism of the Mao cult was conspicuously absent.

Despite the myth of a diverse array of politicians working in harmony in the workshops, the most powerful force at work in the so-called collectives (notwithstanding its explicit absence from the posters themselves) was actually Maoism. As one artist has suggested, Maoism hung upon the air of the *Atelier Populaire* like a perfume.¹²⁷ Arguably its presence can be more accurately described as a heavy fog. Another participant has reported that while the *Atelier Populaire* was very free and open to begin with, near the end, a Maoist commission, which met in a private room separate from the general assembly, was installed to oversee and approve slogans and images. According to the

¹²⁷Henri Cueco. Interview. June 25, 1999.

witness, this resulted in a return to dry blatantly ideological mottoes, imposed from the top down, such as: “The Fight Continues” instead of the more humourous, fast and philosophical examples which were really of the moment, such as, “La Chienlit c’est lui!” or “We are all undesirables!” which had originally defined the workshop’s spirit.¹²⁸

In 1958 Asger Jorn, defined popular culture accordingly: “Popular art does not actually correspond to the conceptions of the public because the public does not actively participate in artistic creation, and is unable to think outside the historical paradigms which have been imposed upon it. What characterizes popular art is an expression that is vital, direct and collective...” The situationists attraction to the vernacular such as *Série Noire* books, their predilection for words, particularly graffiti, the aforementioned pure poetry of Gilda for example, can be explained, not only as an effort to pull away from the stale artistic debates left over from the fifties, but also as a conscious attack against anti-aesthetic so-called popular movements such as the *Salon de la Jeune Peinture* and the workshop posters. The situationists understood that by 1968 anonymous graffiti was the only way certain radical ideas could be effectively conveyed in the public arena. In the heat of May and June, posters were simply not radical enough. In that moment the popular art form *par excellence*, graffiti, proved itself to be the most resistant to propaganda, and hence the most likely refuge for authentic art. As the domain of high art relinquished its monopoly on meaning and form, graffiti took it on.

¹²⁸ Michèle Katz. Interview. August 3, 1999.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

