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A Great Negative Work of Destruction: 20th Century Avant Garde and the Reimagination of Novelty

Alexander V. Hall
Bard College

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Alexander Vertefeuille Hall

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Thank you to my parents without whom I would not be here;

thank you to Éric without whom I would not have completed this;

thank you to my crew, with whom life will always be textural, and convulsive.

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Introduction

In 1874, a book called *Les Chants de Maldoror* was published in France. Its author, a young man named Isidore Ducasse who wrote under the pseudonym Comte de Lautréamont, had died four years earlier in a hotel room in Paris, the circumstances of which are unknown. This text existed in relative obscurity until 1917 when Philippe Soupault, one of the founding members of Surrealism, found a copy in the mathematics section of a bookstore. In his memoirs, he wrote "To the light of a candle which was permitted to me, I began the reading. It was like an enlightenment. In the morning I read the "Chants" again, convinced that I had dreamed… The day after André Breton came to visit me. I gave him the book and asked him to read it. The following day he brought it back, equally enthusiastic as I had been."[1]

André Breton was the main figure of the 1920s art movement, Surrealism, and his role is discussed in detail in Chapter Two. He considered Lautréamont a patron saint of Surrealism, and isolated one line which justified this status: "beautiful as the chance juxtaposition of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table!" (Lautréamont, 263) Lautréamont redefines beauty here as something broader than just how something appears. He emphasizes chance, as well as the novelty of these two objects together rather than their incongruousness.

Lautréamont was an inspiration to more than just the Surrealists: Guy Debord, the founding member of a movement which lasted from the late 1950s to early '70s called the Situationist International—the subject of Chapter Three—revists one of Lautréamont's ideas

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[1] http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Comte_de_Lautreamont

in thesis 207 of his seminal text *Society of the Spectacle*: "The meaning of words has a part in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress demands it. Staying close to an author's phrasing, plagiarism exploits his expressions, erases false ideas, replaces them with correct ideas." (Debord, 145) This quote from Debord is itself a copy of Lautéamont's original from his *Poésies*[2], but Debord experiences the same thing as the surrealists in finding a direct precursor to an idea that is central to their cause in an unexpected place. For his movement, a concept called *détournement*—a kind of sociocultural collage—is this form of plagiarism.

I've shown the influence of Lautréamont on these movements, however he is most important as an example of their beliefs, rather than as an inspiration for them. He demonstrates that what they believed was not tied down to one specific moment in time, nor was it limited to well-studied authors. In retrospect, Lautréamont tapped into this atemporal current of avant-garde thought—which I discuss in regards to the Surrealists in Chapter Two—without being aware of it himself. It was of course not his goal to be recognized as such, but he saw things in a similar way to these later movements, before they were even conceived.

Initially, with Dada in 1918, the avant-garde fought against bourgeois nationalist interests, on behalf of art in line with the praxis of life rather than art for art's sake. As Surrealism took shape in the early 1920's, its motives took the form of an internal change in perception. It maintained that expression was to come from inside the human psyche, drawing on external sources in terms of how they are perceived. This took shape through "surrealist objects," such as Lautréamont's chance encounter on the dissection table, as well as

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[2] "Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It presses after an author's phrase, uses his expression, erases a false idea, replaces it with the correct one." (Lautréamont, 327)

various other psychological methods of coaxing the subconscious into producing without concern for its rationality. The final form of this tendency comes in the Situationist International, where what was previously known as the expression of the avant-garde became its hiddenness. They chose to produce nothing, acknowledging that anything that was made would be bought, sold and commodified.

Ultimately, it is my goal to explore how these three movements all approached the idea of "novelty," and how their studies of it took shape. In all of them, art was inseparable from lived experience. Life is clearly affected by social and political factors--whether it manifested as the impetus for Dada to take shape, a later alignment of Surrealism, or an inseparable part of the society of which the Situationists were skeptical. Their importance is thus just as much social as it is artistic. They were interested in behavior and how it affects artistic production, and social engagement.

Beginning with Dada in 1918, I will trace this thread of novelty until the dissolution of Situationism in 1978. These three movements are not the only examples of the avant-garde in the 20th century—a time period in which artistic methods of the past were challenged in many different forms by many different people. I do believe them to be, however, groundbreaking in their understanding of the role of art in a society. Particularly in the case of Situationism is this apparent, since they produced nothing and were thus insulated from misinterpretation. Lautréamont is an example of what came before—an example alongside others such as Arthur Rimbaud, Jonathan Swift, Edgar Allan Poe—and a demonstration of the fact that this kind of radical perception is not limited to its time period. These movements borrow, they destroy, they repurpose and, encourage others to do the same. They are

examples of what happens when groups of people form over these ideas, gaining the ability to change the state of society around them.

I

Dada and the Birth of "Avant-Garde"

Dada was unique among the twentieth century art movements because of its defined commitment to the lived experience. What separated it from the other 'isms' of its time, such as Expressionism and Italian Futurism was that its members were ambivalent towards art as something separate from life. To them the circumstances of living and existing were inseparable from the artistic process. Dada insisted on destruction as its means, but did not clearly define its end. "We hope something new will come from this," Louis Aragon says in one of the manifestos of Dada, "being exactly what we no longer want, determinedly less putrid, less selfish, less materialistic, less obtuse, less immensely *grotesque*." (Ades, 181) Its goal was to destroy 'realist' art, without filling in its place.

What Dada did not want is more clearly laid out than what it did, in part due to the circumstances of its upbringing. Dada was born in the wake of the first World War, when a poet named Hugo Ball opened the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, in 1916. Like the cabarets in Paris and Berlin at this time, the Voltaire offered a mix of entertainment; people sung, danced, and recited poetry. In the beginning, the performances at The Voltaire were not explicitly off-center. The Cabaret was frequented by many artists who would become prominent in the Dada mode: the Romanians Tristan Tzara, and Marcel Janco; Hans/Jean Arp whose name embodied his dual German/French nationality and, eventually, the German poet Richard Huelsenbeck. It quickly found its footing in provocation and absurdity—two things which would characterize the movement going forward. These first steps established

the bases of the 20th century's first avant-garde movement, and the groundwork for today's modern art.

Ball specified, when asked about the naming of the Cabaret and the subsequent review he edited which bore the same name, that Voltaire's name was used as a tribute to the author's 1759 novel, *Candide.* He felt that, just as Candide navigated innocently through a world of horrors, the Dadaists themselves ended up in neutral Switzerland, refugees of the first World War.[3] This was a concept shared among many of the Dada outposts across the globe. As a movement, it was able to independently pop up in various places because of their similarity of circumstances. Though it began in Switzerland, a country with a rare neutrality in the war, all of the artists who were a part of The Cabaret had previously fled their home countries for similar reasons. All the other instances of Dada across the globe—in places like Berlin, Paris, and New York—arose from a society faced with a war they were unfit to participate in: for machines, yet fought by men.

Dada was later to become a more formal international movement with the publication and dispersal of Tristan Tzara's manifesto in 1918, as well as other journals affiliated with different strains of Dada in various cities. Prior to all of this, however, a pair of expatriate artists in New York came to an idea similar to that of Ball and the others in Zürich at the same time as them. Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia were both from France, but were at a further remove from the crises of Europe at the time than their Zürich equivalents, living in the United States. They were both prominent artists in the various circles of their home country, but they did not strictly adhere to a singular theme, and thus fell into a space

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[3] Ades, 16

between two worlds. One of Duchamp's cubist paintings, *Nude Descending a Staircase no 2*, wasn't successful in France, but traveled to the United States in 1913 and was included in the International Exhibition of Modern Art at the 69th Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue. Here, it was successful, and was displayed alongside Matisse's *Figure in Motion*.

Duchamp's abstraction was in stark contrast to the clearly defined form of Matisse's figure. To see them side by side would be a provocative image, each one playing off the reality of the other. To Duchamp, art which appealed to the eye as opposed to the intellect was distasteful. He thought that the intellectual benefit of the piece was not dependent solely on how beautiful it was, but rather its ability to express an idea. In brief, his idea of art is dependent on the idea, rather than the skill required to express it.

