

To Realize Art: Notes for a History of the Situationist International (1957-72)

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Philosophy must never forget that it has always spoken its part in the most burlesque and melodramatic setting
- Attila Kotani

In *Theory of the Avant-garde*, Peter Burger argues that Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism aimed at "the sublation of art into life." A similar consideration might well be made about the *Situationist International* (SI), a movement of great ambition and influence whose reflections on art, the city, spontaneity, and the spectacle, have insured it a vital but largely hidden role in 20th century art and politics.¹ In what follows I propose to sketch briefly the history of this group from its beginnings in 1957 to its participation (some would say its leading role) in the May '68 events in France, which marked the zenith of SI activity and also the beginning of the group's decline (it was formally dissolved in 1972 by its only two remaining members, Guy Debord and Gianfranco Sanguinetti). More specifically, I would like to emphasize 1) the urban dimension of many SI practices, as seen in the notions of "derive," "psycho geography," and "unitary urbanism," 2) the importance of play as a technique of diversion and re-appropriation, evident especially in the notion of "detournement," and 3) the global scope of SI activities, which ranged from poetry to architecture, from cinema to urbanism, and which developed as part of the group's totalizing (in Lukacs' sense) critique of capitalist consumer culture. Central to this story is what one might call, following Burger, the SI's attack on the institution of art and its rejection of culture as a separate, reified sphere.

The founding of the SI dates from a conference held in 1957 in Cosio d'Arroscia in Northern Italy. The conference brought together members of the *International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus* (IMIB) represented by the Danish painter Asger Jorn and the Italian Pinot-Gallizio, and the *Lettrist International* (LI) headed by the Parisian Guy Debord. Both groups traced their origins back to the International Surrealist movement whose break-up after the war led to a proliferation of splinter groups, each claiming the revolutionary heritage of the avant-garde. Jorn had been a founding member of COBRA and a collaborator on Le Corbusier's

Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux (1937).² In 1953 he founded the IMIB as an alternative to Max Bill's more technical school at Ulm, guilty in his view of having sold-out the Bauhaus idea to industrial capitalism. In its short life-span of only three years, this "center for free and experimental research" had been able to attract several leading European artists, including Matta and Enrico Baj, and had already exhibited some of its

PREMIÈRE EXPÉRIENCE DU BAUHAUS IMAGINISTE



Cérénique de Matta

Fig. 1. Matta, "First experiment of the Imaginist Bauhaus," from A. Jorn, *Image et Forme* (1958)