*une jeunesse que
l'avenir inquiète trop
souvent*



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



NOUS SOMMES TOUS

INDÉSIRABLES

Fig. 7

SÉRIE NOIRE

DANIEL PICOULY

Les larmes du chef

nrf

GALLIMARD

Fig. 8

A BAS



**LES CADENCES
INFERNALES**

Fig. 9

**ABOLITION
DE LA
SOCIÉTÉ
DE
CLASSE**

CONSEIL POUR LE MAINTIEN DES OCCUPATIONS

Fig. 10

nous voulons
une université
populaire



Fig. 11

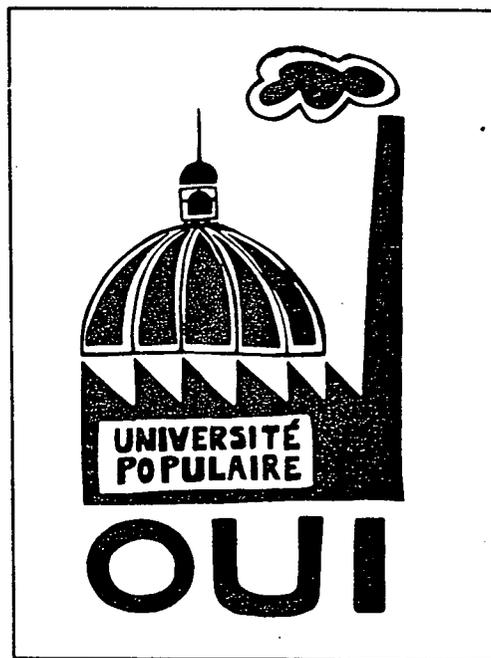


Fig. 12



Fig. 13

**LE
POUVOIR
AUX
CONSEILS
DE
TRAVAILLEURS**
CONSEIL POUR LE MAINTIEN DES OCCUPATIONS

Fig. 14



Fig. 15

**QUE PEUT
LE MOUVEMENT
REVOLUTIONNAIRE
MAINTENANT?**

TOUT

**QUE DEVIENT-IL
ENTRE LES MAINS DES PARTIS
ET DES SYNDICATS?**

RIEN

**QUE VEUT-IL? LA REALISATION
DE LA SOCIETE SANS CLASSE
PAR LE POUVOIR
DES CONSEILS OUVRIERS**

conseil pour le maintien des occupations

Fig. 16

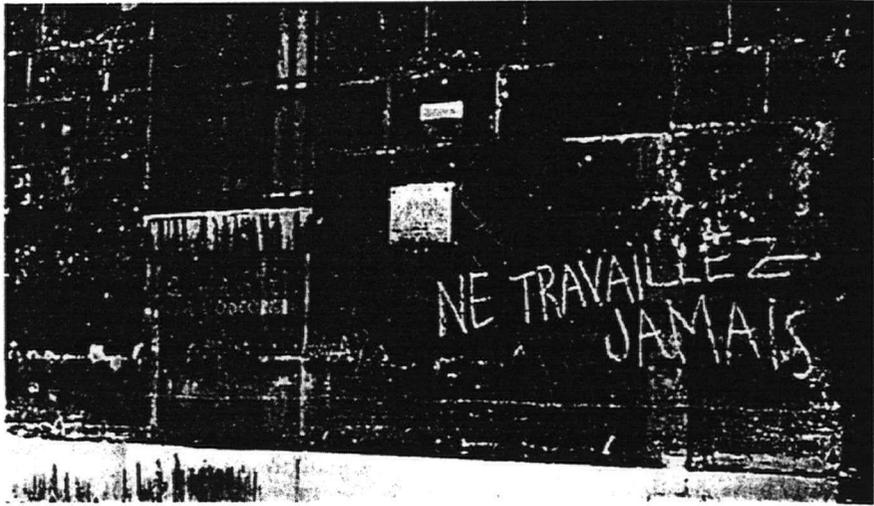


Fig. 17



Fig. 18

**QUI
CREE ?**

Le Bon Dieu

**POUR ?
QUI ?**

*pour
les hommes*

Fig. 19



Fig. 20

**LA POLICE S'AFFICHE
AUX BEAUX ARTS**



**LES BEAUX ARTS
AFFICHENT dans la RUE**

Fig. 21



Fig. 22

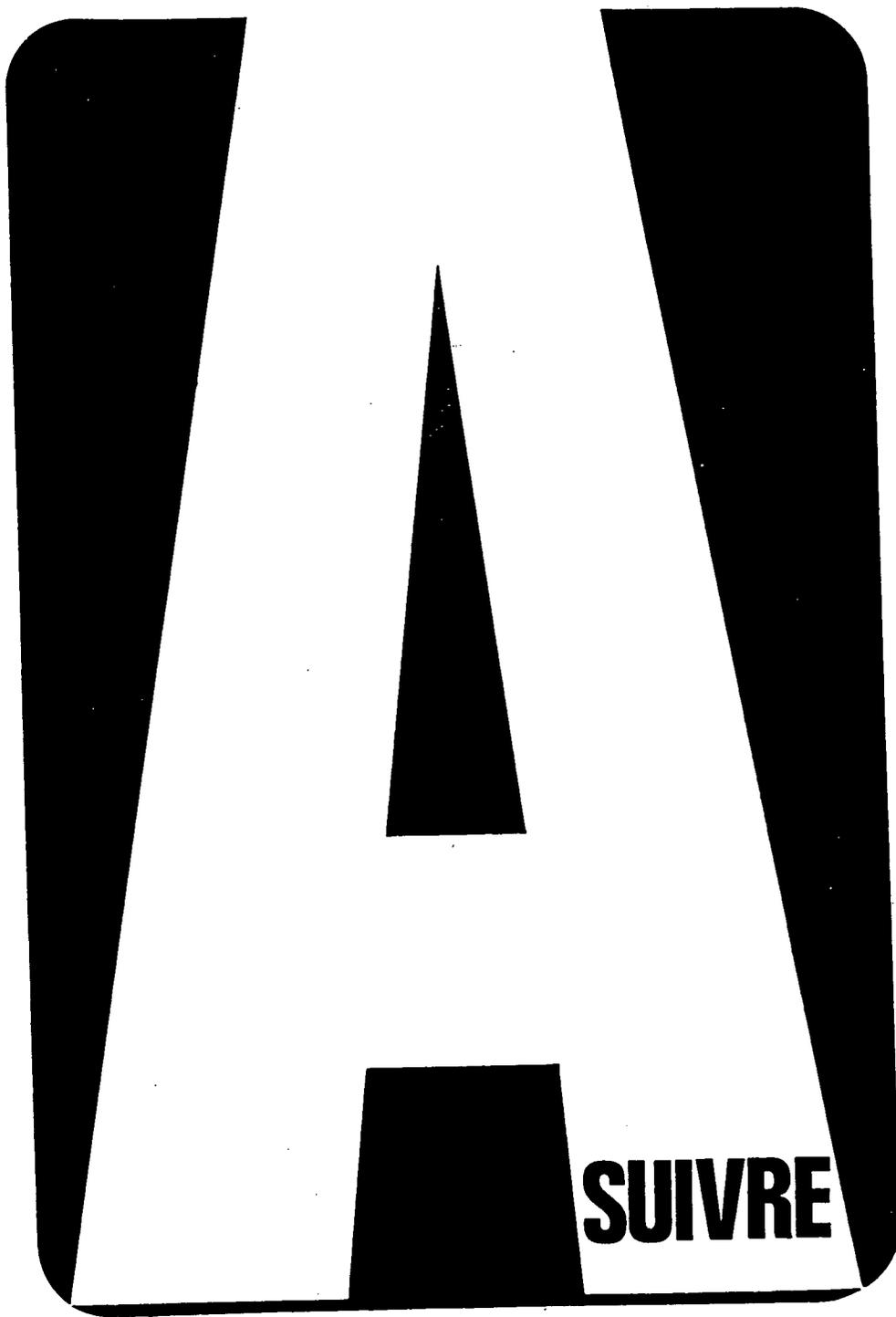


Fig. 23

Chapter III

La Langue du Mur: The Public Matter of Private Interests

The imagination took over the street and found there a support that measured up to its delirium.

-Walter Lewino, *Imagination au pouvoir: Photographies de Jo Schnapp*

No doubt it is an arduous task - as well as a monotonous one - to isolate the transforming action of the poetic imagination in the detail of the variations of the images.

-Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*,

A black and white photo taken in the heat of May 1968, by a man apparently named Jo Schnapp, depicts an anonymous Parisian street side location (fig. 1). Two walls wrapped in peeling posters frame a white gateway covered in graffiti which reads: “*Vivre sans temps mort*,” (Live without dead time) and “*Jouir sans entraves*” (Finish forever).¹²⁹ On either side of the battered portal, there are advertisements for beer, modern dance, cinema and movies, political personalities, burlesque ballets and classical music recitals. This intimate city-scape, illustrating the chaotic composition of shared space on a random sidewalk, demonstrates the dynamics of the ephemeral matter of the streets. Literally up against the wall, here the graffiti and posters collide, not only with each other, but also with the authority and so-called order of the district, indicated by two small signs attached to the doors forbidding postering (but notably not graffiti) in an accordance with a law passed on July 29th, 1881.

In the late forties Henri Lefebvre began developing his ideas concerning urban development and its effect on everyday life. He envisioned the city as an *oeuvre*, and argued for a conception of public space that recognized its pivotal role in forging a sense of community and identity. For Lefebvre, ideally the street was a place of play, a forum in which one might reassert the materiality of life, in a society where life seemed to be more and more immaterial. Above all, he wanted the city to be considered in its totality: “To think about the city is to hold and maintain its conflictual aspects: constraints and

¹²⁹Translated literally, “*Jouir sans entraves*” means orgasm without interruption.

possibilities, peacefulness and violence, meetings and solitude, gatherings and separation, the trivial and the poetic, brutal functionalism, and surprising improvisation.”¹³⁰ When students and workers took to the streets in May, demonstrating and marching throughout the city, writing graffiti and posterizing the walls of streets, buildings, billboards and anything else that stood still, they realized Lefebvre’s theories, de-pressurizing public space and decolonizing everyday life, opening up all the so-called ‘commonsense’ generalities of the city to the desires and whims of the public imagination.

My first chapter discussed the circumstances which led the situationists to adopt an aesthetic system which replaced the notion of beauty with the idea of poetry or *poésie*. Emphasizing open creation, formation, and production over a close-minded adherence to classical aesthetics, this program marked a distinct departure not only from traditional aesthetic philosophies but also from the very popular anti-aesthetic position (largely inspired by the strange bed-fellows of Maoism and American Pop art), which was also enjoying mainstream success at that time. This chapter will explore the importance of the city streets in this equation and demonstrate the ways in which the exhaustive exploration and exploitation of the meaning of public space in 68 lent so much power to this movement, and the art it produced. At this time the definition of public space was being fiercely contested throughout France, as schools, businesses, and factories were occupied by their constituents. As private space retreated, public space - the streets and beyond - became a utopic crucible where all the defining elements of 68 were brought together producing a potent mixture which would enable the situationists to achieve their ultimate objective of overcoming the division between life and art, if only for a brief two month interval.

