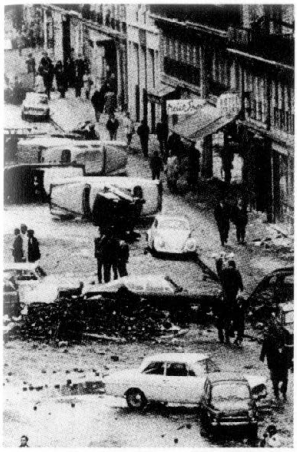
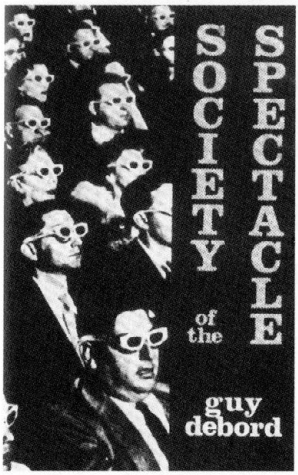
Libero Andreotti

Towards a Post-Situationist Architecture





Among the various groups that formed from the break up of the International Surrealist movement after the second world war, perhaps none has had a more consistent underground cult following than the *Internationale Situationniste*, also known in English as '*the SI*'. Founded in 1957 by representatives of several European avant-gardes, the SI was, from its inception, a revolutionary cultural organisation very much in the spirit of Dada and Surrealism. Like these earlier groups, the artists, poets, and agitators who joined the SI placed themselves at the margins of art and politics, challenging existing conventions and developing new arenas for creative expression and critical action. Throughout their fifteen years of existence, the situationists formulated an incisive critique of the injustices and class divisions underlying Europe's post-war consumer culture, which they expressed in a remarkable and extraordinarily varied body of writings, actions, and works that revived, in often starkly political tones, the avant-garde project of merging art and life.

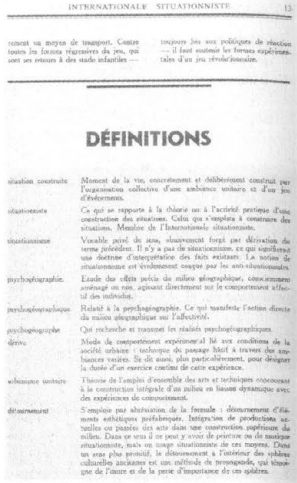
Unlike their predecessors, however, the situationists were actually able to carry out this project at an ambitious scale. During the events of May 68, their slogans covered the walls of Paris and their tactics of cultural sabotage were a decisive stimulus to the forms of *direct communication*, the *detournement* of city streets, and the forms of *urban bricolage* adopted by the insurgents. Since then, situationist ideas have inspired radical utopian currents around the world. At the same time, however, many of their critiques of functionalist town planning, for example, have found their way into the architectural profession, generating new approaches to design that share little if any of the group's larger social goals.

My purpose today is to begin to explore the grey zone of what we might term *post-situationist practices* in recent years, highlighting the power of concepts developed largely outside (and even against) the architectural profession in an effort to distinguish the *recuperation* of the SI from more genuine extensions of its urban theories. Possibly the most eloquent summary of situationist ideas on the city is the chapter devoted to territorial planning in *The Society of the Spectacle*

(1967, here shown in one of the many pirate editions by the Chicago-based publishing house Black and Red), where Debord described what he took to be a new stage of capitalist development based on the massive invasion of private life by manufactured consumer fantasies (1). Among the characteristic spatial manifestations of this new regime, according to Debord, were the impoverishment and banalisation of the physical world in what today would be termed "*junk space*" (2); the breakdown of divisions between town and country, now referred to as *sprawl*; the isolation of people from each other and their *reintegration* into pre-programmed places of work or consumption like office parks, manufacturing zones, and shopping malls; the militarization of city space, as in the subsequent spread of invasive surveillance technology; and the saturation of every available surface by commercial imagery.

