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# The Situationist International(s): The Realization of Art

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# ***ART AS FORCE. SITUATIONISM AND POPULAR ART INTERNATIONAL SITUATIONISM***

## **THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL(S): THE REALISATION OF ART**

**MIKKEL BOLT RASMUSSEN<sup>1</sup>**

### *Abstract*

The text presents the small international post-world war two vanguard, the Situationist International, and the different factions of the group that all sought to realise art with a view to revolutionizing capitalist society. One faction led by Guy Debord abandoned art and the art institution in favor of an art of war, that is the setting in work of revolutionary actions and the elaboration of a revolutionary theory about a communist abolition of capitalist money economy. Another faction, organized by Jørgen Nash, sought to use art and the art institution in an attempt to provoke bourgeois society.

*Keywords:* The Situationist International; avant-garde; Marxism; modern art.

The Situationist International is a complex affair with a history that includes a series of publications, the creation, split and dissolution of an organisation as well as a series of concepts, analyses and practices within the fields of urbanism, mass media, political economy, revolutionary strategy, the working-class movement and art and film. These subjects were not to be separated but treated as part of a totality addressed by the group theoretically and practically

The Situationists' project was characterised by its refusal of both the established art world and all reformist political organisations. The Situationists attacked the naive belief in art as well as politics as the

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illusionary means of emancipation from the society of the spectacle. The task was to supersede art as a separate sphere of society as well as politics, state and legislation. In that sense the last thing the Situationists wanted was to end their days in a museum of art or as a topic for a seminar in a dance festival.

It is customary to divide the existence of the Situationist organisation into two phases. From 1957 to 1961 different artistic media like painting and architecture were used as instruments by the Situationists in their critique of the society of the spectacle and its art. In 1961 there occurred a split in the group resulting in the creation of a rival Situationist group led by Jørgen Nash who wanted to continue using art in the battle against a boring and repressive society. This was no longer a possibility the other faction centred around Debord argued replacing artistic experiments with the development of a theory, or revolutionary theory-practice about post-war capitalist society. From 1962 the so-called First Situationist International focused on analysing what they theorised as the society of the spectacle. According to the Situationists the dominance of capital was being perfected through the general commodification of fetishes in the production and consumption of material and symbolic goods – all of which were representations or images. The society of the spectacle disseminated appearances through a symbolic production apparatus of gigantic proportions. In this process where society was no longer justified by reference to anything beyond it. Capitalism was engaged in a sweeping attempt to empty society of all 'association' and 'community' with the object of consolidating the overproduction and consumption of commodities. This development was followed by a parallel attempt in which the state, as the loyal associate of capital, rapidly involved itself in the day-to-day instrumentation of consumer obedience. Capitalism tried to prevent the realization of the new revolutionary possibilities by creating a mirror image in which the division of society was concealed by false representations. The result of this process was the society of the spectacle, the spectacular market society, where people passively contemplated a world beyond their intervention.

Some of the Situationists participated actively in the occupation of the Sorbonne and were among other things responsible for a large part

of the communiqués that were sent out during the occupation. After May '68 the Situationists argued that time was producing revolutionaries and that it was thus no longer necessary with a formal organisation. In 1972 the group was officially dissolved by Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti.

It was during the first phase from 1957 to 1961, when artists like Asger Jorn and Constant were active, that the group developed a series of techniques with which the Situationists sought to dominate the artistic media and use art as a propaganda tool. Even in this first phase the Situationists did not regard their praxis as artistic in a straight forward sense, mixing ultra-left currents like council communism and Western Marxism with interest in Surrealism and Dada. "We take our stand on the other side of culture. Not before it, but *after it*. We feel it is necessary to realise culture by transcending it as a separate sphere" (*Internationale situationniste* 1963, 21). Following the almost invisible project of the Lettrist International, which took place far away from the institution of art and the political scene throughout the 1950s, the Situationist project was initiated as an attempt to create a revolutionary avant-garde that could coordinate the struggle against capital. The Situationists wanted to create a counter public sphere where they could unite the dispersed attempts to challenge the existing state of things. The struggle against capital was to take place as an *Aufhebung* of art and politics; these separate spheres were to be superseded by a total revolutionary activity. Art thus formed a part of the Situationist project, but only in as far as art was realised in everyday life; art was not a goal in itself. The creation of works of art to be displayed in galleries and museums was counter to the interests of the Situationists. Revolutionary art took place beyond the institution of art and beyond the separation of artist and spectator thereby overcoming the cultural division of labour according to which some people are creative while most people are mere spectators. Instead of showing people how to live the point was to make people live.