During this time, the city, starved of gas by the state, forced everyone onto their bikes, or more often, their feet. Increased numbers of people in the street, for longer periods of time, at all hours of the day and night, changed Paris profoundly. According to

¹³⁰Lefebvre, *Qu'est-que penser?* (Paris: Publisud, 1985), p. 110.

some accounts, the city even began to smell differently. No longer were the roads polluted by the noise and fumes of cars, now the pavement smelled distinctly like people.¹³¹ And the sounds of barmping horns, growling engines and the relentless drill of motor scooters, were replaced by thousands of voices engaging in endless discussion and debate.¹³²

Many historians have noted the importance of speech in 68. Michel de Certeau for example, has argued that the notion of the *prise de parole*, inadequately translated as the capture of speech, specifically political speech, is the most crucial aspect of that year. "Everywhere we saw exploding in the surge of lyricism, in undefined palavers, an apology for the tidal wave of common speech, what was basically a kind of neutral experience, but of a veracity for each and every person because everyone could discover themselves in a fabric of language, of speech."¹³³ Long time member of the *Salon de la jeune peinture*, artist Henri Cueco described his experience with the following remarks:

Many spoke as if they were singing a song. Others read menus out of order producing raw street poetry and surprising themselves with the effect of their speech. The timid and taciturn spoke, the dumb gestured semaphorically, the loud became lyrical; the relentless south Americans, the Spanish, became confused, the precious Italians, the old exiles, no one was ashamed of their voice, of their accent, of their words. Most often, it must be said, no one really understood what they themselves were saying. It was like a song, it was the general impression that mattered, not the meaning of the lyrics; the chorus, that was the most important thing to remember. Often it was the well turned phrase that provoked condemnation. Clumsy words were considered more authentic: rhetorical skills no longer passed muster.¹³⁴

Riots are typically associated with the spoken word, or more often, the shouted word, but writing and print also occupy a central position in the history of street protest. Speech, radio, the press, information of all kinds became highly politicized in 68 as people began to recognize the power the state wielded over the media. In an effort to

¹³¹As Serge Guilbaut has pointed out to me here, what I mean to say is that the streets smelled like garbage. Like everyone else, the garbage collectors were on strike so no one was picking up the trash. This resulted in huge piles of refuse, ripening in the hot sun, for almost two months, throughout the city.

¹³²Interview. Michèle Katz. August 3, 1999.

¹³³Michel de Certeau, in Jean-Michel Damien, ed., *Regards sur un revolte. Que faisaient-ils en avril?* (Paris: Declee de Brower, 1969), p. 204 - 205.

¹³⁴Henri Cueco, *Revue D'Esthétique* 17, 1990 pp. 42-43.

contest this one-sided barrage of so-called information the students and workers began publishing their own newspapers, and also turned to foreign radio stations for news about the events.¹³⁵ Aside from *la prise de parole*, the newspaper trade, experienced an unforeseen boom in 68: both established presses and the new dailies enjoyed extra-large print runs at this time, while thousands of tracts and manifestos were also printed (fig. 2).

Michel de Certeau has chalked up this textual phenomenon to the importance of writing for working through problems, noting that the enthusiasm for the spoken word demonstrated in May, was quickly reversed in June as people turned to print in an effort to make sense of it all.¹³⁶ One scholar has described the posters as, "...the cold ashes of heated discussions and arguments,"¹³⁷ affirming the observations of Laurent Gervereau who has pointed out that the majority of posters we associate with May were actually produced in June.¹³⁸ This argument can not be made for the graffiti however, which appeared, much earlier than the posters, on May 6th a few short days before the first serious street fight which took place on March 10th, commonly referred to as "The Night of the Barricades."¹³⁹

Baudrillard has suggested that the only authentically revolutionary form of communication in 68 were the acts that bypassed the media and the official circuits of the arts. Personal conversations, and the word play that characterized the graffiti, produced a "transgressive reversal of discourse." According to Baudrillard the streets were subversive because they in no way claimed objectivity as did the state newspapers, radio and television. Furthermore, graffiti goaded their audiences into responding, unlike the one

¹³⁵ Students were listening to radio stations from Monaco, Luxembourg, and England.

¹³⁶ Michel de Certeau, "For A New Culture (Paris, September 9, 1968)" in *The Capture of Speech and Other Political Writings* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p. 41 - 42.

¹³⁷ Serge Guilbaut, "Get A(n) (everyday) Life!" in *Up Against the Wall Motherposter!* Exhibition Catalogue, Belkin Gallery, December 1999. p. 3.

¹³⁸ Laurent Gervereau, "L'Art au Service du Mouvement," in *Mai 68: les mouvements étudiants en France et dans le Monde* (Paris: Collections des publications de BDIC, 1988), p. 164.

¹³⁹ One of the more notable aspects of 68 was the fact that it was the first time overturned cars were used as barricades.

way screen of mass media.¹⁴⁰ Graffiti was the *sine qua non* of communication at this time exactly because it was *un-mediated*.¹⁴¹

Although in recent years Roger Chartier and W.J.T. Mitchell have written about the tension between words and images, speech and words are not intuitively associated with visuality. This idea is, of course, central to an examination of graffiti. Speech is important, because while it is generally conceived as occupying a position clearly outside the domain of the image, the instantaneousness of speech, its ephemerality, suggested by the word bubbles or clouds that appear comic books, is essential to this form. In addition, the presence and freshness of oral debate is often represented in graffiti, as public space is held hostage to these mute gestures, and we, as an audience, are forced to confront them, and they each other.

Slight of Hand: Posters & Graffiti in the Streets

Graffiti oscillates between representations, it is both figural and textual.¹⁴² It can be defined as verbal images that are addressed freely to a certain audience, written on a ground that was not meant for that purpose, using what is at hand, in the immediate time available.¹⁴³ Readability is sometimes cited as the only criteria for graffiti, but unreadability, not to mention the choice of location, and juxtaposition with other signs; posters, graffiti or other cultural signifiers, i.e. movies and political events, have always been important elements.

Graffiti declares that the normal conduits of information, the 'official texts' have proved inadequate, that they are denying the reality of at least one segment of the population.¹⁴⁴ They are almost always an attack: even the chaotic aesthetics of a well used wall is an attack on the accepted aesthetics of the status quo: "... frequently phrased in esoteric and coded forms, it is often difficult for the casual observer to distinguish

¹⁴⁰Jean Baudrillard, *Pour une critique de l'économie politique du signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), p. 218.

¹⁴¹Again, thanks to Maggie Milne for this discerning remark.

¹⁴²Denys Riout, *Le Livre du Graffiti*, p. 37-38.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 4.

between what is merely incoherent and what has been written in a magical code reserved for initiates.”¹⁴⁵

In both their approach to public space, and rough spontaneous visual style, the posters owe much to graffiti and should be seen as an extension of this tradition, with some important qualifications. Like graffiti, the posters served as a communication network, publicizing events and providing valuable information the press was omitting or ignoring. Produced on the fly, they were used to respond to events immediately, and their presence throughout the Latin Quarter was testimony to the magnitude of the movement. However, the production of posters in 68 was a group effort, and, consequently, it was bound by certain limitations. First of all, to make copious amounts of posters you need adequate materials, sufficient space and the appropriate equipment. Also, because of the number of people participating, production was time consuming. Formulated by members of collectives, who often discussed all the pertinent issues concerned, including social and philosophical questions, via their continuous general assemblies, the poster often had to work its way through several layers of unofficial censorship, before it reached the public. This sometimes had the effect of slowing up the dialogue that was beginning to take shape between the mainstream press and the students, but it also severely frustrated the radical ideas that were struggling to gain an audience. Graffiti managed to avoid these snares. Unlike the slow process of the posters, the graffiti writers avoided the problem of consensus. Often executed in secret and in defiance of local law and/or even one's supposed political comrades, this largely individual act, suffered editors only after it had been received by the public. Relatively uncensored, the integrity of the ideas remained intact. In many ways graffiti was a more direct and original form of expression, and most importantly, it was fast.

