

Extract from **Internationale Situationniste** at **Context XXI**

(http://contextxxi.org/response-to-a-questionnaire-from.html)

extracted on: 22 April 2024

Date of this contribution: August 1964

Response to a Questionnaire from the Center for Socio-Experimental Art

■ KEN KNABB (TRANSLATION) ■
SITUATIONISTISCHE INTERNATIONALE

1. Why are the masses not concerned with art? Why does art remain the privilege of certain educated sectors of the bourgeois class?

The importance of the theme of the present questionnaire and the limited space allotted for answers oblige us to be somewhat schematic. The situationists' positions on these topics have been elaborated in more detail in the SI's journals (*Internationale Situationniste*, *Der Deutsche Gedanke* and *Situationistisk Revolution*) and in the catalog [*The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Art and Politics*] published on the occasion of the "Destruction of RSG 6" demonstration in Denmark last June.

The masses, i.e. the nonruling classes, have no reason to feel concerned with any aspects of a culture or an organization of social life that have not only been developed without their participation or their control, but that have in fact been deliberately designed to prevent such participation and control. They are concerned (illusorily) only with the by-products specifically produced for their consumption: the diverse forms of spectacular publicity and propaganda in favor of various products or role models.

This does not mean, however, that art subsists merely as a "privilege" of the bourgeois class. In the past every dominant class had its *own* art — for the

same reasons that a classless society will have none, will be beyond artistic practice. But the historical conditions of our time, associated with a major breakthrough in man's appropriation of nature and thus bearing the concrete project of a classless society, are such that major art in this period has necessarily been revolutionary. What has been called modern art, from its origins in the nineteenth century to its full development in the first third of the twentieth, has been an *anti-bourgeois* art. The present crisis of art is linked to the crisis of the workers movement since the defeat of the Russian revolution and the modernization of capitalism.

Today a *fake* continuation of modern art (formal repetitions attractively packaged and publicized, completely divorced from the original combativeness of their models) along with a voracious consumption of bits and pieces of previous cultures completely divorced from their real meaning (Malraux, previously their most ludicrous salesman in the realm of "theory," is now exhibiting them in his "Culture Centers") are what actually constitute the dubious "privilege" of the new stratum of intellectual workers that proliferates with the development of the "tertiary sector" of the economy. This sector is closely connected to that of the social *spectacle*: this intellectual stratum (the requirements of whose training and employment explain both the quantitative extension of education and its qualitative degradation) is both the most direct producer of the spectacle and the most direct consumer of its specifically cultural ele-

ments.

Two tendencies seem to us to typify the contemporary cultural consumption offered to this public of alienated intellectual workers:

On one hand, endeavors such as the "Visual Art Research Group" clearly tend toward the integration of the population into the dominant socioeconomic system, along the lines currently being worked out by repressive urbanism and the theorists of cybernetic control. Through a veritable parody of the revolutionary theses on putting an end to the passivity of separated spectators through the *construction of situations*, this "Visual Art" group strives to make the spectator participate in his own misery — taking its lack of dialectics to the point of "freeing" the spectator by announcing that it is "forbidden not to participate" (tract at the Third Paris Biennial).

On the other hand, "New Realism," drawing heavily on the form of dadaism (but not its spirit), is an apologetic junk art. It fits quite well in the margin of pseudofreedom offered by a society of gadgets and waste.

But the importance of such artists remains very secondary, even in comparison with advertising. Thus, paradoxically, the "Socialist Realism" of the Eastern bloc, which is not art at all, nevertheless has a more decisive social function. This is because in the East power is maintained primarily by selling ideology (i.e. mystifying justifications), while in the West it is maintained by

selling consumer goods. The fact that the Eastern bureaucracy has proved incapable of developing its own art, and has been forced to adapt the forms of the pseudoartistic vision of petty-bourgeois conformists of the last century (in spite of the inherent ineffectuality of those forms), confirms the present impossibility of any art as a ruling-class “privilege.”

Nevertheless, all art is “social” in the sense that it has its roots in a given society and even despite itself must have some relation to the prevailing conditions, or to their negation. Former moments of opposition survive *fragmentarily* and lose their artistic (or postartistic) value to the precise extent they have lost the heart of opposition. With their loss of this heart they have also lost any reference to the mass of postartistic acts (of revolt and of free reconstruction of life) that already exist in the world and that are tending to replace art. This fragmentary opposition can then only withdraw to an aesthetic position and harden rapidly into a dated and ineffectual aesthetic *in a world where it is already too late for aesthetics* — as has happened with surrealism, for example. Other movements are typical of degraded bourgeois mysticism (art as substitute for religion). They reproduce — but only in the form of solitary fantasy or idealist pretension — the forces that dominate present social life both officially and in fact: noncommunication, bluff, frantic desire for novelty as such, for the rapid turnover of arbitrary and uninteresting gadgets — lettrism, for example, on which subject we remarked that “Isou, product of an era of unconsumable art, has suppressed the very idea of its consumption” and that he has “proposed the first art of solipsism” (*Internationale Situationniste #4 [Originality and Magnitude: On Isou’s System]*).

Finally, the very proliferation of would-be artistic movements that are essentially indistinguishable from one another can be seen as an application of the modern sales technique of marketing the same product under rival trademarks.

2. How can art be really “social”?

The time for art is over. The point now is to *realize* art, to really create on ev-

ery level of life everything that hitherto could only be an artistic memory or an illusion, dreamed and preserved unilaterally. Art can be realized *only by being suppressed*. However, in contrast to the present society, which suppresses art by replacing it with the automatic functioning of an even more passive and hierarchical spectacle, we maintain that art can really be suppressed *only by being realized*.