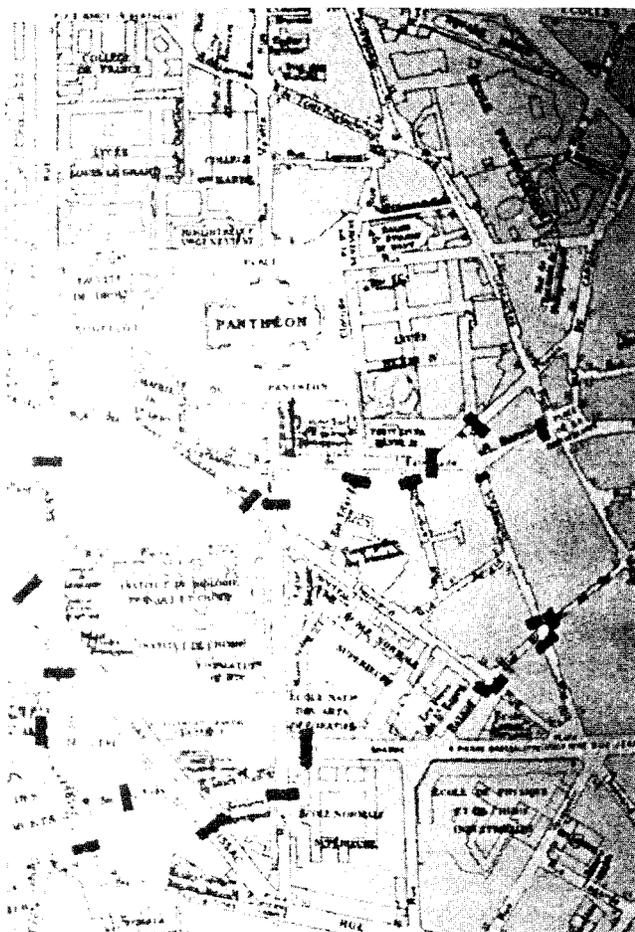


Fig. 4. The defense perimeter and emplacement of principal barricades in the occupied quarter on May 10th, from *Enrages and Situationists ...*

conceptually to a 17th century game devised by Madeleine de Scudery and reprinted in the SI journal: an imaginary landscape, entitled *Carte de Tendre*, representing various possible outcomes in a sentimental journey. The comparison is instructive, for while both works are in some sense experimental topographies which modify the objective features of a landscape according to the subjective logic of human desires, *Naked City* appears to involve a more systematic and analytical approach. The situationists developed a term for this, psychogeography, defined as "the study of the specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behavior of individuals." Not surprisingly, the most direct source for *Naked City* is actually a book by the French urban geographer Chombart de Lauwe, who carefully mapped out the Paris districts according to observed patterns of use and movement.⁴ In any case, and whatever the actual meaning of *Naked City*, its more "rational" character would be consistent with Debord's criticism of surrealism's emphasis on the unconscious and the occult. In fact, the whole point of a derive - and of any lettrist activity - was the systematic criticism of modern society starting, as Debord would say,

from "a general theory that explains it."

The founding document of the SI, whose long title (*Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's conditions of Organization and Action*) echoed the style of 19th century revolutionary tracts, carried this position further in a detailed critique of Dadaism, Futurism, and Surrealism for having failed to develop "a comprehensive theory of the conditions and perspectives of their work," and for "limiting their pursuits largely to plastic experimentation," a criticism applicable *a fortiori* to more recent movements like Abstract Expressionism. Debord called for a revolutionary action in culture aimed "not at translating or explaining life but at enlarging it":

The struggle for a new sensibility and a new culture - he wrote - is itself part of a general revolutionary resurgence... visible in the upsurge of the masses in the USSR, Poland, and Hungary... in the successes of the Algerian insurrection, and in the major strikes in Spain ...

It was here, also, that Debord gave his first definition of a technique that would be widely applied by the SI later on: "détournement" (which literally means diversion, but with an added connotation of criminality, as in hijacking), when he wrote:

we must not refuse modern culture, but co-opt it, in order to deny it ... we must destroy, through every hyper-political means, the bourgeois idea of happiness ...

Thus from its inception the SI conceived itself as an organization explicitly denying its own status as an art movement, for which the making of art was only one dimension of a much larger revolutionary project. Clearly, then, the value of any work would have to be measured against its ability to radically question "the present organization of culture" and by its potential to become, as Debord would say, an "anti-work." It is necessary to note here the ambiguity of such a stance, which Debord acknowledged meant "accepting to operate within culture while at the same time refusing the present organization of culture and even the whole notion of culture as a separate sphere."

The two years following the founding of the SI saw, first in chronological order, the appearance of Debord and Jorn's "anti-book" *Memoires*, which recounted the adventures of the first year of the Lettrist International. The book was bound in sandpaper so as to cause as much destruction as possible and was produced in the form of a "sumptuary gift," according to the principle of potlatch described below. Consisting entirely of words, phrases or images cut from books or magazines and scattered across the page, which Jorn then crossed and splattered with lines and blotches of color, its formal structure might be described as standing somewhere between the map and the dadaist letter-poem (fig. 5). Like Isou's earlier metagraphic poems, *Memoires* seems to reach back to an almost prelinguistic form of communication based on "primary linguistic particles," and