¹⁴⁵An exception to this is Brazil, where they actually celebrate “National Graffiti Day.” Ibid. Howard J. Pearlstein, “Handwriting on the Wall,” in *Aesthetics of Graffiti* San Francisco Museum of Modern Art 1978 (no page numbers).

Cities are like books. Major cities swarm with multiple texts: street names, people, societies, banners, journals, tracts, menus, prices, etc.¹⁴⁶ Posters and graffiti occupy a category which stands somewhere between speech acts and monuments.¹⁴⁷ Together in 68 they enabled the Latin Quarter to brake free of its official script, politicizing public space by laying out the issues before the eyes of their readers, bringing the importance of contrast and comparison, in terms of both politics and aesthetics, into the foreground.

While stores and street signs linked the buildings and spaces of the Latin Quarter together, and the Sorbonne marked out its territory through its monumental architecture and stately vistas, the posters and graffiti subverted these connections, treating the streets, back alleys, facades and monuments as an open screen for the projection of manifestos, gimmicks and acts of sabotage.¹⁴⁸ Challenging the conformity of the traditional commercial and political signage, these illegal interventions broke down the impersonal authority of public space by suggesting referential relationships betwixt and between what had previously been considered to be wholly unrelated urban texts.¹⁴⁹

Collectively, the graffiti and posters gauged the debate and drew lots for their audiences. Shamelessly competing with each other, the regular French commercial and political posters, and the oversized American style posters, they covered the spaces closest to eye level, their words alternately expanding or contracting, even winding around architectural components, according to their whims and/or objectives: "I take my desires for reality because I believe in the reality of my desires," for example, which was written near the Rococo stairway of the Sorbonne amphitheater (fig. 3).

¹⁴⁶*Le Livre du Graffiti*, texte de Denys Riout, Photographies de Dominique Gurdjian, Jean-Pierre Leroux and Denys Riout, (Paris: Éditions Alternatives, 1990), p. 4.

¹⁴⁷ David M. Henkin applies these ideas specifically to nineteenth century New York, but I think they provide a useful way to discuss Paris in 68. *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 71.

¹⁴⁸Henkin, p. 15.

¹⁴⁹Henkin, p. 18 & 71.

As they accumulated their original messages were continually being reformulated. To some extent this undermined their effectiveness as walls of mixed messages covered one another like scales, canceling each other out, or simply blurring altogether into one long incomprehensible passage.¹⁵⁰ In the public domain, however, these elements were radically severed from their author's control.¹⁵¹ On one hand walls of endless directives risked being ignored by their intended audiences but they could also be continually rearranged to create humorous and subversive juxtapositions.¹⁵²

The photograph of the Parisian sidewalk scene discussed earlier provides us with a demonstration of how this played out on the ground level (fig. 1). On the left wall a poster displaying a ribbed goblet filled with beer labeled Vega is decorated with smiling words that read: "The blond from the North" Below the word "Logos," appear on a film poster, and below that an advertisement with bold black lettering announces a show entitled, "The Funny Game." To the left is a poster publicizing midnight film screenings of *The House of the Devil*, *Monsters from Space*, and *Nosferatu*. On the other side of "The Funny Game," squeezed in above a flyer for a burlesque ballet entitled "Death" is an election poster for smiling politician with the unfortunate last name of Low.

Dominating the wall on the right side of the gate is an advertisement for a Hollywood film executed in the same style as the CMDO posters, with bold oversized white letters on a black background. *The Outlaw*, directed by the American Industrialist Howard Hughes, was made in 1941. Sometimes referred to as the most infamous western of all time, as its so-called racy contents had it banned from public theaters until 1946, it starred Thomas Mitchell, Jack Bueter, and Jane Russell in a down to earth take on the legendary life of Billy the Kid. Above the title is a quote from the French film critic André Bazin: "They slept with the same woman, but they loved the same horse."

¹⁵⁰Ibid.

¹⁵¹Ibid.

¹⁵²Henkin, p. 18.

Below is another advertisement for late night cinema. Under the heading “Erotically yours...,” this time dashed out in sloppy white paint, they advertise a showing of *Un Chien andalou* (1926). This was the first film made by the surrealist Spanish director Luis Buñuel, which he co-wrote with Salvador Dali.¹⁵³ Below, a young woman lies prostrate, her hair spilling over her unsmiling face which stares out at us vacantly. Like an over easy Olympia, she too is punctuated with a black cat who has conformably settled on her ass. Most commonly associated here in North America, with Halloween, among anarchists, black cats are code for anarchism itself. Below it, in casual lettering it warns: “An Affair of the Heart restricted for those under eighteen.” Again the lowest register is inhabited by politicians: Mr. Low and, unbelievably, Mr. Straightlaced.

Finally, on the doors, in defiance of municipal law which has been physically and permanently posted in the space itself, lest anyone forget, via those two miniature metal signs, is the graffiti dramatizing “...the clash between a barely conspicuous and patently ineffective public authority, and a commercial culture intent on leaving no vertical space unmarked.”¹⁵⁴

The posters themselves are laid out in such a way as to create a subversive stream of dialogue. Cleverly unfurling the politics of city space via a barrage of juxtapositions and jokes. The prominent poster for *The Outlaw* refers to the illegal act of graffiti itself, and its absent author who has already made his successful getaway. Women, crime, sex and pleasure are given high priority in this “funny game” of the apparently accidental collage, where even the beer is a blond. Formal politics and politicians, the men who make the laws, are relegated to their natural resting place at the bottom of the register, refiguring public space and inverting social hierarchies where politicians normally float to the top. Finally, in the last ironic twist, the small metal “*défense d’afficher*” signs on the doors are actually directed at the walls covered in posters. Hence, the words written on the door are

¹⁵³Buñuel later parted company with Dali when he supported Franco.

¹⁵⁴Henkin, p. 70.

not unlawful but in fact *legal*, testifying yet again to the superiority of graffiti over the posters.¹⁵⁵

The same hand writing graces a wall in another photograph (fig. 4). This time it reads "Never Work." In the background, perhaps in an abandoned alleyway another wall has been tiled with black posters, again replicating the style of the CMDO. Large white text reads, over and over again: "Savage Credo." Suggesting that "Never Work" is the savage motto of the socially and politically dispossessed. Inside the Sorbonne the outlaw strikes again along a set of stairs which guides students on a daily basis through their academic schedules. "Hide yourself object!" warns one, while another directs the reader to "Put your head down and graze!" or in an alternate translation, implying oral sex "Shut up and eat!" The writing pulls the viewers eyes to the floor, mimicking the motions of a cow, or in the latter case, an obedient lover (fig. 5).¹⁵⁶ Here the students are eloquently being criticized for their passivity and herd mentality, and even perhaps their tired sexual habits. This graffiti makes the invisible politics of the space visible; not only does it articulate that hazy moment between classes when students let the nameless crowds pull them to their preordained destination but it also refers to the highly charged public morality regarding sexual relations among young people at this time.