2. (cont.) Does the political society in which you live encourage or discourage your social function as an artist?

This society has suppressed what you call the social function of the artist.

If this question refers to the function of employees in the reigning *spectacle*, it is obvious that the number of jobs to be had there expands as the spectacle does. The situationists, however, do not find this employment opportunity the least bit attractive.

If, on the other hand, we take this question as referring to the *inheriting of previous art* through new types of activity, beginning with contestation of the whole society, the society in question naturally discourages such a practice.

3. Do you think your aesthetics would be different if you lived in a socially, politically or economically different society?

Certainly. When our perspectives are realized, aesthetics (as well as its negation) will be superseded.

If we were presently living in an underdeveloped country or in one subjected to archaic forms of domination (colonialism or a Franco-type dictatorship), we would agree that artists can to a certain extent participate as such in popular struggles. In a context of general social and cultural backwardness the social function of the artist still retains a certain significance, and a not entirely sham communication is still possible within the traditional forms.

If we were living in a country governed by a “socialist” bureaucracy, where information about cultural and other experimentation in advanced industrialized countries over the last fifty years is

systematically suppressed, we would certainly support the minimum demand for dissemination of truth, including the truth about contemporary Western art. We would do this despite the inevitable ambiguity of such a demand, since the history of modern art, though already accessible and even glorified in the West, is nonetheless still profoundly falsified; and its importation into the Eastern bloc would first of all be exploited by hacks like Yevtushenko in their modernization of official art.

4. Do you participate in politics or not? Why?

Yes, but in only one kind: together with various other forces in the world, we are working toward the linkup and the theoretical and practical organization of a new revolutionary movement.

All the considerations we are developing here simultaneously demonstrate the need to go beyond the failures of previous specialized politics.

5. Does an association of artists seem necessary to you? What would be its objectives?

There are already numerous associations of artists, either without principles or based on one or another extravagant absurdity — mutual aid unions, mutual congratulation societies, alliances for collective careerism. Works that on the slightest pretext are proclaimed “collective projects” are fashionable at the moment, and are even put in the limelight at the pitiful Paris biennials, thus diverting attention from the real problems of the supersession of art. We regard all these associations with equal contempt and accept no contact whatsoever with this milieu.

We do believe that a coherent and disciplined association for the realization of a common program is possible on the bases worked out by the Situationist International, provided that the participants are so rigorously selected that they all demonstrate a high degree of creative originality, and that in a sense they cease to be “artists” or to consider themselves as artists in the old sense of the word.

It could in fact be questioned whether the situationists are artists at all, even avant-garde ones. Not only because al-

most everyone in the cultural scene resists acknowledging them as such (at least once the whole of the situationist program is involved) or because their interests extend far beyond the former scope of art.

Their nature as artists is even more problematic on the socioeconomic level. Many situationists support themselves by rather dubious methods, ranging from historical research to poker, from bartending to running puppet theaters. It is striking that of the 28 members of the Situationist International whom we have had to exclude so far, 23 personally had a socially recognized and increasingly profitable role as artists: they were known as artists despite their membership in the SI. But as such they were tending to reinforce the position of our enemies, who want to invent a “situationism” so as to finish with us by integrating us into the spectacle as just one more doomsday aesthetic. Yet while doing this, these artists wanted to remain in the SI. This was unacceptable for us. The figures speak for themselves.

It goes without saying that any other “objectives” of any association of artists are of no interest to us, since we regard them as no longer having any point whatsoever.

6. How is the work you are presenting here related to these statements?

The enclosed work obviously cannot represent a “situationist art.” Under the present distinctly antisituationist cultural conditions we have to resort to “communication containing its own critique,” which we have experimented with in every accessible medium, from film to writing, and which we have theorized under the name of *détournement*. Since the Center for Socio-Experimental Art has limited its survey to the plastic arts, we have selected, from among the numerous possibilities of *détournement* as a means of agitation, Michèle Bernstein’s antipainting *Victory of the Bonnot Gang*. It forms part of a series including *Victory of the Paris Commune*, *Victory of the Great Jacquerie of 1358*, *Victory of the Spanish Republicans*, *Victory of the Workers Councils of Budapest* and several other victories. Such paintings attempt to negate “Pop Art” (which is materially and “ideologically” characterized by *indifference* and dull complacency) by incorporating only *toy* objects and by making them meaningful in as heavy-handed a way as possible. In a sense this series carries on the tradition of the painting of battles; and also rectifies the history of revolts (which is not over) in a way that pleases us. It seems

that each new attempt to transform the world is forced to start out with the appearance of a *new unrealism*.

We hope that our remarks here, both humorous and serious, will help to clarify our position on the present relationship between art and society.

Situationist International: Situationistisch / Situationist: All das, was sich auf die Theorie oder auf die praktische Tätigkeit von Situationen bezieht. Derjenige, der sich damit beschäftigt, Situationen zu konstruieren. Mitglied der situationistischen Internationale.

Situationismus: Sinnloses Wort, missbräuchlich durch Ableitung des vorigen gebildet. Einen Situationismus gibt es nicht — was eine Doktrin zur Interpretation der vorhandenen Tatsachen bedeuten würde. Selbstverständlich haben sich die Anti-Situationisten den Begriff „Situationismus“ ausgedacht.

Ken Knabb: Geboren 1945 in Louisiana. Autor, Übersetzer und radikaler Theoretiker, Betreiber des Website *Bureau of Public Secrets*.

License of this contribution
Gemeinfrei
Gemeinfrei