Duchamp and the Dada conglomerate in Zürich had a similar idea of the function of art, both of them manifesting largely in ignorance of the other. They thought that its novelty was its most important characteristic, and the idea which it expressed to be its defining feature. Artistically, all of them believed in the necessity to create art, but not in order to be the best at making it. "No more painters, no more writers, no more musicians, no more sculptors," opens edition number thirteen of *Littérature*, one of the literary reviews published by the Paris Dada. No more artists, no more classifications, no more reductions, "*nothing, nothing, nothing.*"(Ades, 181) This was the essence of Dada regardless of its location, or its medium. They wanted to create a chasm, eliminating everything that had come before.

Littérature was among many other reviews from the movement. Its founders, André Breton, Philippe Soupault and Louis Aragon, first published it in 1919. It was a way for them to establish a foothold in the thriving literary world of Paris at the time. The name of this

journal was rightfully ambiguous, since the publication was not focused on a specific theme. In its first issues, it produced wildly diverse content, such as a collection of letters (*Lettres de Jacques Vaché*) from a young soldier whose rejection of a literary career, and subsequent death from an overdose of opium in 1919, fascinated and haunted the group; as well as Breton's "*Le corset mystére*," a fragmentary text constructed using pieces of found advertising slogans[4]. This review eventually came to include the first examples of Surrealist thought, with its publication of automatic texts--the first example being the aforementioned piece by Breton. These three would come to be the founders of the Surrealist movement in this city after the dissolution of Dada around 1924.

A similar review was made by Francis Picabia, Duchamp's artistic partner in New York. *391*, as it was called, was the longest running of these magazines, and it was published in three different cities. First, with Duchamp in New York, then in Zürich with the Dada Caberet, and finally in Paris. There was also a journal in Berlin called called *Club Dada*, run by Raoul Hausmann.

The multiplicity of these journals shows the scope of the movement. In the case of *391*, and *Littérature*, it's clear that Dada was a label applied to an international change in artistic thought. This is precisely what the name itself is to signify, with the rumors of its origins varying from Raoul Hausmann plunging a knife into a dictionary and having it land on "dada," the word for a hobby-horse in French, to it being the first words of a baby when it learns to speak. In either form, this name signifies nothing, so its use in different places is by no means inappropriate. Their existence was not in support of the movement Dada, but

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[4] Ades, 162

rather what it stood for. The growing international avant-garde was inseparably linked to the sociopolitical climate during and immediately after the first world war. Dada—wherever it came to exist—was a reaction to its surroundings more so than anything. Art had become a commodity, and a tool used for influence. In his 1918 *Manifesto* Tzara asks "is the goal of art to cajole the nice nice bourgeois?" (Ades, 37) 'No,' of course, is the answer he seeks from the reader. Art is not a tool, but a means for catharsis. Dada combatted the capitalist notion of art as a commodity by reducing it to folly. "We haven't the faintest idea how to treat any subject seriously," says André Breton "least of all this subject: us." (Ades, 186) They conceived the idea which would continue through these movements in the 20th century: that art is to be separate from society, but united with life.

Dada on Art

"It would be ludicrous, in principle, to anticipate a DADA masterpiece in the fields of literature and painting," (Ades, 186) says Breton in *Dada Skating*. It would be hard to conceive a perfect form of what Dada sought to be—what is the destructive magnum opus? Before arriving in New York, Marcel Duchamp repurposed a men's urinal by turning it upside down, signing it "R. Mutt," and then giving it the name *Fountain*. Though it may not be a masterpiece, an unmodified urinal being treated with the same respect that one would treat fine art is a great example of what Dada stood for. It makes an audience stop and question aspects of it—it forces them to interact with it as art, even if it's begrudgingly. One can be repelled by a complex masterwork in the fields of painting or sculpture, but they are helplessly drawn in by an object that they have an intimate relationship with.

Duchamp's piece is, in retrospect, modern art incarnate. It is provocative for a different reason than a Realist sculpture, whose beauty comes from its accuracy, and which creates a pinnacle of beauty directly related to the artist's skill. *Fountain* is thought-provoking because of its inviting simplicity. Even if an audience doesn't understand why there a urinal in the sculpture room, their confused interaction with it poses questions about it as a sculpture, not a farce. Its harmless vulgarity makes the object forcibly relatable.

Fountain is humorous, emitting an intoxicating absurdity to its audience. Duchamp's methods are simple, and in theory easily replicated. Anybody can take an object that's interesting and place it where it doesn't seem to belong. Tristan Tzara has this same appreciation for novelty in most of his written works, and especially in his poem *Pour faire un poème Dadaïste* (How to Write a Dadaist Poem) he outlines an example of how anybody can represent that in writing, too:

> Take your newspaper.
>
> Take your scissors.
>
> In the newspaper, choose an article the length of which you want to make your poem.
>
> Cut out the article.
>
> Carefully cut out each word from the article, and put them in a bag.
>
> Shake gently.
>
> Take each word out one after another.
>
> Write the words down in the order that you pull them out.
>
> The poem will resemble you.

And now you are an infinitely original writer with a charming sensibility, even if unappreciated by the vulgar. (My own translation)

In this framework, the idea of a Dada poem is affected almost entirely by chance. In the process that Tzara has laid out, the poet is a vehicle more so than a creator. Their intuition picks an article of appropriate length, and their hand picks words at random. The hand is focused not on reconstructing the length, nor making a sensical poem; it is focused on the locomotive action of picking words out of a bag. It resembles a poem-game, where the stakes are not very high. It's whimsical but, since "the poem resembles you," the poet of course is seduced into deriving a meaning from what they've created. Despite the distance of this practice from organization, and the creativity associated with it (i.e. a carefully written out poem), it clearly possesses intellectual currency for its producer. For what reason is this not art? Tzara seems to be asking the reader. It is a poem in the same way as any other, albeit from a different source: chance.

Just like Duchamp, Tzara has no interest in behaving by the rules of common practice--an idea the two would agree has no place in poetry and art. He reminds the Dada consumer that they need not write a single thing in order to craft a poem. In other words: they do not need to be an intellectual in order to make poetry. Tzara is advocating for linguistic bricolage, since all one needs is a newspaper and a pair of scissors to make this poem. The Berlin-based Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann demonstrated this visually as well, constructing abstract collages with advertisement and news clippings. By taking a free-standing work and repurposing it, Dada showed how to nullify the role of the fine

Artist. The collage is not violent in its essence, but for them it had an inseparable link with destruction. Further, the works produced from these haphazard reorganizations of ideas gave the impression of mocking the original. All of this was in support of a "complete madness of a world abandoned to the hands of bandits, who rend one another and destroy the centuries." (Ades, 41)

Dada's tendency towards destruction rather than construction was necessary, since that which it fought against was (and is) deep-rooted in society. Art and poetry are serious topics, studied at universities where scholars strive to parse out and make sense of all their complexities. In the academic spotlight, it's easy to forget why people make art in the first place. Dada's childish manner of behavior with art scales back its intensity, bringing it back to the place where one can feel an accurate reaction of what the piece conveys, without the filter of its analytic complexities. "I love ancient work for its novelty," begins Tzara. "The writers who teach morality and discuss or improve psychological foundations have, aside from a hidden desire to make money, an absurd view of life, which they have classified, cut into sections, channelised: they insist on waving the baton as the categories dance. Their readers snicker and go on: what for?" (Ades, 38) Ancient work was made without regard for critics, or reviews. Whatever it was portraying, it was for a purpose other than just an aesthetic talking point. It held cultural, or personal value, acting as an historical, or a spiritual device.

Tzara is mocking the bourgeois moralist for his impractical notion of life: organized, and neatly assigned a compartment. Dada fundamentally opposes this, consistently taking the road of chaos rather than organization, especially in the case of life. Rather than study its

different, Dada sought to experience, and express in order to recreate that experience. Tzara writes in the *Manifesto* that, in line with Dada, one strives "to complete oneself, to perfect oneself in one's own littleness, to fill the vessel with one's individuality, to have the courage to fight for and against thought." (Ades, 40)

Just as it opposed organization, the members of Dada opposed seriousness. "We haven't the faintest idea how to treat any subject seriously—least of all this subject: us," says André Breton in *Dada Skating* (Ades 186) Breton and the others wanted impulse to rule their work. That impulsion was not something to be interpreted and analyzed; it was just for fun, and that's what made it organic. "[Art] is not as important as we, mercenaries of spirit, have been proclaiming for centuries," says Tzara in his 1918 *Dada Manifesto*, "Art afflicts no one, and those who manage to take an interest in it will harvest caresses and a fine opportunity to populate the country with their conversation." (Ades, 40) This reason—that art is not as important as it is made out to be—is why Dada chooses to take the stance it does. They want to demonstrate the fact that art relates to human components, and it is not purely defined by its pleasurable contributions to our aesthetic sense.