Noir: The Silent Partner

In North America the word noir is usually associated with Hollywood movies, particularly those made in the forties. In France however, the meaning of the term noir has a distinctly political flavour, and is often used in a broader fashion to denote a particular aesthetic, or sensibility. Previous chapters alluded to noir as an important influence on the CMDO posters, specifically in their imitation of the graphic design of *Série Noire* crime novels, and also the graffiti, "I love Gilda," which referenced the film noir of the same

¹⁵⁵Thanks again to Serge Guilbaut for recognizing this little mockery of state control of public space.

¹⁵⁶Here at UBC, behind Serge Guilbaut's back, his students often refer to him as 'Coach' or simply: 'The Master.' Again I have him to thank for this last interpretation of "Baisse-toi et broute!" which I would have completely missed if he had not so generously pointed it out to me.

name. In fact the term noir had been in use in France since the thirties, and was a crucial element of surrealism, and later Existentialism. Both movements were very influential on the situationists, who were also greatly attracted to the noir mystique. To understand the importance of this concept to 68, and to the situationists themselves, it is essential to have a grasp of this notion's history, and its relation to French film, and pulp fiction.

According to film historian Charles O'Brien the origins of the word noir go back to the years before the war. At that time the word noir often had derisive connotations and was frequently used by the right wing French press in their attacks on the "immorality and scandal" of left wing culture.¹⁵⁷ Soon after it was embraced by several writers who used it to describe a series of dark prewar melodramas set in the criminal underworld such as *Pépé le Moko* (1936), *Hôtel du Nord* (1938), and *Le jour se lève* (1939).¹⁵⁸ Later, in the forties, when many of the same themes were taken up and explored by American directors (many of whom were European émigrés - particularly Germans), the term was re-invoked by French critics who could immediately relate to the moral ambiguity, and the honourable criminals of their own golden age of cinema.¹⁵⁹ The compromised and conflicted nature of film noir, and noir protagonists however, was in no way exclusive to film. Pulp fiction, particularly American pulp fiction novels, with their portrayal of sympathetic outlaws also embodied the noir sensibility.

Throughout the war American crime novels enjoyed unprecedented popularity in Europe.¹⁶⁰ George Orwell has put it down to the sheer boredom of being bombed: the "...millions to whom the world of gangsters and the prize ring is more "real," more

¹⁵⁷Charles O'Brien, "Film Noir in France: Before the Liberation," *Iris* 21 (spring 1996): 7-20. Of course the term noir has an even older history: it describes the roman noir, or gothic novel, and in French Literary criticism it suggests the decadent of late romanticism. quoted in James Naremore, *More than Noir: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) p. 15.

¹⁵⁸Naremore, p. 15.

¹⁵⁹Naremore, p. 20.

¹⁶⁰ "...but it seems to have enjoyed its greatest popularity in 1940 during the battle of Britain and the Blitz." George Orwell, "No Raffles and Miss Blandish," in *The Collected Essays of George Orwell* (London: Secker, 1961) p. 255.

“tough,” than such things as war, revolutions, earthquakes famines, and pestilence.”¹⁶¹ James Naremore has suggested that it was because they depicted a violent and corrupt world where ambiguous personal action was the only redemptive gesture possible.¹⁶² In fact the alienation and nihilism which defined the American crime novel in this period was probably strangely comforting to the soldiers fighting in the muddy trenches of World War II.¹⁶³ All the same, whoever was reading those novels was not reading them in French, as translations of American crime novels were not widely available in France until after the war.

The American crime novel was actually introduced in France by the *Série Noire* collection, discussed earlier. Established in 1945 by the surrealist Marcel Duhamel this series endeavored to: “...choose manuscripts which were the most authentic and to propose novels that were living documents, true to life witnesses of the era.”¹⁶⁴ The problem with which he was immediately confronted with, was that of translation. Instead of hiring academics and specialists his solution was to employ journalists whose bread and butter was the everyday language of the streets. These were a new type of translators because they thought and wrote in the vernacular. This new style of French language imitated the terse dialogue of the American novels and established a unique tone that became inextricably associated with these novels and the noir sensibility as a whole.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹Ibid., p. 256.

¹⁶²Naremore, p. 24.

¹⁶³Tony Hilfer, *The Crime Novel: A Deviant Genre* (Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1990), p. xiii.

¹⁶⁴“...Marcel Duhamel drew enough resources from his rather fanciful (but highly stylish) participation in the hotel industry (he was a manager of a hotel owned by one of his uncles), to shelter there permanently his friends Jacques Prévert and Yves Tanguy, who at that time excelled only in the art of living and of enlivening everything with their witticisms. Benjamin Péret stayed there also for a long time. Absolute non-conformity and total irreverance were the fashion, the best of moods reigned. It was a time for pleasure and nothing else. Nearly each evening found us gathered together around a table where the Château Yquem designed to blend it's sweet presence with those of many other and much more tonic brands.” André Breton quoted in *The Autobiography of Surrealism* Ed. Marcel Jean (New York: Viking Press, 1980), p. 222.

¹⁶⁵The translators were Jacques-Laurent Bost, Boris Vian, Robert Scipion, the son of Gromaire, Jacques Legris and Henri Robillot. Pierre Giraud and Pierre Ditalia, *L'Argot de la Série Noire*, p. 9.

In the *Série Noire* novels, the seamy reality of the American underworld of the late thirties and forties was revealed. Written in coded patois these books spoke to the wet grime of the gutter, the violence of the street, and also to sex, issues which were all pivotal to the adventure of 68.¹⁶⁶ Perhaps it is not so strange then that, these stories, which enjoyed such widespread popularity among the general public, also found favour among members of the situationists, many pro-situationist groups, and other types of anarchists active at the time.¹⁶⁷ Noir became a code, covertly indicating political allegiances: not just to anarchism (which is traditionally indicated by the colour black), or leftist principles in general, but to a nuanced aesthetic, examples of which, were inextricably bound to an authentically popular culture and a recognition of the art of the vernacular.¹⁶⁸

In *Panorama du film noir américain* (1955), Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton define noir as method of psychological disruption whereby the spectator is disoriented by inverting common conventions. Noir reverses normality creating a tension that results from the upheaval of order and the "...disappearance of psychological bearings or guideposts."¹⁶⁹ Losing your orientation, on a grand scale, both psychologically and physically was what the situationists wished for everyone involved

¹⁶⁶Despite its complete absence from the posters, and rare appearance in the graffiti, as I stated in my introduction many people trace the disturbances of 68 back to the problem of repressed, frustrated and/or overly controlled sexuality. Specifically this can be concretely observed via the occupation of dorms in Nanterre, which were organized to protest curfews and the gender exclusivity of student dorms.

¹⁶⁷ The quotation, "Besides, you anarchists are poor operators. Whenever you try your hand at it you bungle or get caught." from Jack London's tale about the philosophical contradictions involved in being an assassin for anarchists, *The Assassination Bureau Ltd.* is cited at the beginning of the collection concerning the relations between the situationists and the Fédération des Anarchistes: *La F.A. et les situationnistes ou mémoire pour discussion dans les familles après boire* (éditeur responsable Guy Bodson {Guy Debord?}, 1969?).