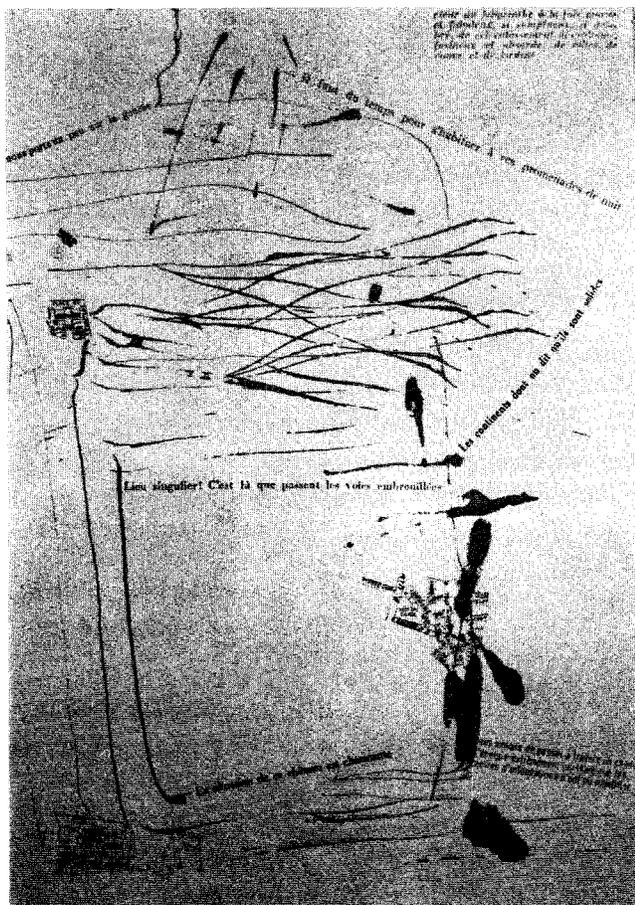


Fig. 5. Debord and Jorn, *Memoires* (1959)

where - to quote Isou again - "each element exists insofar as it allows one to imagine another element, which is either non-existent or possible." The most common images were fragments of Paris, often tied loosely together in a network of strangely evocative sentences ("the earth with its noise," or "we just passed through a very powerful field of energy that our centers of information failed to identify"). Only a few pages referred to known events, like the one recalling Debord's imageless film and the public outrage on its first showing in 1952 (the Bretonian phrase, "The art of the future will be an overturning of situations or it will be nothing" sums up the whole point of the experiment). The clue to *Memoires* is on the last page where the single sentence, "Je voulais parler la belle langue de mon siècle," appears just above a gorgeous dripped form by Jorn.

Composed in 1957, *Memoires* was published only two years later. By this time, three important shows had been opened by individual members of the group, each in its own way indicative of the range and fruitfulness of SI work during these years. The first was Jorn's *Modifications* (at the Rive Gauche gallery in Paris), a series of anonymous kitsch paintings from the Paris flea market which Jorn reworked in his fantastic gestural style. Presented as a "monument to bad painting," the show was a good illustration of the technique of *detournement*: a sophisticated sabotaging operation that

reinscribed Duchamp's gesture in a timeless tradition of popular rebellion, while also demonstrating how popular culture might serve to "regenerate" modern art (fig. 6). The thinking behind these works was actually quite rigorous: it was based on the principle of potlatch, a primitive form of exchange based on the gift and the sacrifice, which Jorn believed represented a richer, more generous and less utilitarian economy than our modern-day's buying and selling.