In *The Pleasures of Dada*, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes directly addresses the reader, a potential Dada consumer: "You can be fun. You probably enjoy life. But you've got some bad habits. You're too fond of what you've been taught to be fond of. Cemeteries, melancholy, the tragic lover, Venetian gondolas. You shout at the moon. You believe in art and respect Artists." (Ades, 187) He criticizes the reader for the banality of their sense of soul. All Artists shout at the moon, hypnotized by its power and mysteriousness. The lover doesn't

have to be tragic, and melancholy doesn't have to be romantic. By speaking into the face of the reader, he shows the reduction of that which they presume to be fond of, by what they have been led to believe they are. He provides a resolution to his criticism further down: "You can easily become friends of Dada. . .Mistrust your leaders. They exploit your ill-considered affection for the fake and the famous to lead you by the nose and make things even better for themselves." (Ades, 188) Dessaignes is encouraging freethinking because it is necessary for the sake of art, but also in the development of an aesthetic sense. He argues against a standard of beauty, since it stifles creativity. Forcing notions of properness shapes too much the perspective of the consumer. It cajoles the bourgeois, say, and it falsifies what one may think in themselves. If the skill required to make a piece accurate and beautiful outweighs the idea which it communicates, that pushes everyone without that technical skill out of the artistic sphere. If, instead, it is what you are expressing which is valued, the playing field favors those with the most interesting ideas.

It is necessary here to address the importance of Dessaignes' statement here in the larger picture of the 20th century avant-garde. He is recognizing a flaw in the relationship between society and those who take part in it, saying that "your leaders" dictate what is important to you. He is not pushing his own themes of importance on the reader, but simply indicating a red flag in how art is perceived. It must be romantic, or charged in some emotional way. It must evoke reactions that people want to feel when they see it, because they go to see art for that reason. This is an ever-present theme, shared by Surrealism and especially Situationism. As the century grows older, those who have demonstrated the

posterity of Dada grow increasingly skeptical of the powers that be. Eventually, this idea is what defines the avant-garde, even more so than the art which it produces.

Tzara's cut-up style poem is an example of the Dada mentality which prizes this sense of the idea over the technical skill. It's a means to circumvent opinions which, for the most part are inherent. Many of Dada's ideas can be understood through this framework. Its members saw this as a way to both demonstrate and practice a new kind of intellectual freedom; one which is not based on what has come before but rather what is presently happening. Further, they used this as an artistic tool to change perceptions of what art could be when no longer looking to the past in order to create.

It is Dada's obsession with novelty which makes all of this possible. It was tired of common recyclage in art. They didn't want to add what they believed to a preconceived canon, regardless of its posterity or apparent righteousness. Dada said that art can, and must be different. It must be reactionary, but it must also be new, especially if that newness is the manifestation of a simple pleasure. "In documenting art on the basis of supreme simplicity: novelty, we are human and true for the sake of amusement, impulsive, vibrant to crucify boredom. (Ades, 36) This was fundamental to Dada, and would later apply to Surrealism. Both believed in novelty as the basis of an object's value.

Dada contributed an appreciation of novelty in all works of life. Surrealism, in many ways its successor, brought that to new places, applying it to art and making something unique and texturally savvy. What was unique to the movement, however, was an absolute opposition to perfection in all shapes. There was no way for the Dada masterpiece to exists because a master work requires a committee to deem it so. It needs to achieve some level of

perfection in its relation, or opposition to something. "Sensibility is not constructed on the basis of a word," says Tzara, "all constructions converge on perfection which is boring, the stagnant idea of a gilded swamp, a relative human product." (Ades, 37)

By the end of the movement, there was no Dada masterpiece. Its role was not to produce, but to destroy. The focus on production that was foreign to Dada came later with Surrealism. This emphasis on opposing nationalist, bourgeois tendencies, however did not carry over so strongly. Dada ended having completed its goal of hollowing out their space in stylistic norms of the time. They destroyed successfully, and turned heads in their direction doing so. As a result, Surrealism was able to become the largest art movement of the 20th century in the wake of Dada. It took these ideas about novelty and applied it to the every day, in search of constant novelty. From it, the idea of the 'surrealist object' took hold, and is still present today.

Surrealism and the Redefinition of Art

A Brief History

The word "surrealism" was first used by Guillaume Apollinaire in 1917, in the program notes of Sergei Daghiliev's ballet, *Parade*. Apollinaire wrote: "From this new alliance—for until now costume and scenery on one hand, choreography on the other, have been linked only artificially—there has resulted in *Parade* a kind of *sur-réalisme*." The set and the costumes were designed by Pablo Picasso—at once a precursor and master of surrealism—who at this time was experimenting with cubist styles. This was blatantly apparent in his costume design, one of which was a collection of skyscrapers and seemingly organic cardboard shapes. Its cubism in fact went so far as to apparently have made the actor's movements more difficult because of its design. The scenario of the ballet was conceived by the poet and playwright Jean Cocteau, and the music score written by Erik Satie. In addition to Satie's score, Cocteau insisted on the inclusion of various sounds, such as rattling milk bottles, the sounds of a typewriter, and a shooting pistol.

The Surrealist movement itself began to take shape immediately after the first world war with the publication of the literary journal, *Littérature*, by André Breton in 1919. Its name, when phonically separated, reads as "*lis tes ratures*," which translates to "read your scraps {erasures | blots}." This exemplifies a kind of surrealist sight, as the phrase takes one obviously apparent idea and repurposes it for slightly different definition.

Breton was one of the most important writers associated with Surrealism, and his

Manifeste de Surrealisme was the text which established the goals of the movement. He was

the President of the *Centrale Surréaliste*[5], and thus the informal head of the movement. The

Centrale Surréaliste was an office located on 15 rue de Grenelle, Paris, which opened on 11

October, 1924.The press was immediately notified of its opening, and the *Journal littéraire*

even published an article about it on the same day. They were not the only ones interested in

this event either, as the *Nouvelles littéraires* published an account of what was set to go on at

this bureau also, vocalizing the interests of Breton and the other Surrealists:

> No domain has been specified, a priori, for this undertaking, and surrealism proposes
>
> a gathering of the greatest possible number of experimental elements, for a purpose
>
> that cannot yet be perceived. All those who have the means to contribute, in any
>
> fashion, to the creation of genuine surrealist archives, *are urgently* requested to come
>
> forward: let them shed light on the genesis of an invention, or propose a new system
>
> of psychic investigation, or make us the judges of striking coincidences, or reveal their
>
> most instinctive ideas on fashion, as well as politics, etc., or freely criticize morality, or
>
> even simply entrust us with their most curious dreams and with what their dreams
>
> suggest to them. (Durozoi[6])

This is a precise account of what would both interest and define the Surrealist

movement in the succeeding years. Much of the group's program was based off the theory of

psychic automatism, which is a way of studying the unconscious by using an automatic style

of being, rather than a thoughtful one. Briefly, they experimented with various exercises

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[5] English: *The Bureau of Surrealist Research.*
[6] This source was accessed online. Where I have found it, there are no page numbers.

designed to probe the unconscious and bring an understanding of it to light. Experiments such as automatic writing, or drawing were prevalent, because they combined all the interests of the Surrealists. An automatic image, or poem, was able to be appreciated artistically as well as academically, through psychology, since it was created with a deliberate dissociation from the artist's opinions of it. The *Centrale Surréaliste* was not only was a place for formal investigation, but it also served as a meeting place for the group to gather, share dream-experiences of uncanny moments with one another. It served, more than anything, as a meeting place for the members of the Surrealist movement. Because of it, they could make possible the *révolution surréaliste*, and prove its relevance.