Against the concentrated assault on the space of communities inherent in these urbicidal tendencies (which have done nothing but intensify over the last 40 years), the situationists developed new concepts and counter-practices intended to promote a different use of city space. Among these, one should mention the idea of *situations* defined as *moments of life concretely and deliberately lived by the organized collectivity*; the notion of *psychogeography*, a new field of research dedicated to the study of urban space in relation to its subconscious emotional effects and influence on behaviour; the art of drifting through urban landscapes, called *dèrive*, itself based on the spontaneous practices of the bohemian underworld of Paris as well as the urban wanderings of the surrealists and defined as a *technique of quick passage through changing ambiences*; the principle of *unitary urbanism*, defined as *the combined use of art and technique for the integral construction of a place in dynamic relation with experiments in behaviour*, and the technique of *detournement*, of the mis-appropriation of pre-existing forms to create a new effect. (3)

Consistent with their notion of theory as a means and not an end in itself, the situationists also engaged a wide range of media to give expression to the essentially ludic and iconoclastic spirit of their program. Among the many products of their research are Debord's psychogeographic maps of Paris, which reconfigured the city into an archipelago of islands connected by red vectors of desire – their tactical conception of city space already in some ways anticipating the urban re-appropriations of May 68; the urban poetry of Debord and



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rement sa moyen de transport. Contre toutes les formes régressives du jeu, qui sont ses retours à des stade infantiles — toujours les aux politiques de réaction — il faut soutenir les formes expérimentales d'un jeu révolutionnaire.

DÉFINITIONS

situation construite — Moment de la vie, concrètement et délibérément construit par l'organisation collective d'une ambiance unitaire et d'un jeu d'événements.

situationniste — Ce qui se rapporte à la théorie ou à l'activité pratique d'une construction des situations. Celui qui s'emploie à construire des situations. Membre de l'Internationale situationniste.

situationnisme — Vocable privé de sens, abusivement forgé par dérivation du terme précédent. Il n'y a pas de situationnisme, ce qui signifierait une doctrine d'interprétation des faits existants. Les notions de situationnisme et révolutionnaire coupée par les anti-situationnistes.

psychogéographie. — Étude des effets précis du milieu géographique, consciemment aménagé ou non, agissant directement sur le comportement affectif des individus.

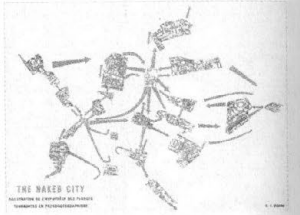
psychogéographique — Relatif à la psychogéographie. Ce qui manifeste l'action directe du milieu géographique sur l'affectivité.

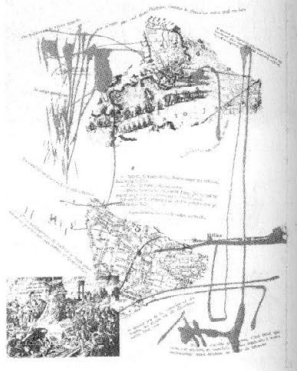
psychogéographe — Qui recherche et transmet les réalités psychogéographiques.

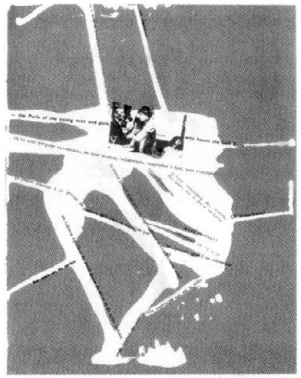
dérive — Mode de comportement expérimental lié aux conditions de la société urbaine : technique du passage hâté à travers des ambiances variées. Se dit aussi, plus particulièrement, pour désigner la durée d'un exercice continu de cette expérience.

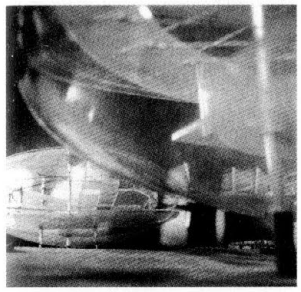
urbanisme unitaire — Théorie de l'emploi d'ensemble des arts et techniques concourant à la construction intégrale d'un milieu en liaison dynamique avec des expériences de comportement.

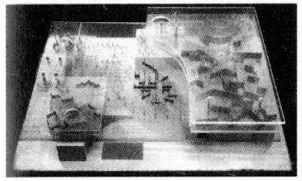
détournement — S'emploie par abréviation de la formule : détournement d'éléments esthétiques préfabriqués. Intégration de productions actuelles ou passées des arts dans une construction supérieure du milieu. Dans ce sens il ne peut y avoir de peinture ou de musique situationnistes, mais un usage situationniste de ces moyens. Dans un sens plus primitif, le détournement à l'intérieur des sphères culturelles anciennes est une méthode de propagande, qui témoigne de l'usure et de la perte d'importance de ces sphères.