No less ambitious was Pinot-Gallizio's *Cavern of Anti-matter*, which opened shortly after at the Galerie Rene Drouin, also in Paris. Like Jorn, and with an equally destructive sense of fun, Gallizio took on the entire history of modern art. His "unitary ambiance" used his earlier painting machines to mark the final supersession of the art object. In this labyrinth-like setting, which used lights and mirrors and was filled with violent colors, perfumes, and music, Gallizio invited viewers to "appropriate" the work either by taking pieces of it with them or by following the example of a few models who could be seen parading through the space dressed in the same material. Here the "devaluation" of painting meant the elimination of the isolated work of art and the conventional distinction between producer and consumer. Gallizio also proposed that the *Cavern of anti-matter* be read as the prototype cell for a new, technologically advanced society in which everyone would participate in the creation of appropriate architectural ensembles - sites of "magical-creative festivity," as he called them. This was consistent with the SI's interest in the liberating potential of



Fig. 6. A. Jom, *Modifications* (1959)

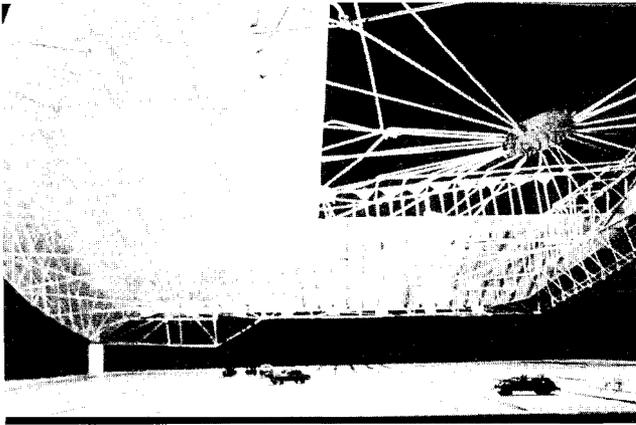


Fig. 7. Constant, *New Babylon* (1959)

technology and automation, which through the reduction of the work-day opened up new uses of free time for making "situations," defined as "moments of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a game of events."

New Babylon, which opened at the same time at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, carried these ideas further into the realms of architecture and urban design. Its author was the painter-turned-architect and one time-collaborator with Aldo Van Eyck, Constant Nieuwenhuys, who would later play an important role in the Dutch Provos movement. Through Gallizio, Constant found an ideal "client" for his project in a community of gypsies who visited Alba in Northern Italy every year and whom Gallizio represented on the town council. From this encounter Constant was inspired to build a series of nomadic encampments which became the basis for a set of proposals for Amsterdam, the Hague, and London (fig. 7). More concretely than any previous SI work, *New Babylon* gave form to some of the key themes of the group, from the critique of functionalist town planning, to the notion of play, psychogeography, and unitary urbanism ("the theory of the combined use of art and technique for the integral construction of a milieu in dynamic relation with experimental behavior.") Based also on the writings of the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, whose *The Right to the City* called for the development of a global perspective on the economic forces responsible for the city's decay, Constant proposed a vast chain of lightweight structures, each of which could be internally re-organized at will to satisfy the needs and desires of its transient users. Physical models for a future society in which, as Chombart de Lauwe had written, "those who are subject to the physical environment will have the power and the means to shape it," these ceaselessly changing habitats offered themselves as the ideal setting for "homo ludens" (man the player), as described by the historian Johan Huizinga in a famous book by that title.

If Constant's work marked the most developed architectural resolution of the situationist idea of a unitary urbanism, it also signaled the beginning of a crisis within the group, which came to a head a year later with the forced resignation

of Constant, followed shortly after by the expulsion of Gallizio and the resignation of Jorn. Some details of this controversy, which involved especially the German and Swedish factions, are found in Peter Wollen's essay and I will not rehearse them here. As one might have expected, it centered on the problem of the autonomous work of art and the SI's steadfast refusal of any separation between artistic and political activity. Debord put the problem concisely when he noted (in a formulation reminiscent of Marcuse and Adorno) that "only the real negation of culture can preserve its meaning," suggesting that individual art works, no matter how radical in content, were fated to become mere cerebral compensations for society's shortcomings — a point that in retrospect seems especially applicable to Constant's work.