The legitimacy of the movement was brought into question, and at once point Breton had a fist fight with Yvan Goll, author of a different *Manifeste du Surréalisme*, published fourteen days prior to Breton's, during a performance at the *Comédie des Champs-Élysees*. Breton was upset with people who trivialized the movement, since to him it was not merely literary. He believed in the revolution, and, more importantly, he believed himself to be its leader. Goll criticized Breton for wanting to "monopolize a movement of literary and artistic renewal that dates from well before his time and that in scope goes far beyond his fidgety little person." (Durozoi) They argued that Surrealism began with Apollinaire, and that Breton accrediting himself for its conception was thus being unfaithful to Apollinaire. Breton, however, in his manifesto, lists many other surrealist thinkers throughout history who are affiliated with his movement, simply because of the temporal space they occupied. For example: "Mallarmé is Surrealist when he is confiding. / Chateaubriand is Surrealist in exoticism, Vaché is Surrealist in me." (Breton, *Manifesto of Surrealism*, 27)

After this incident, despite the success of individual surrealist aspirations, and a prominence of its artists in cultural spheres, Breton's divisiveness--a product of his political goals, more than artistic--brought about problems in the group. His idea of Surrealism proved to be different than others'. He saw it as a unification between the poetics of Rimbaud, and the politics of Marx. For others—those who were less interested in Communism, for one—this was problematic. An original member of the surrealist group, Antonin Artaud, one of the most prominent and important avant-garde playwrights of the 20th century, was one of those who disagreed with this vision. He was "expelled" in 1926 for disagreeing with the group's Communist alignment, which, since it proposed a relationship to the external world without regard to internal phenomenon, was a rough contrast to the surrealist perspective on life. Artaud, in his blaspheming work, *In the Dark or The Surrealist Bluff*, discusses the ineffectuality of the the Surrealists, both in their work, and in their "principal attitude, the pattern of their entire lives." (Corti, 194) This attack, written as a response to the ill-reasoned separation of the group and himself, focuses on the faults of the group by positioning Surrealism against itself. Artaud, demonstrating a fundamental source of these problems, writes:

> Besides, is there still a Surrealist venture or didn't Surrealism die the day Breton and his adepts thought they ought to join with Communism and look to the field of events and contiguous matter for the outcome of acts which normally could only develop within the inmost compass of the brain. (Corti, 192)

Specifically, Artaud is referring to the group's alliance with the *Parti communiste françiase* (PCF) in 1927 in order to gain a larger sphere of political influence. The avant garde

does not call for a necessary unification of politics and art, rather that is supplemental. To Artaud this affiliation was, more than anything, illogical, since there was no element of the movement waiting to be uncovered in the PCF. Breton was not looking out for surrealism, but something else.

In 1930, the *Second Surrealist Manifesto* was written, and it reevaluated the group's political and artistic goals. It formally excommunicated those who were hesitant to join the new Surrealism; a movement which was characterized by a split rather than a unity, and whose publication was titled, in replacement of *La Révolution surréaliste* (The Surrealist Revolution), *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution* (Surrealism in the Service of the Revolution). After this divisive reshuffling of the group's collective priorities, Surrealism slowly became less relevant on the platform of international art. The Second World War sent many of its members into exile in Latin America—specifically, in Mexico. Though the idea of Surrealism thrived there, the movement as such came to a halt. Informally, it continued on through the 1960's until Breton's death in '66.

It is necessary in a discussion of Surrealism to highlight Breton's role in the movement in its negatives, as well as its positives. His insistence on establishing Surrealism as a political force, though maybe the right thing from his perspective, was not what the group sought to do. Not only did he push people away because of their politics, but made an ultimatum that they submit to a communist revolution, or lose their affiliation with his Surrealist group. These matters are trivial when considering the scope at which the group was working. Breton's Surrealism existed for a particular moment in time, but the ideas expressed are not restricted to that period. Though, as stated, it is necessary to show his particular role with

regard to its negative impact, it is more relevant and important to show the surrealist venture in practice, rather than in politics. Surrealism exists without politics—internal factions, and government parties alike—and, despite the pitfalls of the movement, it was a success in demonstrating the importance of this ideology.

The Surrealist Vision

One of the things which interested the Surrealists was the idea of psychic automatism; specifically, the role of the subconscious in creative settings. Automatism as such manifested in a few ways for the group. The most simple in terms of its theory is the act of *automatic writing*. While writing automatically, the participant would attempt to write without regard to logical predispositions like grammar, or word choice, with the goal being to create and observe the natural productions of the mind unfettered. Its importance was affirmed in Breton's first *Manifesto of Surrealism*, in 1924, wherein he defines surrealism as an act of automatism:

> SURREALISM, *n.* Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express -- verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner -- the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern. (Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto*, 26)

This definition shows Breton's insistence on the automatic as a precursor for any kind of surrealist activity. Understanding this idea of an automatic and unconscious expression thus is the first step in the direction of understanding what is properly surreal. It

demonstrates the necessity of the dream-state and its lucidity in the production of art, and writing. One tends to disregard the dream, "because man, when he ceases to sleep, is above all the plaything of his memory, and in its normal state memory takes pleasure in weakly retracing for him the circumstances of the dream, in stripping it of any real in importance, and in dismissing the only *determinant* from the point where he thinks he has left it a few hours" (Breton, *Surrealist Manifest*o, 11) The dream is also a frame for understanding the methods of the movement, since it is important in surrealist works--by means of their production, or subject--and in many cases, it is the lens through which they are understood.

The Surrealist group of the 1920s are not the only surrealists, they simply codified what it means to be as such. They believed the force of the movement to have stemmed from something inherent in man, rather than having been birthed from them. "Surrealism," is considered atemporal rather than belonging to Breton. In his *Manifesto*, he lists those who are in various ways surrealist: "Swift is surrealist in malice / Bertrand is surrealist in the past / Poe is surrealist in adventure / Rimbaud is surrealist in the way he lived, and elsewhere." (Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto,* 27) All of these examples of surrealism are interesting in and of themselves, since they speak specifically to an understanding of the self, rather than the circumstance.

It is clear that these artists whom Breton mentions were not writing in hopes of building a Surrealism in the future. They were expressing their vision, their view of the world, which, according to Breton, was surrealist in nature. To be surrealist, thus, is not to be a Surrealist. The latter only being a term used to describe a group of people in the early to mid twentieth century who recognized this similarity of thought among certain artists whom they

began to be interested in; but the former is an atemporal ideology. A landscape painter may not be explicitly surrealist in his style of painting, since he is trying to best represent what is there, with accuracy. But, just as Rimbaud was surreal in how he lived (and elsewhere), that landscape painter could be as well. It is not simply in the realm of arts that surrealism exists. Of course, it is easily recognized there, and lends itself to artistic production, but by its very nature, surrealism is the automatic instance of that which occurs in every life. Rimbaud and Swift belong to two very different time periods, and are concerned with different themes, and genres, but Breton considers their impetus being from the same place. They both have an appreciation for the fantastic, and know that "the marvelous is always beautiful." (Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto*, 14) Especially so in the case of a drunken boat, or even a single season in Hell.

According to Breton, these so-called surrealists "are not always Surrealists, in that I discern in each of them a certain number of preconceived ideas to which—very naively!—they hold. They hold on to them because they have not *heard the Surrealist voice*." (Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto*, 27) More specifically, he's differentiating between a passive and active voice in the process of creating, living, or existing. Activity is movement with the hopes of discovering something. It is seeking out, rather than being sought out. The Surrealists advocated in this sense for a type of passivity: "But we, who have made no effort whatsoever to filter, who in our works have made ourselves into simple receptacles of so many echoes, modest *recording instruments* who are not mesmerized by he drawings we are making, perhaps we serve an even nobler cause." (Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto*, 28)

One of Breton's works, *Nadja*, deals with this idea directly. It was published in 1928,

and deals directly with the theme of chance. In the story, Breton's narrator (taking the form of

Breton himself) tells about his experiences with a girl who goes by the name Nadja. She takes

the form of his muse, drawing pictures and saying things which are of unfaltering interest to

him. Her allure to him is one part fleeting, and one part possession. More specifically, in once

scene Nadja tells the narrator of his "power over her, of my faculty for making her think and

do whatever I desire, perhaps more than I think I desire." (Breton, *Nadja*, 79) And in another:

"Nadja telephones me at home while I was out. To the person who answered the telephone

and asked her how I could reach her, she replied 'I cannot be reached.'" (Breton, *Nadja*, 94)

These episodes of pushing and pulling are common in this novel. In fact, the nature of their

relationship is at once oppositional and attracting. She is opaque, and thus he can only go so

far in understanding her, but she is constantly enticing him with seemingly surrealist

moments.