### **The Realisation of Art**

During discussions in the group in 1960 and 1961 there emerged two opposed conceptions of the way to deal with art and realising the

transgressive potential of art in a situation of conformism. A majority headed by Debord argued that art was in fact dead and that it was no longer possible to continue producing individual works of art. Instead it was necessary to engage in what they described as an art of war where they sought to develop an all-inclusive critique of the new forms of domination coming into being in the booming post-war economies.

During the conference in Gothenburg in 1961, Raoul Vaneigem had set forth the complex Situationist stance on art, arguing that 'traditional' modern art was no longer possible as a critical gesture. Only in so far as the entirety of society was reconstructed could 'separate' art be renewed, becoming a kind of post-artistic explosion that united theory and practice. Under capitalist rule, art could at best be a reified expression of a previous radical gesture: Modern art had come to an end. With the defeat of the proletarian uprising in the early 1920s, the conditions of possibility of modern art had disappeared, and art had since been capable only of consolidating ruling tastes. Situationists were free to create critical personal 'non-Situationist' artefacts, Vaneigem said, but it was important that these artefacts were not regarded as Situationist art. There was no Situationist art.

A small minority objected among them Nash and Gruppe SPUR. They argued that it was precisely in art that the Situationists were able to articulate a critique of present society, and that it was in the art milieu that the Situationists had made important advances, establishing contact with experimental artists across Europe. They were sceptical of the way in which Vaneigem embedded Situationist theory in Marxism, referring to the proletariat as a potential class-of-consciousness and as the revolutionary subject in waiting. According to Nash and SPUR, the proletariat had become integrated into the new welfare society and had thus lost its historical agency. It was through art – the last vestige of freedom – that the Situationist project could be set in motion and ultimately realised.

In retrospect, it is evident that both factions actually wished to realise art, but they differed when it came to the means and the analysis of the necessary preconditions. The group that gathered around Debord and Vaneigem argued that it was necessary to negate art as it was just another expression of how the capitalist mode of production separated proletarians from each other and rendered them passive.

The dissenting artists also sought to realise art but did not understand why it would be necessary to revive a Hegelian-Marxist vocabulary concerning the proletariat. Art was still *the* resource. The artists were also critical of the institutionalisation and commercialisation of art in post-war Europe, but they did not wish to relinquish the creativity of the artist. Art was thus not dead. Instead of basing their sense of revolutionary possibilities on the ability of the proletariat to revolt, the artists wished to realise art in the here and now, transforming audience members into active participants. As Nash put it: "The essential in Situationism is the relationship of human beings to the forces of creativity; it is the intention to realise these forces through moments of creativity. The Situationist idea is based on the use and the forces of creativity directly in the social environment". They thus insisted on free use of artistic means of expression and new modes of symbolic production. The revolution will begin in art. Artists should seize power and take over the means of symbolic production, realising art and thereby liberating the aesthetic energy with which humans are equipped. Everybody should become an artist.

When the dissenting artist were expelled in 1962 Nash established the Second Situationist International and carried through a staggering amount of provocations in the art institution and outside trying to set free as much creativity as possible. If the First Situationist International recoiled from the recuperative light of the spectacle, the Drakabygget movement basked in the attention of the media. The bigger the scandal the better. The media was the battlefield and instead of trying to escape and become "angels of purity" like Debord the Scandinavians Situationists sought to work the media, being faster than the media and creating media scandals with a view to causing scandals that would, that was the hope, get people to react.

Nash and Thorsen often worked together with journalists from Danish and Swedish newspapers in order to get attention and cause a stir. When Thorsen walked around in Odense as Jesus Christ, carrying a large cross in connection with the opening of the 'Seven Rebels' exhibition in 1962, he himself called a photographer from the daily paper *Information*, ensuring that his performance did not go unnoticed in the press. Nash and Thorsen were shrewd operators and did not care

about notions of authenticity or artistic copyright, producing fake Jorn paintings, blackmailing gallerists, and cheating colleagues. They sought to scandalise both the established art institution as well as the broader public sphere. The goal was to liberate the spectator from his or her passive role as a consumer of dull representations. Nash described this practice as “spiritual anarchism”.