Following the split, Debord assumed a leading role in the organization, whose activities turned increasingly towards the elaboration of theory, the production of explicitly agitational art, and direct engagement in various forms of provocation. *The society of the spectacle* published with no copyright in 1967, is the work of theory which more than any other expresses the situationist philosophy of revolt. Here Debord, working in the tradition of Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness* but from a more radical position of council communism, described how capitalist societies of both East and West attempted to compensate for the fragmentation of life through the false unity of the "spectacle." The alienation fundamental to class society, he argued, could now be seen in all areas of social life. It robbed people of the goods they produced, but more importantly it turned them into passive spectators of their own lives, removing them from their own desires and emotions which they could only relive through vicarious forms of commercial entertainment - a notion well conveyed by the cover of the English translation (fig. 8).

The impact of this difficult book, which became a cult classic in the underground world of the youth groups which were just then beginning to make themselves heard, owed a lot to the SI's skillful use of detoured imagery, whose corrosive satire complemented Debord's arcane Hegelian terminology in a very effective way. In the best cases, these images achieve what Jameson would call an effect of "dialectical shock," as seen, for example, in a detoured advertisement for the German home movie camera Eumig, where the text ("I love my camera because I love to live: I record the best moments of life and relive them in all their richness") is coupled with the SI caption, "The Domination of Life by the Spectacle," commenting on how the ad illustrates "the petrification of individual life which has now reversed itself into a spectacular economy." Another example comes from a Catholic family journal and serves to ridicule the liberalizing policies of the church towards rock and roll. The title explains how the girls doing the twist in Father Leonard's church represent "the common front of the spectacles ... [where] the divine and the profane go hand in hand ... in order to bring the rockers back into the fold, come what may." A more serious but no less powerful example is the illustration

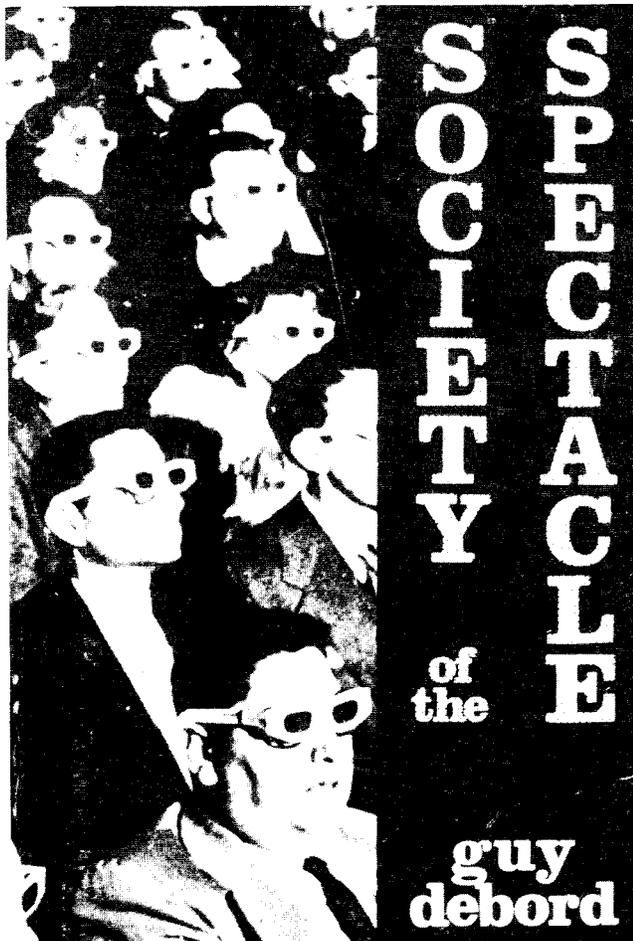


Fig. 8. Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967)