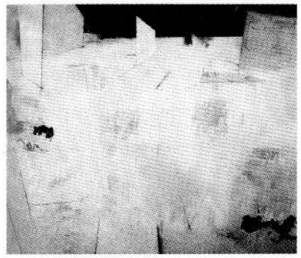










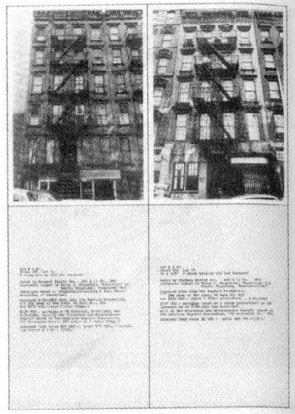


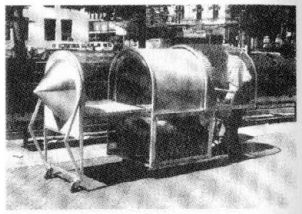
Asger Jorn, which vividly evoked the atmospheres of the *derives*, with their recurring themes of time passing, love, war, drinking, and often including direct references to the reconfigurations of Paris under De Gaulle, as in this case, where the working class district of The Contrescarpe is analogized to a battleground between natives and invading forces. Equally important, during the first few years of the group, was the environmental art of Pinot Gallizio, specifically his *Industrial Paintings*, produced collectively with *painting machines* and capable of being worn or draped on gallery walls, foors and ceilings, to form entire ambiences, as in his 1959 *Cavern of Anti-Matter* mounted with Debord in Paris. No less central were the architectural explorations of the Dutch artist Constant, who starting from studies of gypsy communities, developed a remarkable series of models for a future nomadic city called *New Babylon*, whose changing atmospheres, interactive surfaces, and systematic blurring of distinctions between public and private space vividly expressed the tone of *serious play* animating the group. Also relevant are Constant's paintings of *terrain vagues* and his reflections on the potential of empty space. The situationists also developed group proposals, like the one for the Stedelick Museum in Amsterdam (1960), which activated the boundary between the museum and the city through radio transmitters connecting the proposed *microderive* inside the museum with groups of situationists roaming the city's passional terrain outside, as seen in these two pages for the SI journal that describe the proposal, comparing the center of Amsterdam to the famous 17th century passional cartography by Madeleine de Scudery. Other installations, like *Destruction of RSG-6* in Denmark (1966), brought the world of politics directly into the space of the art gallery through Debord's political slogans and JV Martin's terrifying series of *thermonuclear maps* (this one is entitled *Europe 4 hours and 30 minutes after the outbreak of WWIII*), which effectively dramatized the dangers of nuclear build-up. Finally, one cannot fail to mention the whole arsenal of popular art forms used collectively to establish and hold *free zones* of resistance in May 68: recaptioned comic strips, posters, graffiti (including their most famous, *under the paving stones, the beach*, and the *wild architecture* in boulevard Saint Germain – all of them exemplifying the group's activist conception of art and theory as weapons of combat to be mobilized in the service of particular goals (5).

Today, of course, after four decades of neo-conservative

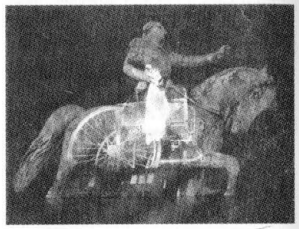
backlash accompanied by the ritual abuse piled on the *counter-cultural* movement as a whole, the search for continuities with the SI is neither simple nor obvious. Many of their ideas may appear naïve or amateurish in retrospect; professionalism has made great strides, languages and whole fields of research are now more separated than ever. Nevertheless, the tactics of urban intervention developed by the SI have not dissipated and continue to play a significant, if underground role, in many contemporary forms of artistic or architectural practice. Among the many examples that could be cited, the politicised work of Hans Haacke seems to offer a contemporary counterpart to the installations of the SI. His *Shapolsky real estate holdings*, for example, intended for the Guggenheim in NY (1971) but cancelled at the last moment, injected massive hyperpolitical content into the museum in the form of 142 framed panels offering a complete documentation on the investment strategies of a single Manhattan slumlord -- the theme of the city vs the museum here highlighted by the contrast between the photographs of vacant lots and decaying buildings, many of them at walking distance from the viewer, and the pristine white walls of the gallery space (6).

