
Situationism and avant-garde

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Marelli, Gianfranco. *L'Amère victoire du Situationnisme : pour une histoire critique du Situationnisme, 1957-1972*, Arles : Sulliver, 1998

- 1 Among the various avant-garde movements in the latter half of the 20th century, the Situationist International has a place all of its own, not least because it is seen as having acted as a platform of theory and revolutionary ferment during the explosion of May 1968. Since 1989, the year of the retrospective put on at Beaubourg, the reprint of the magazine of the Situationist International, combined with the publication of a certain number of critical essays, have helped to further analyse the Situationist phenomenon, with its various implications and repercussions. Editions Sulliver have just translated two Italian studies of the subject. Both retrace the history of the movement by focusing in particular on examining the awkward links between art and politics. In her book *L'Esthétique, le politique*, Mirella Bandini analyses the postwar artistic context, which, in 1957, encouraged the emergence of the Situationist International. Using journals, magazines, statements and events, she then retraces the movement's early period up until 1961--the year when the issue of «art being exceeded» was settled by the exclusion from the group of all members hailing from artistic circles. Gianfranco Marelli's *L'Amère victoire du Situationnisme*--which parodies the title of an article that appeared in the first issue of the *Situationist International*: «L'amère victoire du surréalisme»--reconstructs the movement's critical development, from the premises of its inception to its final break-up in 1972. Marelli also takes a very close look at the decisive change of direction that occurred in 1961, when the Situationist International switched from being an aesthetic avant-garde movement to a political and ideological avant-garde period.

- 2 It was, as it happens, in artistic circles that the Situationists had made their first headway. Noting the flop of Dadaism and Surrealism, when it came to changing life by transforming society, and advancing the real and the imaginary hand-in-hand, a certain number of figures involved in these same areas of ideas came together to express their desire to carry out research in free experimentation, where «art was exceeded». To start with there was the COBRA group, which was very swiftly taken over by the Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus and the Lettrist International, the dissident movement of Isidore Isou's French Lettrisme. The four European artists who were conspicuous in this initial and decidedly neo-Futurist stage--the Frenchman Guy Debord, the Dane Asger Jorn, the Dutchman Benjamin Constant and the Italian Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio (together with the German members of the SPUR group)--were keen to checkmate the figure of the professional artist who had been incorporated within the art market, and promote a «free and dilettante» artist whose life, as lived, and whose social commitment would be his main work. In 1957, at the Cosio d'Arroscia conference, these different artists and the groups they represented all merged by founding the Situationist International whose main ideas were, on the one hand, the relentless criticism of the so-called art avant-gardes (abstract art, needless to say, but more importantly the psychic automatism of the Surrealists and the neo-Constructivist functionalism of the Ulm Bauhaus, run by Max Bill) and, on the other, the experimental approach in the artistic arena, aimed at coming up with new values and laying the bases for a new society. In the very first issue of the *Situationist International*, it reflected a busy output of theoretical writings focusing on the radical transformation of all fields of art, from architecture to painting by way of film and writing. At this stage, the weaponry, as it were, was still above all artistic. The Situationists, hailing for the most part from art circles, were firmly persuaded that cultural work was the most advanced expression of bourgeois society. So it was within this culture that revolutionary action must be conducted, for it was there that the breakdown of the values of the capitalist system was most evident. However, problems were soon to crop up, arising from ideological contradictions which G. Marelli skilfully sheds light on. Thenceforth, the production of any kind of work, which would be inevitably scooped up by the contemporary cultural world thirsty for modernism, became suspect, not to say impossible.
- 3 It was above all Guy Debord who issued a harsh denunciation of any possibility of salvage by the market and museums. It was this paradox and this problem of staying on the sidelines, while still being keen to speed up change in tangible ways, which would bring about first the exclusion of P. Gallizio, who was guilty of having agreed to show his cave of anti-matter in the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, then the resignation of B. Constant, who was starting to make proposals about integrated city life that were too factual and too precise, and lastly that of A. Jorn in 1961. The absolute refusal of the work of art as revolutionary wherewithal was the culmination of the issue of «art being exceeded», which had lain at the root of the movement since 1957. The figure of Guy Debord then assumed the dimension of no less than the «leader» of a movement which, by incorporating the survival of art within the art of living (later called life-style), could thus respond to the «project of the authentic artist». M. Bandini turns her back on any real historicization of the movement, describing Situationism rather as a dynamic phenomenon of turbulent ideological militancy, and a basic questioning about the place of art, now altogether subordinate to the market, in modern society. As for G. Marelli, he observes that «the end of the Situationist International coincided with the success of

Situationism». He actually notes the ease with which a «critical theory thus concerned with not being salvaged and used by the powers-that-be» was so quickly absorbed, to the point of becoming a «cure» for soothing the subversive fever brought about by individual alienation in the society of the spectacle.

- 4 With the re-emergence of the avant-garde spirit that occurred in the postwar period, Situationism definitely played the most radical hand, which consisted in brandishing the torch of revolution precisely where previous avant-gardes had foundered. It was its coherence which created its limits and its greatness alike. This is why posing questions about the ideological challenges of Situationism is tantamount to assessing the issue of modernity in this 20th century of ours. It is also easy to understand today's interest in this movement in Italy, the country which, with Futurism, saw the birth of the very culture of the avant-gardes for which Situationism was eager to be the extreme synthesis.