One of these moments mirrors the surrealist practice of *automatic writing*. In this,

someone would put their pen to paper—or, in the case of Robert Desnos, open their mouth

(Breton, *Nadja*, 31)—and write without regard to anything, save the current which they

mentally attach to. The purpose of this was, in essence, to provoke the unconscious of one

individual. In one instance, Nadja invites the narrator to participate in one of these games:

> We remain silent for a while, then she suddenly addresses me using *tu*: 'A game: say
>
> something. Close your eyes and say something. Anything, a number, a name. Like this
>
> (she closes her eyes): Two, two what? Two women. What do they look like? Wearing
>
> black. Where are they? In a park. . . . And then, what are they doing? Try it, it's so easy,

why don't you want to play? You know, that's how I talk to myself when I'm alone, I tell myself all kinds of stories. And not only silly stories: actually, I live this way altogether' (Breton, *Nadja*, 74)

The simplicity of this game is that which is most appealing--there are no prerequisites except for the participant's own imagination. "It's so easy," Nadja says, when he doesn't play back. It's just playing with words: putting them carelessly together, disregarding their structure, their significance. In order to play the game properly, or even just by one's own rules, the participants must resort to simplicity as their guide.

Nadja's drawings, as well as her actions, show an example of the simplicity that can characterize surrealist ideas. A specific example is the first one that she shows André which she is glad to explain: "The black cat in the middle of the forehead is the nail by which it is attached; along the dotted line we find first of all, a hook; the black star in the upper section represents the idea." (Breton, *Nadja*, 105) There is also a mask in this, "about which she will say nothing." Her ease in explicating the meaning of these images, seemingly thoughtlessly juxtaposed around the paper and then made sense of after, is precisely this surrealist aspiration. It is not merely their appearance together, but their clear relation to one another that becomes apparent only in their unity which makes this the case.

In a footnote Breton writes: "Does this not approach the extreme limit of the surrealist aspiration, its *furthest determinant*?" (Breton, *Nadja*, 74) It is clear that she does demonstrate this goal when in the last line she says "actually, I live this way altogether." The members of Surrealism strived to achieve this, if only for limited periods of time. They sought to free

themselves from a monotonous kind of perception, not by removing themselves from it but rather by repurpositioning themselves in relation to the things around them.

For them, the study of automatism led directly to experiments with its application to art, and writing. A practice called the *exquisite corpse* juxtapozed unrelated images to form the shape of a human body. One person would draw the first part on top (a head, for example), and fold over the paper so as to conceal their drawing. The corpse would then be passed around, with everyone participating adding another part, and folding over the paper. Like automatic writing, this practice took ideas of artistic composition and put them aside for the sake of furthering the abilities of the imagination. This image of the exquisite corpse is an example of the *surrealist image*.

Generally, however, the concept of the surrealist image is a form of concretized automatism. In the *Surrealist Manifesto*, Breton writes that "it is true of Surrealist images as it is of opium images that man does not evoke them; rather they "come to him spontaneously, despotically. He cannot chase them away; for the will is powerless now and no longer controlled by the faculties." (Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto*, 36) This mirrors the effect of a dream. One does not control the images they see while they are asleep, rather they come in happiness or horror, speed or slowness.

In the dream state, "the agonizing question of possibility is no longer pertinent. Kill, fly faster, love to your heart's content." (Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto*, 13) To a lesser degree, this was also the case in the surrealist state. The only thing separating them being the obvious setbacks of corporeal and societal form. A goal of surrealism was to unite these two states of living and dreaming by means of experiments like automatism, or the exquisite corpse, which

forces the production of something that by its nature does not make sense in the reality. In the manifesto Breton writes of "the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak." (Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto*, 14)

The book expectantly begins to revolve around this figure of Nadja cum Muse immediately after her initial appearance. It describes their first meeting by an apparent coincidence, as they simply meet each other on the street, and catalogs all of the subsequent interactions as well. Interspersed throughout this narrative are moments of reflection, based on experiences that the narrator has previously experienced. What makes *Nadja* interesting, however, is that she, its subject, appears at once as a physical reality to the narrator, since he can see her, kiss her, enter or leave her presence, and a spiritual reality, an ephemeral current, a method of living. This vague but palpable sensation represents a living form of surrealism in the way that it is constructed and, naturally, felt. Being with Nadja is not so much being with someone else, but experiencing living from a specific point of view.

The narrator relates this in many ways, and places in the story. Beginning with events occurring before the appearance of Nadja, the importance of her presence—or, the importance of how she makes the narrator see, and feel—is demonstrated. Writing of his preferred way of living, he says:

> I myself shall continue living in my glass house where you can always see who comes to call; where everything hanging from the ceiling and on the walls stays where it is as if by magic, where I sleep nights in a glass bed, under glass sheets, where *who I am* will sooner or later appear etched by a diamond. (Breton, *Nadja*, 18)

This glass house and all of its contents are something through which the narrator perceives life. The narrator looks longingly outside of it—at once through the walls, and by means of them—his search, though, stays both effortless and relaxed. It is a framework for living, grounded in the idea of seeing through a lens, but also an explanation of a surrealist method of physical existence; it is how one sees which defines what they see. Just as Breton describes different artists as being surrealist in various ways in the *Manifesto*, his narrator here demonstrates that, albeit from a macrocosmic perspective. He is in a closed house, impenetrable yet fragile; however from this glass bed, he is not in want of something else which is not there. Simply, he exists in this house as means of perceiving, and places his confidence in the transparency of this perspective. He stresses that he will endlessly look through the frame of this house, hoping that one day his method of seeing life will result in a kind of self-confirmation. The phrase "who am I" is a theme throughout this story, and the narrator's way of understanding that is accurately demonstrated with this metaphor. He looks through the walls at the outside world, appreciative of what is there, constantly curious about the objects in his sight. This idea of looking without regard to the fleeting nature of the subject is at the crux of understanding the surrealist perspective. Often, it seen as characterized by an effortlessness in apprehending it—for example, like automatism.

An interesting idea brought about in the *Manifeste* is madness, and its role in the creative process. Breton's fetishizes it, and treats it as a kind of natural surrealism. He says that victims of madness "are, to some degree, victims of their imagination, in that it induces them not to pay attention to certain rules—outside of which the species feels threatened—which we are all supposed to know and respect," thus making the case that

someone who is mad cannot help but be lost in their imagination; a permanent dream state. He further clarifies this point by pointing out the relationship between himself as well as the other surrealists, and those who are mad: "it is not the fear of madness which will oblige us to leave the flag of imagination furled." (Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto*, 6) If one finds themselves deep in the crevasses of their imagination, it could be that their mind becomes an abyss. Because this of concern to him—not someone who is mad, at least with "the kind of madness that they lock up"—he shows that there is a relationship between the automatic acts that the movement practices, and a state of insanity. Why would one feel the need to defend the unfurling of the flag of imagination from its alter ego of madness, if it was not an appropriate connection?

He describes how it is that the mad are mistreated, and how their illness is in part due to the fact that their imagination has been let free, to exist without constraint. From the reader's point of view, this serves as a beacon for all of those who are interested in weaving together the subconscious, the unknown, the inexpressible, and presenting them all, together or independently, through poetry, painting, sculpture. It also, however, proposes a choice for his reader, wherein they can choose to unfurl their imagination in exchange for uncovering, to the light, the stone of folly. Inversely, they can leave the imagination be, thus allowing their inherent madness to lie undisturbed, but unknown.

To us, the children of Freud, the idea of dreams representing our unconscious, unorganized thoughts that are otherwise inaccessible is not foreign. We analyze our dreams for their significance, and think about them more as ways to understand ourselves than, say, to predict the future, or receive messages from the beyond. To understand a dream is to

understand its connections to one's own conscious state, by means of our own unconsciousness.

Surrealism brought this notion to the forefront of art, showing that what life had to offer was more than just how it appeared, and reappeared in all of our depictions of it through history. Perceiving experience through the lens that they proposed changes one's perception of the every day. Life appears in a new form, revealing things to the viewer that are, like a dream, not always what one wants to see. The importance of surrealism thus is not limited to the study or production of art, but also to behavior in a society. It attempted to eliminate the boundary between a dream-state and a waking one. This disintegrates the separation between internal thoughts and external life.