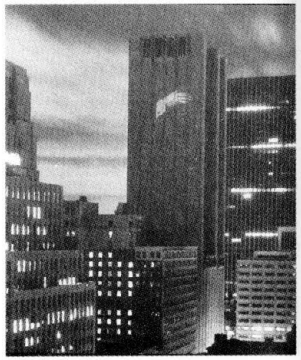
In a similar way, Krzysztof Wodiczko's widely publicised *Homeless Vehicle Prototype* (1988), offered as an emergency functional response to the dramatic problem of homelessness in NYC, served to dramatize the consequences of Mayor Koch's policies of urban renewal while giving visibility to a whole urban underworld of transient populations living on the margins of society. Even more in the spirit of the SI's hit-and-run tactics are Wodiczko's projections, like the one for Union Square in NY (1986), which made a similar point about the effects of so called *beautification* schemes through its capture and *detournement* of the square's monuments, which briefly turned George Washington into a homeless windshield cleaner and Abraham Lincoln, tin cup in hand, into a limping beggar. Other similar nocturnal assaults include the giant open hand pressed to the heart of the business tower in New York's financial district (1984), carried out four days before the US presidential elections, and suggesting a quite different reading of Ronald Reagan's pledge of allegiance; the *Works* piece at the Hirshorn museum in Washington (1988), with its overt reference to Bush 1st famous speech about the *one thousands points of light*, and the *Memoiral Hall* in Dayton, Ohio (1983), whose neoclassical forms offered perfect material to expose the *dark side* of such institutions and their glorification of war. In each case, Wodiczko seems also to be

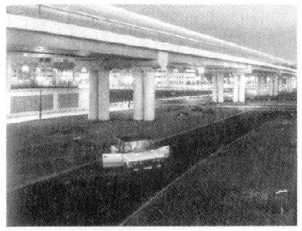


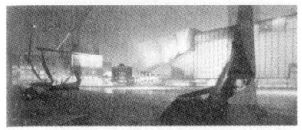


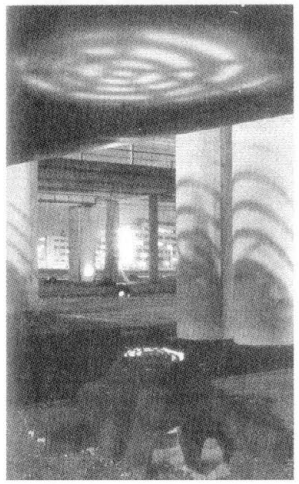
rzysztof Wodiczko, Homeless Vehicle Prototype, 1988 (photo courtesy Krzysztof Wodiczko
nd Galerie Lelong).

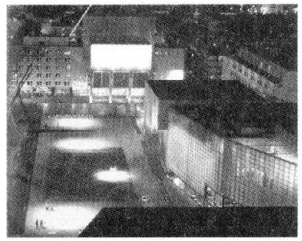












making a commentary on the subliminal authority of images and their function, as Debord would say, to represent and reify power relations. In the artist's own words,

> The attack must be unexpected and frontal. It must come with the night when the building, undisturbed by its daily functions, is asleep ... when the architecture has its nightmares (7).

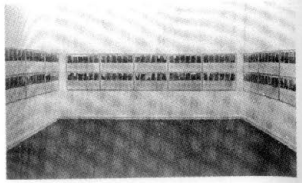
This notion of an urban or architectural subconscious was also key to the psychogeographic research of the SI. We find an echo of it in the work of contemporary architect Adriaan Geuze in Holland, whose interventions in left-over spaces, far away from the spectacle of the city center, like the ground beneath the elevated train tracks – exploit the poetic possibilities of uninhabited space in a way that might recall the *terrains vagues* of Constant. In this case, a scattering of tree stumps made of cast iron, distributed over an indefinite area, with some of them appearing to take over entire piers, and with their night-time lighting projecting underneath the train line, creates an atmosphere both playful and vaguely unsettling: an uncanny image in Freud's sense that it evokes repressed childhood fears, like the fear of severed limbs, or of objects that appear to be coming alive. Even when operating within the more familiar spaces of the city, as in this project for a new public square in downtown Rotterdam, Gauze's landscapes seem cognizant of the way Constant's proposals systematically blurred spatial distinctions, providing flexible interactive surfaces capable of responding to the needs of users, in this case through zones of light and dark and through varied surface materials, like rubber, steel, wood, or epoxy, suggesting a range of possible activities, the boundaries between each surface treated as flush with the next so as to encourage the act of crossing or spilling over. The coin-operated *dinasour* lamps, swinging slowly to create spaces of greater or lesser intensity, recall the ludic proposals of the situationists, which in a famous list of *rational improvements to the city of Paris* demanded that, since *lighting should be for public use*, all street lamps be equipped with switches (8).