which accompanied Debord's all-too-prophetic essay on the Watts riots in Los Angeles, "The decline and fall of the spectacle-commodity society." It shows a burning supermarket re-titled "Critique of Urbanism," as if to say that vandalism and looting are the only possible consequence (and effective criticism) of a discipline completely in the service of a dominant power. There is no question that images such as these helped immensely to popularize situationist ideas even among the less educated: their terse lapidary quality appealed to the discontented and excluded, while suggesting a theory and a language capable of "naming the system." It was in late 1966, in fact, that urged on by the situationist Attila Kotanyi, several students at the University of Strasbourg took over the Student Union and illegally used the funds of the organization to print a situationist text: *On the Poverty of Student Life: a consideration of its economic, political, sexual, psychological, and most notably Intellectual aspects and a few ways to cure it*. The pamphlet described the average university student as the most miserable creature who had ever appeared on the face of the earth: a mere number in a mass of frustrated consumers, working on the fringes of a star-system that denied him or her any role in the products it produced, economically dependent, living in a state of constant intellectual inferiority; it was only by

overthrowing the entire system of cultural as well as economic domination that students would ever be able to regain control of their lives. This appeal to direct self-empowerment, based on what one SI member (Dieter Kunzelmann) called the "principle of fun and dance," resonated powerfully among students disillusioned with traditional forms of political organization, and, according to some historians at least, was the spark that ignited the far more devastating conflagration of May 68. It resulted in a famous court case, in which the prosecuting judge described the SI as "cynics who do not hesitate to commend theft, the destruction of scholarship, the abolition of work, total subversion, and a world wide revolution with 'unlicensed pleasure' as its only aim," all told a pretty accurate description of the situationist program, which harked back to a long tradition of pleasure-seeking radicalism from Fourier to Saint-Just.

As mentioned, the Strasbourg events are often seen as an anticipation of the much more widespread uprising of students and workers a year later that threatened to topple the De Gaulle regime and which the SI helped to provoke through propaganda and direct participation in the occupation movement. However, since the exact role of the SI in these events is still disputed by some (and because I have been going on too long already), I will not say much about this. For those who are interested, the best sources in English are Ken Knabb's *Situationist Anthology*, and Rene' Vient's recently translated book on the occupation movement in France, published by Autonomedia.⁵

To conclude with two general remarks, and to return to my opening suggestion, I think it is fair to say that the same impulse to destroy the institution of art which Burger saw as animating the historical avant-gardes helps to explain the path followed by the SI in its remarkable trajectory from art movement to "hyperpolitical" organization. If Modernism, to follow Burger a bit further, involved a "transformation of form into content," or the introjection of external conditions into the work itself, the SI tried to reverse this trend by directly engaging the real life terrain in which "cultural" meanings can and must be expressed. I think it can also be said that in the process the SI produced formally innovative works that also embodied a sustained reflection on the role of the artist in society. To use a current phrase, it combined a 'politics of the signifier' with a 'politics of the signified'. With a little more time, one could also show how the activism of the SI contrasts sharply with the current "fin de millennium" mood of post-modernity, whose leading theorists from Baudrillard to Lyotard seem rarely to recognize their debt to it.⁶ Against post-modernism's political agnosticism, the SI remained faithful to what Bloch would have called a "principle of hope": a moral imperative in which "questions of right and wrong take precedence over questions of truth and falsity."

Perhaps the most lasting influence of the SI can be seen in the models of action and behavior it proposed, which in the best Brechtian tradition aimed at transforming aesthetic experience into forms of awareness. As Stewart Home has shown,

SI tactics have influenced a whole generation of artists and cultural agitators on both sides of the Atlantic, including Fluxus, Mail-Art, Neo-ism, Art Strike, Punk and Class War.⁸ From this point of view, at least, Debord's immodest claim that the SI was the only true inheritor of the avant-garde seems justified.

Of course it must also be admitted that like the avant-garde movements before it, the SI failed in its attempt to destroy the institution of art, and that it too fell victim to the institutional forces or "strategies of containment" it fought so hard to resist. And this is not even to mention more specific failures pointed out by several disenchanted members of the group: for example, that it never overcame its sectarian and elitist inclinations; that it basically misjudged the direction of economic development towards a society of abundance; and that it gave insufficient weight to the economic interests underlying the spectacle.