For a later French movement, the Situationist International, Surrealism broke ground on this unification: it produced images and texts based on these unique moments in life that they isolated and studied. To Situationism, however, the Surrealists did not take this far enough. The sale of art made from these deeply personal moments was a commodification of experience which, though not necessarily antithetic to the surrealist cause, did not help their research. Their reproduction of these ephemeral moments was appropriate because of their interest in the object, rather than the sensation the object emitted. To the Situationists, this simply did not take the idea far enough.

<center>**III**</center>

<center>**Situationist International, the Hidden Avant-Garde**</center>

Situationist International

In an artistic sense, the Situationist International movement was vastly different from Surrealism and Dada, primarily because the Situationists did not produce art as a means of expressing their ideas. They were opposed to their work being displayed in a museum or a bookstore because to them this was buying in to capitalist society, and its insistence on commodifying art. Instead of displaying their work, they exhibited an "avant-garde of presence," (Knabb, 142)in which lived experiences were sought for what they were, rather than their possibility of being reproduced.

They considered Surrealism to be "only a beginning of a revolutionary experiment in culture, an experiment that almost immediately ground to a practical and theoretical halt." (Knabb, 48) Positioning themselves in relation to this movement, they say: "We have to go further." (Knabb, 48) SI shared faith in the ideas proposed by the surrealists, but modified them to be more beneficial to the avant-gardist of the 1950s, and 60's. For example the 'surrealist image' was reworked into the concept of *détournement*, a more culturally subversive way of appropriating the elements of the everyday. They recognized the fact that a movement like Surrealism could not again "easily be formed because its liberativeness now depends on its seizing the more advanced material means of the modern world." (Knabb, 48) There was no space for SI to occupy in culture. Their avant-garde of presence neither did, nor ever will have a place in a capitalist society because it would be considered a pointless activity.

It does not generate revenue, and it is most beneficial as a personal activity, rather than a social one. In that lens, it is without purpose.

This was one of the most basic problems SI had with society. They argued that "functionalism (an inevitable expression of technological advance) is attempting to entirely eliminate play." (Knabb, 51) Their means of expression is an example of something that any capitalist would immediately criticize. If it is not for the sake of function (money), what is its point? Surely, it is a waste of time, because the astute attention for sensation that it requires is only applicable to the practitioner themself; being shared it loses value. It slows society down, and reduces the role of a commodity to a trifle. Dada was interested in a similar means of subversion. They wanted to shock people with their simple sculptures and fun poems in order to bring art back to playfulness; to confront the serious artist with a parody of their own work. SI fought against the same thing, but to them the artist was also the advertising executive, the entertainment industry, government, as well as numerous others. They fought capitalist society on these terms, acknowledging the difficulties of their endeavor.

Guy Debord, one of the founding members of SI as well as its principal theorist, wrote in his essay *Report on the Construction of Situations* a simple explication of their philosophy: "first of all, we think the world must be changed." (Knabb, 25) Indeed, they did, and throughout the lifetime of the group (roughly 1958-1972) its actions did not stray from this idea. Their actions were dictated by a firm belief in revolution and subversion, and for no reason did they compromise.

SI played a key role in the events in France during May of 1968. Their precise relationship to these events, however, is not exactly clear. It began alongside them, and

developed according to their philosophy. Alongside thousands of students and workers, its members participated in the occupation of universities and factories across the country in opposition to capitalistic interests and consumerism. Their theses, like Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, formed a theoretical basis for the events in '68, and, from a wider perspective, SI's insistence on change by means of revolution was demonstrated by these events. They were part of the occupation of the Sorbonne—the event which served as the spark for all of the action in '68—documenting, as a group, what took place. Despite a lack of clarity in terms of the precise relationship between the demonstrations and the SI itself, the similarity between their ideas, and the actions of the demonstrator is apparent

In a piece titled *The Beginning of an Era*, published in the Situationist magazine in which they circulated their theories, *Internationale Situationniste #12*, they recount what happened in a more broad context:

> The largest general strike that ever stopped the economy of an advanced industrial country, and the first *wildcat general strike* in history; revolutionary occupations and the beginnings of direct democracy; the increasingly complete collapse of state power for nearly two weeks; the resounding verification of the revolutionary theory of our time and even here and there the first steps towards putting it into practice; the most important experience of the modern proletarian movement that is in the process of constituting itself in its *fully developed* form in all counties, and the example it must now go beyond—this is what the French May 1968 was essentially, and this in itself *already* constitutes its essential victory. (Knabb, 289)

These demonstrations brought the government of Charles de Gaulle to a virtual standstill, and showed the power of student-led demonstrations in France. Their tone is justly proud, since their beliefs were proven to be shared among numerous others, all coming together to show that the "modern proletarian movement" is in fact "in the process of constituting itself in its *fully developed* form." For the fully developed form to exist, those fighting against the commodification of everyday life—in this case, the occupants and demonstrators—must continue to subvert violently.

Against the Spectacle

When it was first founded, Situationist International was more focused on artistic forms than explicit political theory. It was the result of the combination of a few artistic movements whose members became friends and peers. Guy Debord had befriended Asger Jorn, a Danish international affiliated with the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus. This movement was, as it sounds, interested in the ideas of Kandinsky and Paul Klee's Bauhaus school, but only in an imaginist sense. That is, without painting, without symbols or images—a Bauhaus which was purely institutional[7].Himself being a member of the French group Lettrism[8], Debord had begun to experiment with the methods of subversion (such as détournement, a repurposing of images and phrases in different contexts) which would later be the foundations of Situationist thought. These two, along with the ideas proposed by The London Psychogeographical Association, became the foundation of Situationism.

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[7] Knabb, 23
[8] Lettrism was a French avant-garde movement most notable in poetry, film, painting, and political theory, established in Paris in the mid-1940s by Romanian immigrant Isidore Isou.

Debord's dealings with Lettrism provided him with an idea called psychogeography, wherein the geography of a city was redesigned to be more conducive to playing or activities. His 1955 text *Proposals for Rationally Improving the City of Paris* gave examples of this, such as "the rooftops of Paris should be opened to pedestrian traffic by modifying fire-escape ladders and by constructing bridges when necessary," and "churches [should] be left standing but stripped of all religious content. They should be treated as ordinary buildings, and children should be allowed to play in them." (Knabb, 12) This idea was adopted by the Situationists, and positioned in relation to another idea—that of the *dérive.*

The dérive is knowingly similar to the method that Breton and the Surrealists used to meander about any city they found themselves in. They wandered aimlessly, allowing themselves to be taken by various surrealist objects, or themes. "In a dérive, one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there." (Knabb, 62)

Unlike the surrealist method of wandering, the dérive was the means and the end in and of itself. What they discovered was not to be reproduced, but experienced. It took into consideration what people naturally gravitated towards, as well as those areas which they avoided for no particular reason. It is "a technique of rapid passage through various ambiences," (Knabb, 62) and its importance lies in its ability to do just that. Breton's *Nadja* is an example of what SI sought not to do in a dérive. In the book, these meeting with Nadja are the what the narrator is searching for. Wandering, and being influenced by the fabric of the city is thus not the end in itself, but the means to something else.

Around 1962, SI's focus shifted heavily onto their journal—*Internationale Situationniste*—as their means of expression. Between July 1958 and December 1969 twelve issues were published and translated into other languages. Most of the articles and essays published in these journals were written collectively and anonymously. It was designed as a critique of capitalist culture and urban life through the lens of Situationist theory. The bulk of the information about the movement is contained within these journals. A backdrop, however, to the impetus behind the movement is written in Guy Debord's 1967 book, *Society of the Spectacle.*

In this book, Debord redefines capitalist society as the "society of the spectacle," interested only in its own prosperity, not that of its citizens. He defines the spectacle over 221 theses, constructed as aphorisms, and describes its various methods of influence over people. "The spectacle is not something *added* to the real world—not a decorative element , so to speak," he says in the sixth thesis, "on the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality, news or propaganda, advertising, or the actual consumption of entertainment." (Debord, 13) It is inseparable from everyday social life, itself dependent on that which the spectacle deems most important.