If Gauze's work testifies to the penetration of situationist ideas into the world of the architectural profession, Jon Jerde's *City Walk* in LA (1993) shows how the notions of the derive or of psychogegraphy can also be recycled as marketing devices to create apparently playful spaces that are, in fact, as pre-programmed and mono-functional as any shopping mall. The *recuperation* of these ideas by the business culture is

unsurprising: suffice it to mention the myriad ways in which the radical right, especially its popular management literature, has taken over the themes and slogans of the 60s – and Gerde's case is essentially no different from the discredited media mogul Bernard Tapie's notorious misquoting of Debord. Against this stands the much greater resilience of what we might call the SI's *activist strain*, as seen in a great many groups who are mobilising today to defend people's rights to a *non-colonized* space of self expression. One example among many is the global network that calls itself *Reclaim the Streets*, self-described as *a non-hierarchical, leaderless, openly organised, public group*, which since its emergence in the early 90s has staged events in over forty countries worldwide, including raves, road blocks, *guerrilla gardening* incursions, global street parties, as well as a few exemplary actions like the pie-ing of Bill Gates. Another is *Critical Mass*. Operating in 7 continents, it describes itself as *an unorganized coincidence*, in which hundreds, sometimes thousands, of cyclists happen to *meet* at a designated location for a *ride* that rapidly takes on the form of an event, complete with costumes and street theatre. Monthly rides have taken place in hundreds of cities in North America, Europe, and Asia since the first group was formed in San Francisco in the early 1990s. Critical Mass – I quote here from one of its websites - advocates *a new kind of political space (based on) preferable alternatives, most obviously... bicycling over the car culture*. Like the situationists, it has strong roots in humor, disdain for authority, decentralization, and self-direction. As one of the earliest participants put it,

Critical Mass descends from the anti-nuke movement as much as it does from the bicycling initiatives of the past. It is as much street theater as it is a (semi)functional commute. It is inherently anti-corporate even though there are more uncritical supporters of the American Empire and its moneyed interests riding along than there are blazing subversives, which is just another of the many pleasant ironies of Critical Mass (9).

Aside from such direct action networks of transnational resistance that are attempting to challenge the global economic forces responsible for the degradation of cities across the world, mention should also be made of smaller formations that combine a global perspective with a more specific architectural focus. A good example is *Stalker*, the Roman based group of former architecture students whose name evokes the guides in Tarkovsky's film who lead visitors through the mysterious and dangerous *Zone* to freedom and



Top: Bill Gates, Microsoft President and CEO, gets pied. *Bottom:* Boston Baking Brigade strikes again. Economist Milton Friedman, architect of the global corporate takeover, gets his just desserts.

the satisfaction of all their desires. Stalker's actions have tended to concentrate on the informal exploration of the vast negative zones of the city, as in its 1995 *Giro di Roma*, which took a group of about 20 friends in a long tour lasting several days. Its mappings of this territory are reminiscent of Debord's psychogeographies, but with an interesting reversal: the marginal zone now constitutes a vast ocean, while the islands, closed off and fortress-like, mark off the official spaces of the city (10).

Stalker's ephemeral projects, like the installation called *Transborderline* set up at the border between Italy and former Yugoslavia (2000), its spiral form evoking the barbed wire frontier between East and West, also recalls the utopian and nomadic proposals of Constant in its optimistic projection of a free zone of transit and cultural exchange. A few years later, their *Amarcario* installation, consisting of a single long roll of cloth capable of being deployed in a variety of situations, like the large warehouse of the Fabbrica Europea in Florence (2002), where it made an interactive space in which the movements of each participant affected all the others, seems not unrelated to Pinot Gallizio's ideas on industrial painting. Through all its many activities, Stalker maintains its base of operations at an abandoned slaughterhouse on the site of Campo Boario, a squatted building which they have turned into a cultural center for Kurdish immigrants, organizing events and workshops. As they put it,

Although Stalker works outside the law.. by cultivating its reputation among established art institutions and universities, it uses it to support and legitimize the illegal immigrant community squatting on state land, in opposition to the local authority's plan.

To conclude, the continuing vitality of situationist ideas among artists, architects, and architecture collectives today is but one aspect of a more pervasive tendency. More time would be needed to consider, for example the influence of the SI on a whole generation of radical architecture from the 60s and 70s, the resurfacing of situationist themes in the works of Rem Koolhaas, Bernard Tschumi, or Nigel Coates, and the impact of Debord's writings on a great many urban theorists, novelists, philosophers, and cultural critics in many countries. As Debord put it in a recent retrospective comment on the meaning of the situationist experiment:

Avant-gardes have their time, and the best thing that can happen to them, in the strict sense of the term, is to have had their time. After them, operations commence on a larger scene.

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