¹⁶⁸ Whereas American intellectuals, acclaimed movies as the great twentieth century art form in the sixties in France film clubs and journals had existed since the thirties. French intellectual circles had always recognized the importance of film and, because of this history, had developed a strong school of criticism, which differentiated between authentically popular, i.e. grass roots film, and so-called popular American movies. Naremore, p. 13. Incidentally, this also relates back to the Maoism question because it was American intellectuals, such as Susan Sontag and others associated with the *Partisan Review*, which then confused the terms popular and mass culture in the sixties - calling American movies produced for mass consumption, "popular" movies. While she may not have been Maoist herself, the position she took up was typical of Maoists at that time.

¹⁶⁹Quoted in Naremore, p. 21.

in 68. Not only did the noir sensibility allude to the criminal adventures waiting in the street, it also suggested the untapped possibilities of the public imagination.

Drôle de Jeu: The Problem of Propaganda

Spontaneity was highly valued in May and June 1968. It continues to be considered one of its defining characteristics. No longer did revolution have to be a predictable Marxist co-efficient born of a conscious proletariat down on its luck. The almost revolution was proof. Profound destabilization was, apparently, authentically unpredictable, dependent on nothing more than the coupling of everyday boredom with night time sexual frustration.¹⁷⁰ Alienation was not inevitable. The ubiquitous graffiti of the period echoed this conviction as it ironically commanded its audience to break the ice and: "Be Spontaneous!"

Sifting through the remnants of 68, it becomes clear the keen irony of that phrase is perhaps more important than its eager sentiment. Combined with the extraordinary cultural explosion that accompanied the two month long general strike, the irony evident in many of the slogans, graffiti and posters produced during this period invoke the problem of democratic propaganda. That is, the problem of how to create propaganda that does not manipulate and thereby degrade its audience: how to capture the imagination without destroying it, or how to spontaneously upset the apple cart instead of paradoxically dictating its operation.

Writing in 1962, French intellectual Jacques Ellul defined propaganda as a set of methods employed by an organized group that wants to bring about the active or passive participation in its actions of a mass of individuals, psychologically unified through psychological manipulations and incorporated in an organization.¹⁷¹ He voiced deep concerns about this issue: "...propaganda is undoubtedly the most formidable power, acting in only one direction (toward the destruction of truth and freedom), no matter what

¹⁷⁰See footnote 2, on page 88.

¹⁷¹Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* trans. by Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner (New York: Vintage books, 1973, 1965), p. 61.

the good intentions or the good will may be of those who manipulate it.”¹⁷² To defend oneself against this tyranny Ellul obliged the public to become informed about propaganda’s limits and capabilities, and, in turn, to put it to use in a conscientious manner, because, while propaganda’s reductive tendencies were considered anti-democratic, democratic society could not function without it.¹⁷³

As I stated in my first chapter, in 1956 the situationists believed that: “The literary and artistic heritage of the world should be used for partisan propaganda purposes.”¹⁷⁴ But by 1963 they had changed their position: “It is the merit of Jacques Ellul, in his book *Propaganda*, which describes the unity of the various forms of conditioning, to have shown that this advertising-propaganda is not merely an unhealthy excrescence that could be prohibited, but it is, at the same time a remedy in a generally sick society, a remedy that makes the sickness tolerable while aggravating it. People are a great extent accomplices of propaganda, of the reigning spectacle, because they can not reject it without contesting the society as a whole.”¹⁷⁵

The objectives of the situationists were very much concerned with the installation of not just radical democracy but *direct* democracy, this is an idea rooted in anarchism and is entirely inimical to propaganda.¹⁷⁶ In fact, at the time, anarchists involved in the

¹⁷²Ellul, p. 257.

¹⁷³Ibid. Reassessing Ellul’s work, it is interesting to note, that while his analysis of propaganda set the scholarly standard of the times, he neglected a subject particularly pertinent to his thesis: the image. While the book historicizes and describes the way propaganda functioned throughout World War II, and the post-war era, it completely overlooks the significance of visual culture. It is not outrageous to suggest that this component of propaganda, could have provided a compelling subject. The analysis of images is, none-the-less, largely absent from most intellectual endeavors undertaken during this period. From the late fifties, and beyond, heavy hitters like Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Baudrillard, and Barthes were all working on semiotics [Foucault was writing about art, but his discussion takes as its central concern the question of the gaze. See Martin Jay, “From the Empire of the Gaze to the Society of the Spectacle: Foucault and Debord,” *Downcast Eyes: the Denigration of Vision in twentieth-century French Thought* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1993), p. 383]. Ellul does address this subject in an extended footnote (pages 163 to 164), however the subject remains peripheral to his overall thesis. He did of course address this later in his book *The Humiliation of the Word*, 1981.

¹⁷⁴Guy Debord & Gil J. Wolman, “Mode d’emploi du détournement,” in *Les Lèvres Nues* 8 (Brussels, 1956).

¹⁷⁵“Domination de la nature, idéologies et classes,” in *Internationale situationniste* 8 (janvier 1963), p. 7.

¹⁷⁶Direct democracy describes an social organisation whereby there is no representation. Everyone represents herself or himself without mediation of any kind. This is different than radical democracy which still functions on the model of representational government.

French *Fédération des Anarchistes* were actually debating whether or not anarchist propaganda existed.¹⁷⁷ The situationists understood this but they also were aware that: “Propaganda is the modern instrument by which...intelligent men can fight for productive ends and help bring order out of chaos.”¹⁷⁸ Ellul also wrote that the best propagandists did not believe the propaganda they disseminated: like the situationists, the efforts of great propagandists were, in no way interested in promoting the “truth,” their sole objective was to effect change.

The situationists’ approach contained within it the critique of ideology which distinguished them from the French anarchists. According to the situationists, the anarchists had turned Marx into a religious figure, and Marxism into a stagnant dogma. The situationists believed that if anything was to be retrieved from Marxism it would have to be up-dated and re-evaluated: Marxism’s revolutionary credibility had to be gauged in correspondence to its contemporary relevance, to everyone - not just western Marxists and/or intellectuals.

Historically western Marxists have been content to point out that the defiance of the status quo can be expressed only in terms not easily absorbed and neutralized by current popular discourse.¹⁷⁹ Many intellectuals believed that popularization of Marxist ideas risked the dilution, if not the perversion of their meaning, not to mention the possibility of pre-mature co-optation.¹⁸⁰ The situationists played both sides of this argument. On the one hand they refused to dilute the potency of their critique but they delivered it in forms relevant to mass and popular culture. Whether it was intentional or not their campaign worked on two levels: both official and unofficial. While the CMDO

¹⁷⁷*La f.a. et les situationistes ou mémoire pour discussion dans les familles après boire* (Paris: Guy Bodson, 1969), p. 4.

¹⁷⁸Edward Bernays quoted in Ellul, 119.

¹⁷⁹Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 1984), p. 11 - 12.

¹⁸⁰Ibid.

posters, presented the position of the more orthodox strains of Situationism, the graffiti displayed an attitude typical of their more playful libertarian elements.