The spectacle is not itself a propaganda tactic, or a method of entertainment. It is the force behind those things which makes them appear immediately relevant in the context of society. "Understood on its own terms, the spectacle proclaims the predominance of appearances and asserts that human life, which is to say all social life, is mere appearance" (Debord, 14) This is one of the more chilling lines from Debord's theses, because "mere appearance" does not necessarily indicate a negative connotation. In fact, appearance and

sight are how we understand everything in social life, that public life which is shared with the rest of the world. One cannot simply turn off their sight to avoid influence from the visual, physical realm.

As a society, we are flocking to urban environments. More than half of the international population lives in a city, and that number will continue to rise[9]. There are both economic and social reasons for this, but regardless of our motives, we are erring on the side of social rather than antisocial. For this reason, sight is massively important in day-to-day living because it is our main method of gathering information. We unconsciously, even accidentally look at advertisements, and before passing judgement about their status as propaganda or aid, allow them to leave an impression on our mind. This is in contrast to how the Situationists behaved in society. They were hidden because they realized the dangers of being seen, and their invisibility thus is an example of how to remain unnoticed by the eyes of the spectacle.

Appearance, in Debord's view, has replaced feeling. The spectacle, being chiefly a visual form, appears as more important than it actually is. In the end, "all it says is: 'Everything that appears is good; whatever is good will appear.' The attitude that it demands in principle is the same passive acceptance that it has already secured by its seeming incontrovertibility, and indeed by its monopolization of the realm of appearances." (Debord, 15) Its domination of appearances is difficult to overcome, because one would have to not see at all, or do so from a permanently off-kilter angle in order to, in a sense, avoid it.

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[9] http://www.who.int/gho/urban_health/situation_trends/urban_population_growth_text/en/

SI approached the idea of the spectacle understanding that it simply cannot be avoided. It is woven into the fabric of life, and eradicating it would mean uprooting the foundation of our society. They recognized that art plays a role in constructing a contrary ambience, and put it on a larger scale; one wherein the role of the spectacle is, for moments of time, nullified. For them, this formed the basis on which their idea of the 'situation' was designed. Debord prefaces his elucidation of this idea in *Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation* by clarifying that 'the situation' is not merely an artistic term. "Our conception of a 'constructed situation' is not limited to an integrated use of artistic means to create an ambience, however great the force or spatiotemporal extent of that ambience might be." (Knabb, 49) It is larger than art, he says. It mirrors the goal of art—to express, or generate feeling—but applies it to a social scale. A situation is just as it sounds: specific in its space and its time, designed to evoke a reaction. Its ability to combat the reach of the spectacle comes from its equally dependent relationship with existence, and appearance. Appearance and existence in the situation, however, are appreciated for their ability to aid feeling. Contrastingly, in the spectacle, they encourage a social passivity.

Tzara in his *Dada Manifesto* alludes to a form of expression like this, writing that "the new artist protests: he no longer paints (symbolic and illusionistic reproduction) but creates directly in stone, wood, iron, tin, rock, or locomotive structures capable of being spun in all directions by the limpid wind of the momentary sensation." (Tzara, 7) The retrospective relationship between Dada and SI is apparent. Both movements emphasized destruction—the Situationists envisioned a cultural revolution, the first traces of which they experienced during 1968; and Dada broke images and language—as the means by which art and society

could liberate itself. Demonstrating what would become his direct antecedence to SI, Tzara writes that "every pictorial or plastic work is unnecessary, even if it is a monster which terrifies servile minds, and not a sickly-sweet object to adorn the reflections of animals in human garb, those illustrations of the sad fable of humanity." (Tzara, 7)

The posterity of Dada, as well as Surrealism, is further demonstrated in Situationism with their concept of *détournement*. It stems from the idea that everything which needs to be said, or shown has already been put forth, albeit in forms that could stand to be revised. Tzara's *pour faire un poème Dadaïste*, a text designed to show how to be Dada, is mirrored by Debord and Gil J. Wolman's *User's Guide to Détournement*, published in 1956. It defines détournement as "the mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the juxtaposition of two independent expressions," designed to supplant the original composition, producing "a synthetic organization of greater efficacy. Anything can be used." (Knabb, 15) Immediately, détournement resembles a collage. It takes objects out of the context they were designed to be in, and places them somewhere else to achieve a different result. This can be anything, such as adding a sentence under an image to alter its meaning. The goal, of course, is not always to be sensical. It is a way of playing, while also messing with the elements of society that they disliked. "Détournement is less effective the more it approaches a rational reply." (Knabb, 17) Especially so is this the case with advertisements, or newspapers. Changing their meaning could potentially cure the blindness of the consumer, whose sudden realization that propaganda is humorous changes their perception of what they are told to believe.

In a text called *Détournement as a Negation and Prelude,* Debord writes:

Détournement, the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble, has been a constantly present tendency of the contemporary avant-garde, both before and since the formation of the SI. The two fundamental laws of détournement are the loss of importance of each detourned autonomous element—which may go so far as to completely lose its original sense—and at the same time the organization of another meaningful ensemble that confers on each element its new scope and effect." (Knabb, 67)

Taking away the meaning that the original element had is akin to taking money and making it into a fine paper airplane. A dollar does more flying from a balcony than it does in a wallet, since everyone who looks at it understands the effectiveness of its deceptive détournement. The SI argued that there were two main categories which their detourned elements feel into: minor détournements, and deceptive détournements. A minor detournement is an element which derives all of its meaning from the new context that it has been placed in, such as a found picture, or a sentence cut out from the newspaper, while a deceptive détournement is something whose meaning is changed by the new context that it has been put it. A paper airplane made out of currency is still money flying through the air, but its economic relevance disappears as it soars over the rooftops.

Détournement is effective because in essence it repurposes the familiar. It takes elements of more or less established relevance, and shifts the emphasis of their meaning. Its goal is to undermining the authority of their original subjects by simply presenting them in a different light. An example of détournement comes from the film of Guy Debord's *In Girum*

Imus Nocte Et Consumimur Igni[10] which was made in 1978, after the dissolution of the Situationist movement. There are other films which were made before this which are also examples of this détournement, however this one is notable because of its use of specific images designed to resonate with the audience. Some examples are clips from old American Westerns, and stock photos from advertising catalogs. Rather than look at détournement from a more theoretical perspective like the 1956 text, this film is an example of it.

Debord opens the film with the image of an audience from the perspective of a movie-theater screen, immediately revoking the familiar comfort of being the anonymous viewer of the film. When going to the cinema, you sits in the dark, watching the movie quietly, and then leaving when it has finished. One goes to the theater in order to see a movie, not to participate in the performance. They go so as to learn about, critique, or discuss what happens and apply it in some shape or form to their daily life. Debord is critical of this appreciation for the cinema, and he likens it to a kind of spectacle:

> The advertising manipulators, with the usual impudence of those who know that people tend to justify whatever affronts they don't avenge, calmly declare that "People who love life go to the cinema." But this life and this cinema are equally paltry, which is why it hardly matters if one is substituted for the other. (Knabb, "Guy Debord: Complete Cinematic Works" 134)

His stance is clear on the role of cinema as prescribed in culture. According to this, people attend the cinema because they believe themselves to be lovers of life. It allows them to see other types of living without themselves being the subject. It approaches life in the

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[10] English: "We turn in the night and are consumed by fire"

same way that the audience attending it presumably does: happily, with strictly good intention in its morals or cathartic capabilities. People cry not because they are genuinely upset, but rather because they are moved by what they've seen. The "movie going public," according to Debord, "has never been very bourgeois and is scarcely any longer working-class." They come entirely from "the stratum of low-level skilled employees in the various 'service' occupations that are so necessary to the present production system: management, control, maintenance, research, teaching, propaganda, entertainment, and pseudocritique." (Knabb, *Guy Debord Complete Cinematic Works* 134)

Debord's idea of a "service occupation" is a job that directly affects society through the education, or management of its citizens. He follows "management" with "control," "propaganda" with "entertainment and pseudocritique" to show the way in which he's attempting to redefine these seemingly commonplace jobs. The scope of entertainment, for example, is much larger than just showing people what they want to see; it is setting the example for what one should want to see, and showing them how it should be portrayed. Entertainment relies on the consumption of its production, so in order to guarantee that, it must first know what entertains its consumers. An audience's tastes cannot be judged from afar, but they can be manipulated. With the placement of the phrase "people who love life go to the cinema," on a billboard, those in charge of the cinema are given a fairly important task: they are to show what makes life so lovable after all.