### **Détournement**

One of Situationists’ main techniques for destroying the spectacle and for disrupting the false coherence of the capitalist system was the so-called *détournement* where an already existing expression was changed. In this operation the process of signification is exposed and the original intention is denaturalised. According to the Situationists, the *détournement* was not only supposed to scandalise art, but also to make propaganda for the Situationist cause. The *détournement* technique was used in a range of different contexts over the years: Jorn used it in his artistic modifications where he painted onto old second-rate canvases, Debord used the technique in his films where he appropriated sequences from commercials, newsreels and westerns, and Michèle Bernstein used it in her novels *Tous les chevaux du roi* and *La Nuit* where she mocked the style of *Le Nouveau Roman*. The Danish Situationist, J. V. Martin, used the technique on several occasions where he changed images from the daily newspapers and exposed what, according to the Situationists, was the false coherence of the spectacle. In 1964 Martin produced a thousand postcards with an image of the British call girl Christine Keeler. Martin had drawn a balloon from Keeler’s mouth: “As the Situationist International says: It is more honourable to be a prostitute like me than to marry a fascist like Konstantin.” The year before Christine Keeler had caught the public eye when it came out that she was sleeping with a Soviet navy officer, Eugene Ivanov, at the same time as she was sleeping with the British Secretary of State for War, John Profumo. Profumo lied about the affair and was subsequently forced to resign. During the scandal, the photographer Lewis Morley took a series of photos of Keeler to be used in connection with the promotion of a motion picture

that was never realised. In one of the photos a naked Keeler is sitting astride a copy of the Danish designer Arne Jacobsen's famous ant-chair. This photo was quickly reproduced in magazines and circulated all over the world. It was this photo Martin chose for the postcard with which he attempted to scandalise the royal Danish family. The juxtaposition of a naked Keeler and the text bubble, in which the recently celebrated marriage between Danish Princess Anne-Marie and the Greek King Konstantin was invoked, left little doubt as to the Situationist attitude towards the political situation in Greece. The British government, the Greek and the Danish monarchy were, according to Martin, all part of a crypto-fascist world whose days were numbered. Beneath the make-up Keeler was a corpse. The bad reproduction of the postcard just underlined this aspect: It was a matter of time; along with the rest of this world she was doomed. The Danish monarchy and the British government were going down. All these sparkling representations were going to be torn aside by the destructive movement of the revolution.

In the years after 1961 the *détournement* technique was very rarely used in connection with the traditional media of art. Instead, it was in the streets that the Situationists tried to put the technique to use. These activities culminated in May '68 in Paris where several Situationists took part in the occupation of the Sorbonne. Barricades were built and the police were met with Molotov cocktails and bricks. Cars were set on fire, shops were robbed and the walls of the city were covered with slogans and graffiti. For the Situationists this was the right use of the *détournement* technique. A different use of the city suddenly became visible, challenging capitalism's organization of the environment. The fight against the spectacle had to take place here and now. The spectacular market economy and its shining depotentiated representations had to be smashed.

## Exit

One of the aspects that distinguish the Situationists from both contemporary and later politicized artistic practices was the belief that capitalism was doomed. In accordance with their reliance on a council communist reading of capital they were sure that capitalism could not overcome its

contradictions; they were sure that the death of the spectacular commodity economy was at hand and they worked hard to make this happen. *Les trente glorieuse* and the golden days of capitalism were just a desperate attempt to postpone the day of reckoning, they argued. The task was therefore to analyse this boom as a temporary phenomena, as a superficial solution of the real problems of capital, and the task of the avant-garde was to accelerate the impending collapse of the spectacle. This vision marked all facets of the Situationist project; they were involved in a civil war and fought for the execution of a gigantic catharsis where mankind would be liberated from capitalism, which had stolen the labour of man. As the group put it in 1962: "The only useful thing left to do is to reconstruct society and life on other foundations" (*Internationale situationniste* 1962, 23).

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