The urban critique afforded by graffiti, dependent as it was on the material characteristics and physicality of space in the inner city, was in complete agreement with the situationist tactic referred to as *la dérive*, the urban equivalent of *détournement*, alluded to in previous chapters. It was about turning the city inside out, changing the modern city-scape into a liberated zone in which authentic life would bring down the fiction of the city skyline.¹⁸¹ If the *dérive* was a form of intelligence “immersed in practice,” combining “flair, sagacity, foresight, intellectual flexibility, deception, vigilant resourcefulness, vigilant watchfulness, a sense for opportunities, diverse sorts of cleverness, and a great deal of acquired experience,”¹⁸² situationist graffiti was its embodiment. At a time when total expression in the sphere of ‘high art’ had become impossible, the poetic and polemical qualities of graffiti in 68 made total critique a reality.

¹⁸¹Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 425.

¹⁸²Marcel Détiene and Jean-Pierre Vernant, *Les Ruses de l'intelligence. La Métis des Grecs* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974); quoted in Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p 81.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

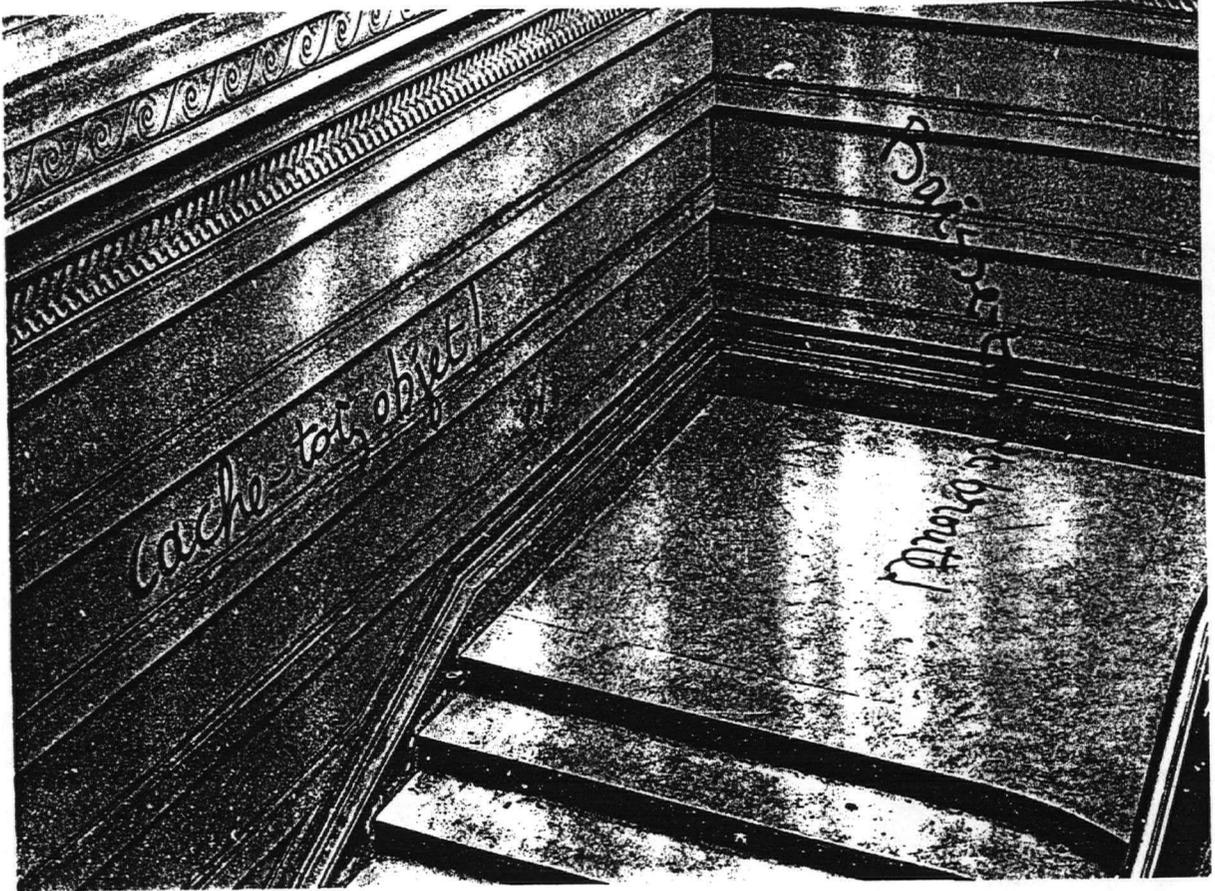


Fig. 5

Conclusion

Out of the Past

The value of an old work of art should be assessed on the basis on the amount of radical theory that can be drawn from it, on the basis of the nucleus of creative spontaneity which the new creators will be able to release from it, for the purposes of - and by means of, an unprecedented kind of poetry.

-Raoul Vaneigem, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*

Modernism is traditionally understood to have a strong formal constituent and has historically been defined as the defense of aesthetics against social, political, historical and intellectual forces. Crow challenges this idea, replacing it with the notion that modernism is about formal schisms between popular and high culture which ideally stimulate critical consciousness.¹⁸³ While Crow implies the importance of aesthetics in this equation, he never explicitly articulates this idea. These two definitions, however, the pitch for aesthetics on one hand and the import of critical consciousness for creating change on the other, are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, they are inextricably intertwined as the situationists' poetic realization of art in the streets of Paris 1968 demonstrates.

The writings of the situationists are largely read as a universal theory, that is to say a theory applicable to the entire perimeters of the expanding western world. Indeed since 1968, many of the tactics laid out by the situationists have been skillfully implemented by a diverse array of artists and activists both in France and abroad. However, to really get to the heart of this 'universal' theory, it is important to get a fix on the very particular circumstances that brought this movement about. North American scholars often imply that the situationists rejected art on the basis of its association with the bourgeoisie. Certainly the situationists had no mercy for bourgeois values, but at the same time, neither were they interested in promoting some anachronistic naïve conception of the happy worker, as promoted by communist social realism or variations thereof. This complex position was realized in their aesthetic program which was developed both

¹⁸³Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," in *Modern Art in the Common Cultures* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 29.

with and against the grain of the artistic and intellectual debates that took place in France in the postwar period. The situationists were, in fact attentive to issues of form but it was a project completely removed from the artistic ideals of both the traditional left and right, and fundamentally concerned with authentic popular culture.

Artists associated with the *Salon de la jeune peinture* flattened painting out to the lowest common denominator. Believing that their images were transparent and universally intelligible, they denied the fact that form is always ideological, that images are inseparable from the contexts and time periods from which they originate. Inspired by publicity posters, they clung to the idea that their adherence to a commercial format testified to their defiance of bourgeois representational codes and that their paintings were more open and readable to a non-cultivated audience.¹⁸⁴ When criticized for sticking to what amounted to a rehashed notion of social realism, they responded by asserting that their works, however figurative, were consistently critical, unlike social realist images where the sun never seemed to set.¹⁸⁵ However it wasn't the question of content that made these paintings suspect, it was the philosophical principals that informed the works that opened them up to this valid criticism.

These mainstream painters turned away from aesthetics because they saw it as a tool for ideological mystification. They chose the format of the banner or the placard with a view to making their paintings more democratic. The situationists believed that these so-called 'open' images were equally perplexing, and that they too masked a hidden agenda. The situationist critique of the spectacle was indeed that every image concealed its own

¹⁸⁴Catherine Millet, *L'Art contemporain en France* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), p. 22.