The people who work in these industries, though of course not necessarily bad, project their worldview on others. If their understanding of reality is through the lens of

social life as it has been prescribed to them, is not what they pass on an opinion of what they too have been told to be good, rather than what they believe?

It is of course reductive to consider the role of everyone who works in these "service occupations" as fundamentally tainted in their perspective and thus their job. It is not Debord's goal to discredit their merit, but draw attention to the factors outside of their control. They receive payment for their work, and they have been taught how to do it by somebody else. Entertainment represents the idea of the spectacle clearly because it derives all of its power from the realm of appearances. It has no jurisdiction over feeling, aside from the feeling it wants the consumer to experience. Its power is simply economic prosperity. It does not represent what is important in culture in any form other than that which it prescribes. This allows the spectacle to appear at once separate from, and united with society. Untouchable, unseen, while dictating the movements of all its consumers.

In this film, Debord uses the same medium he is criticizing, but immediately breaks down the illusion of the spectator. He uses visuals to control feelings. By beginning with an image of an audience, his role as director becomes more personal. He is not communicating with this film, as a director of a Western might, projecting moral characteristic onto their characters. Instead, he conveys his meaning through it, pulling the audience in by his fact, not his fiction.

This apparent omnipotence is all that provides the spectacle with power. It pushes consumption itself more than any one product, and quantifies life as a series of transactions, rather than a series of events:

An earlier stage in the economy's domination of social life entailed an obvious

downgrading of *being* into *having* that left its stamp on all human endeavor. The

present stage, in which social life is completely taken over by the accumulated

products of the economy, entails a generalized shift from *having* to appearing: all

effective "having" must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate raison

d'être from appearances. At the same time all individual reality, being directly

dependent on social power and completely shared by that power, has assumed a social

character. Indeed, it is only inasmuch as individual reality *is not* that it is allowed to

appear. (Debord, *Society of the Spectacle,* 16)

In the society of the spectacle, consuming is living. Its goal is to control desire, limiting

its scope to set of preordained options. It says that these options will give you happiness, and

shows you pictures of other people smiling, having themselves made the right choice.

Because possession usurps sensation, prestige comes from wealth. By the same logic,

possession only becomes important because wealth is prestige. This is the codependent

relationship that allows the spectacle to effortlessly control "individual reality" while still

remaining hidden to its consumer. What does one do with money other than spend it? One

must buy, and continue to do so.

People who loved life at one point went to the cinema because it was only on that

screen that they could see the film. Then they were given the option to see the film in their

own home, with the caveat being an interruption every few minutes by an advertisement.

This was fine, because it was only a few minutes and the movie would be back on soon.

Meanwhile, they are sedated in front of the television, too comfortable with the images

passing before their eyes . This evolved alongside technology, eventually giving the consumer

the ability to produce their own movies, or videos, at once a victim to the spectacle, and a

contributor to it.

The situationists insisted on not going away, on continuous, endless subversion, in

order to oppose the spectacle. It used the idea of the situation as a kind of self-contained, yet

universally applicable surrealist game, wherein the ambiance they strived to achieve was

explicitly unconscious. Debord said that, in terms of the present, Situationism exists as a kind

of "laboratory for experiments." It was a way for one to realize an artistic idea in life. What

Breton and the Surrealists experimented with in psychic and artistic applications, the

situationist group experienced. Something such as the theory of the dérive can be explained,

but as Debord says in *Theory of the Dérive* "written descriptions can be no more than

passwords to this great game." (Knabb, 65) They insisted on the ephemeral, defending it as

the most true state of the avant-garde.

Ultimately, the founding members of SI drifted away from it. They could no longer

participate in the movement because they didn't agree with the direction that the movement

was going. This was not necessarily out of hostility, but out of a change in opinion on the

group's direction. Once this happened, Debord himself dissolved the group, not wanting

imitate Breton's act of ending Surrealism through his own death. The importance of SI is due

to its ability to question the foundations of society incessantly. Only in the destruction of

capitalism—in other words the ending of our present society—would its goal be realized. It

never strayed from this idea, and in its eventual dissolution it demonstrated its success in

regards to its mission. Specifically, it fully erased itself, but it did also subvert society, as

shown in the events of May '68. More importantly, however, it gave instruction on how one could do the same when faced with a behemoth task such as ending the grip of commodification.

It is, of course, most important to consider the actions Situationists in regard to our present time. Our spectacle is even more hidden, and more present than ever with modern technology. Life is not a personal affair, but one tied to the opinions of an insignificant jury whose critiques come in the form of liking, or disliking something not on merit, but on appearance. For example, social media deceives its consumers into giving up their information on the premise that it will be safe. They give this up to a website which has reason to have that information, except to show it to other members of the online community. Advertisements appear in the same shape and form as a picture that one's friend puts up, further blurring the line between individual reality as we perceive it, and manipulation from the spectacle. This spectacle only requires its own proliferation in order to succeed, and our technological advancements, taking the shape of trifles, or ways of connecting the world, often possess an unconscious ulterior motive.

"Why is becoming a surrealist no longer a meaningful option?" asks Debord in "*The Sound and the Fury*. "Not because of the ruling class' constant encouragement of "avant-garde" movements to dissociate themselves from the scandalous aspects of surrealism. . . If we are not surrealists, it is because *surrealism has become a total bore*." (Knabb, 48)

Debord's critique of Surrealism is not of the movement itself, but of its staying the same through time, despite a change in circumstances. What the surrealist movement did, in the sense of its social identity, was specific to its time. Developing out of Dada, it inherited contrarian tendencies against the bourgeoisie and its nationalist agenda. This was repurposed into artistic success for them, but that success came in the form of commodifying their own beliefs. Using the example of Breton's own *Surrealist Manifesto*, which sold at auction in 2008 for 3.2 million Euros[11], Surrealism could not avoid becoming an object for the wealthy to flaunt as their own. This is not a fault of the movement, but rather a fault of its staying power.

Situationism, having recognized this, erased themselves as they existed. They focused on experience rather than expression, considering the art of the immediate present to be of the most importance because it could not be commodified. Regardless, you can still buy a copy of the Situationist essays in a bookstore, or on Amazon. Of course, the buying and selling power of these essays is not something Debord took into consideration. Breton, as well, did not lose sleep worrying about the price for which his manifesto will sell 50 years

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[11] https://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/may/21/france.art

after his death. Rather, these instances demonstrate how the role of the avant-garde changes as society does. Debord writes that "a movement more liberating than the surrealism of 1924 …cannot easily be formed because its liberativeness now depends on its seizing the more advanced means of the modern world." (Knabb, 48) This statement is applicable not only to surrealism, but any revolutionary movement which is firm, and clear in its beliefs. Surrealism could not happen today simply because its aims are not as applicable now, as they were in the 1920s.

Due to the ever-shifting social climate of the world, that which any of these movements opposed is not a constant opponent. These movements thus must be understood as examples of an avant-garde tradition, rather than as the avant-garde itself. They each saw novelty in a different way due to their circumstances. Dada and Surrealism recognized that art had stagnated, and they fought that by mocking fine art, and changing the definition of an artist. What was revolutionary for them, however, is the modern art of today. Situationism saw their opportunity in demonstration and action. They concealed their work, and through self-erasure hid their avant-garde from the society of the spectacle—that society which had already co-opted the perspective of surrealism as its own. By the same token, the avant-garde to which these movements belonged is exclusively theirs, because the term "avant-garde" exists ultimately as a retrospective, and reductive term.

Novelty will always be subjective; what is new becomes instantly old after its conception. The role of these movements is not to prove that something will be permanently new, but that there can, and must always be something new. Novelty is humorous when it mocks the antiquated; it is poetic when it shows a new perspective of a common object; it is

suspect when it conceals rather than expresses. Breton, in *Mad Love*, expresses this

fluctuating idea as "convulsive beauty," which will oppose itself incessantly or cease to exist.

Our perception of what is new will change, but our recognition of novelty will not. It will be

"veiled-erotic, fixed-explosive, magic-circumstantial, or it will not be." (Breton, *Mad Love,*

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