Yet even with these failures it could not be denied that the SI followed Dada and Surrealism in attempting to dissolve art into life. If anything, the difference is that it came closer to succeeding than any movement before it.⁹ For this reason, and because there is so much more to say about this group whose history I have only begun to describe, I can find no better image with which to conclude than a poster, the last one produced by Debord's Occupation Committee before its forced expulsion from the Sorbonne (fig. 9), which reads *A suivre*, to be continued.

NOTES

- ¹ See Peter Burger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis 1984), including J. Schulte-Sasse's useful introduction. A first version of this current paper was delivered in 1993 at the University of Texas at Austin. On the SI, see especially *On the Passage of a Few People through a Relatively Brief Moment in Time*, edited by E. Sussman (MIT Press '1989), Ken Knabb, *Situationist Anthology* (Berkeley 1981) and Gerard Berreby, ed. *Documents Relatifs a la Fondation de l'Internationale Situationniste* (Paris 1985)
- ² On Jom, see Peter Wollen's excellent "Bitter Victory: the Art and Politics of the Situationist International" in *On the Passage ...*, and now *Asger Jorn 1914-1973*, ed. by Troels Andersen et al., catalogue of the exhibition held at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1994.
- ³ M. Bernstein, *Times Literary Supplement* (May 1964)

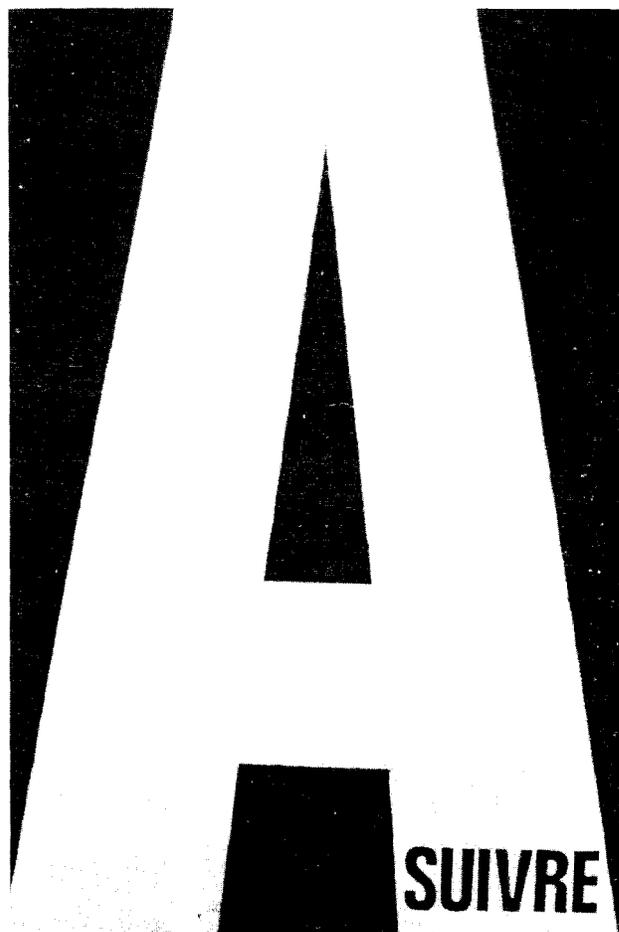


Fig. 9. To be continued ... (1968) from *Enrages and Situationists ...*

- ⁴ See Tom MacDonough's interesting study on "Situationist Space" in *October* (March 1993).
- ⁵ Ken Knabb, *cit.*; Rene Vienet, *Enrages and Situationists in the Occupation Movement. France, May 68* (Autonomedia, New York 1992)
- ⁶ See especially Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture* (Routledge, London 1992).
- ⁷ J. Schulte-Sasse, Foreword to Burger, *cit.* Cf also the title of Lyotard's most recent book, *Derives de Marx a Freud*.
- ⁸ Stewart Home, *The Assault on Culture: utopian currents from Lettrism to Class War* (Stirling, UK 1991).
- ⁹ Margaret Crawford, "The Hacienda must be Built" in *DBR* (1992)