¹⁸⁵By the mid-sixties the group was split down the middle with Gilles Aillaud, Edouardo Arroyo and Henri Cueco beginning to assert their communist and then Maoist tendencies, while Bernard Rancillac and Hervé Télémaque, though still highly political by North American standards, began a retreat, favoring the less radical images associated with American pop such as Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein. This resulted in their eventual expulsion from the group. Millet, p. 68. The battle between the two factions was summed up in the slogan "Aillaud and Arroyo versus Rancillac and Télémaque!" Interview. Bernard Rancillac, June 22, 1999. At this time Rancillac also related to me that he considered Warhol to be as important as Picasso. On page 71 Millet goes so far as to link Rancillac and Télémaque up with Cobra, suggesting that their roots were closer to the paneuropean avant-garde group. While Rancillac and Télémaque were certainly different than the SJP I don't think they resembled Cobra in any way whatsoever.

program. The genius of *détournement* was that it unveiled the specific idiosyncrasies that made different images function in different ways, turning them into vehicles for their own ideological *dénouement*.

By 68 the majority of artists in France were working under the assumption that art was only useful in so far as it could shape public opinion. This meant that the people who were traditionally entrusted with resisting the limits of ideology were now guarding its parameters. The highly developed political and artistic spectrums on the left in France allowed for an incredibly diverse production, however, at the same time, between local allegiances to the French Communist Party, romantic attachments to the cultural revolution in China, not to mention some coy experimentation with anarchism (Jean-Jacques Lebel comes immediately to mind here), the results were often confused and consistently compromised. Many groups took their painting very seriously but as they tried to escape both social realism and abstraction, they ended up lost in an airy hinterland somewhere near popular culture, but not that far off from mass culture, of both the capitalist and communist varieties. In reaction to this complete capitulation to capital P politics, the situationists chose to reject what art had become, and turn instead to the realm of everyday small p politics, utilizing forms of popular culture in a bid to open up new audiences and avenues of resistance.

George Orwell believed that all art was propaganda, but that not all propaganda was art. This pat quip assumes art is always tied to a political function with a fixed objective within predictable perimeters. Art is anti-ideological, its only function is to deny functionality: to retain its innocence in the face of political coercion from any and all directions. Art is inimical to propaganda which is ideological by definition despite presenting itself as utterly sincere. The situationists were not opposed to art and culture in themselves, but only to their usurpation by those who wished to use them merely as instruments of manipulation and power. They were, in fact, not the enemies of art but the greatest defenders of its integrity.

Whether or not the mainstream artists in France during the sixties were consciously subscribing to the formal tenets of social realism they continued to buttress the underlying philosophy that things were the same in reality as in appearance. A hand written note which hung in the *Atelier des Beaux Arts*, read: "Sincerity is more important than technique."¹⁸⁶ The truth is never plain nor images ever sincere. To try and make them fit into these constraints is to neutralize the idiosyncrasies of imagery, of representational regimes of any type. The fact that images can never be trusted, that imagery is always presumed to be making an outrageous, improbable and controversial proposition is the dangerous fun of the game at hand.¹⁸⁷

Beauty, the marvelous, that convulsive poetic moment described by the surrealists which I alluded to in my first chapter is, I would argue, the same experience described by Thomas Crow which he refers to as the point of critical consciousness: a situation where differences are heightened, laying open new possibilities for change.¹⁸⁸ Mario Perniola has elaborated on this idea contrasting classical notions of beauty with an idea culled from the Baroque period, a concept he refers to as strategic beauty or wit. Modern aesthetics associates beauty with roundness, smoothness, softness, sweetness, simplicity, contemplation and calm. Strategic beauty however is: "...sharp, piercing, pungent, pointed, like iron that one uses for cutting or running something through, like a needle, a spear, it is the Latin *acumen*, and the French *pointe*."¹⁸⁹ Using the work of thinkers such as Gracián Baltasar he elaborates on the 17th century definition of beauty which was associated with a subtle, critical, pleasing and probing, intellectual wit. He continues, suggesting that this understanding of beauty is the condition for survival in a world in

¹⁸⁶Laurent Gervereau, "La sérigraphie à l'École des Beaux Arts" in *Mai 68: Les Mouvements étudiants en France et dans le monde* (Collection des Publications de BDIC, 1988), p. 186 .

¹⁸⁷Hickey, Dave. *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993), p. 17.

¹⁸⁸*Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁸⁹Mario Perniola, *Enigmas: The Egyptian moment in society and Art*, trans. Christopher Woodall (London: Verso, 1995), p. 113.

which things are not taken for what they are, but for what they appear to be.¹⁹⁰ Iris Murdoch wrote that beauty prepares us for justice, and medieval philosophers believed that beauty is a call.¹⁹¹ More recently Elaine Scarry has asserted that: "...there is no way to be in a high state of alert towards injustice without simultaneously demanding of oneself precisely the level of perpetual acuity that will forever be opening one to the arrival of beautiful sights and sounds."¹⁹²

Visual culture and high art flag values that cause great anxiety on either side of the line that divides them. The values that each are said to represent, however, have never been finite. Historically the distinctions between the two have been consistently shadowy. High art and popular culture, or mass culture (depending on your political position), have always exchanged content and form to lesser or greater degrees with varying results. What does not change is the existence of beauty. As I have stated repeatedly throughout this thesis I am not referring to the classical conception of beauty which conforms to standardized norms or transcendental ideals, the notion of beauty I have developed here opposes boredom not ugliness. It is synonymous with political struggle against coercion of all types and confirms human beings as the ultimate source of value in our everyday lives.

¹⁹⁰Perniola, p. 114.

¹⁹¹Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 78 & 109.

¹⁹²Ibid., p. 60.

Timeline May - June 1968

- May 6 First graffiti appears.
- May 10 First major street fight referred to as "The Night of the Barricades."
- May 13 One million march in the streets.
- May 14 Sorbonne occupied.
- May 15 First posters are produced in the *Atelier des Beaux Arts*.
- May 17 The CMDO is established.*
- May 20 Twenty million march in the streets.
- May 22 Student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit prevented from re-entering France after a lecture tour abroad.
- May 24 Widespread rioting occurs in protest. The stock exchange is set on fire.
- May 27 The Grenelle agreement is signed by unions and management in an attempt to get people back to work.
- May 29 The *Atelier des Arts Décoratifs* starts producing posters.
- May 30 De Gaulle calls an election and the CMDO move into the basement of the *Atelier des arts Décoratifs*.
- June 5 France's biggest union, the CGT** demands absentee workers return to factories.
- June 15 The CMDO dissolves.
- June 17 The Sorbonne is reclaimed by the police.
- June 18 Last workers return to factories.
- June 27 *Atelier des Beaux Arts* is shut down by police.
- June 30 De Gaulle wins election.

* The CMDO stands for *le Conseil pour le Maintien des Occupations* (The Committee for the Maintenance of Occupations).

** CGT stands for *Congrès Générale de Travail* (The General Congress of Workers).

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