MYTH MAKING 101

I'll never forget that Sunday night during the spring of 1996 when Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions screened Guy Debord's La Societe du spectacle (1973), the film version of his 1967 book. Looking around the room, I jokingly commented to Fred Dewey that there were so many luminaries in attendance (Benjamin Weissman, Ralph Rugoff, and a host of famous artists) that some unfortunate event could extinguish L.A.'s art world in one fell blow. Despite having read The Society of the Spectacle and seen most of that era's French avant-garde cinema, watching this film's mind-numbing, disjunctive stream of black-and-white footage seemed unusually challenging. (1) I vaguely remember feeling rather exhausted at film's end, as if I had had to concentrate rather hard to follow its course, but of course this could very well be a screen memory. Since it wasn't included in Centraal Museum Utrecht's comprehensive traveling exhibition of Lettrist International (1952-56) and Situationist International (1957-72) ephemera and objects, "In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni: The Lost Paradise of the Situationist International" (December 15, 2006--March 11, 2007), I was unable to watch the film again or for the first time. Not unlike the male and female protagonists of Jean-Luc Goddard's 1969 film Le Gai savoir, who actively debate ways to strip sound from the image, Debord and his earlier LI cohorts not only sought to liberate soundtracks from film, but actually made image-free films. In 1952 Debord screened a black-and-white "blank talkie" (my term) at Cannes, Hurlements en faveur de Sade, which soon devolved into a brawl when bored audience members tossed condom water bombs at each other. (2) LI and SI members routinely sampled bits of film footage. By plucking scenes from their original context, they obliterated a scene's referential quality, replacing it with their subversive messages. Not surprisingly, Debord considered movie stars factory products themselves, advanced publicity for anonymous ideologies of power. He further denounced them as agents of the "spectacle staged as a star." (3)

While later generations borrowed imagery and/or text to convey culture's lack of originality or to offer social commentary, the very act of appropriation empowered SI practitioners. They believed that their uncompromising strategies of cultural terrorism, like scrawling provocative slogans around Paris streets or overlaying other images (cartoons, ads, films, paintings) with their wry passages, could eventually defeat the society of the spectacle, or at least impart tools to thwart it. In the generation or so since this small group split, a massive underground cult following has developed around their work, perhaps because SI's very invisibility insinuates taboo. Interest in these apparent outlaws derives partly from their alleged connection to the May '68 student riots in Paris, the suggestion in Greil Marcus's Lipstick Traces (1989) that the SI sparked punk rock, and the internet's capacity to globalize like-minded radicals and activists.

Still, one can't help but wonder whether the SI hasn't rather become a virtual spectacle of its own making, more mythical than real. At a time when people feel so incapable of making a difference in this world, the SI fulfills fantasies of deprived misfits taking society into their own hands, sticking it to the man, and coming out on top. SI art historian Juri Steiner notes that since the nineteenth century, "a new breed of person does all he can to foment the prejudice that he is a loser, a rate." (4) Whether it's Beck wailing "I'm a loser baby, so why don't you kill me," Sanjaya on American Idol, skateboard/design crew Beautiful Loser, or the eccentric SI, each declared social outcast fuels our desire to

transcend our own loser status as virtual hero.

While one can't deny the SI's significance, especially for politically minded artists, graffitists, political theorists, geographers, urban planners, and forward-looking architects, it's always bewildering to discover people who readily describe their output as art. Given the SI's errant attitude toward public events, especially art exhibitions, those who describe their efforts as art seem eager to co-opt the very attitude they visibly resisted. While I have often included SI literature in course material, I've only once encountered a museum vitrine dedicated to SI ephemera. And this was at the Pompidou, which stealthily organized their inaugural exhibition in 1989 ("On the Passage of a Few People through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International, 1957-1972"), for which Debord refused visitation rights, even during off-hours! So the SI stuff, other than films and homespun journals such as Debord's 12-issue Internationale situationniste (1958-69) and Jacqueline de Jong's The Situationist Times (1962-67), remains mostly hidden from sight. While the SI offered a savvy media critique (very helpful, indeed), and even a quotidian critique, their orneriness seems oppositional in spirit to that era's Gutai performances, Allan Kaprow or Marta Minujin happenings, neo-concrete installations, nouveau realiste events, Wolf Vostell's de-coll/age, and "fluxfests."

What did these self-described cultural terrorists actually do? Was it visual art or agitprop? Of course, I have no problem viewing a person's life as a work of art. In this case, they were surely artists: their very existence was a work in progress. But for all of their efforts (and apparent influence), they yielded very little stuff. We know that LI and SI poets, filmmakers, and theorists sparred with sociologist Henri Lefebvre, the radical Socialisme ou Barbarie group, and Max Bill's Bauhaus-inspired Hochschule fur Gestaltung in Ulm, while supporting members of nouveau realisme. As a work in progress, the SI seems to have engendered more false starts than lasting memories. Still, we're remarkably fond of remembering them, perhaps because they did nothing in particular, other than continue to draw the world's attention (and scoot about a lot!). Yet in their final reckoning, the SI failed miserably at determining the art experience's public nature, as opposed to the revelry of secret societies or privately held pictures. Hardly postmodernists, what they valued was less work that engendered cognition than carrying out real, mostly slight interventions, those leading to surprise and "mood swings" among urban strollers.

True to their purported goal to revolutionize society as an art movement, the SI disseminated their theories more via hearsay than history. Their project thus resembles folklore more than art, which would be fine if their views had proved motivating. Beckoning toward a future event always in the making, their art was whatever "situation" their ideas inspired, which didn't necessarily require member participation. No wonder they still loom as such an unstoppable force. And the more intangible SI remains, the more universal is their appeal. Divorced from any accountability, virtually any action can claim lineage to SI folklore. Should strict SI adherents draw the line? The SI has been linked--however implausibly--to the 1980s youth riots in Zurich, and even civil unrest among Paris's immigrant population in 2005. Shades of Rousseau's writings having supposedly caused the French Revolution, in recent years authorities have even suspected the SI of instigating far more disastrous events, despite their open denunciation by Debord.

Did the SI really spark the Paris student riots? Are we to believe so, simply because The

Society of the Spectacle starts off by crediting Debord's "subversive theories" with inspiring May '68?5 So far as revolutions can ever be attributed to a single agent, there is a plausible chain of causation that lends slight weight to this theory. Even excluding a 1971 TV interview with Greil Marcus who is at pains to explain SI's role in this uprising (not included in the show), "Lost Paradise" finally offers proof for skeptics who consider Debord's cult status disproportionate to actual LI and SI cultural production. One such connection is SI member Mustapha Khayati's 1966 pamphlet, On the Poverty of Student Life: considered in its economic, political, psychological, sexual, and particularly intellectual aspects, and a modest proposal for its remedy, which was first distributed among students at the University of Strasbourg ("hence" the scandalous riots of that year) and then circulated in far larger numbers around the University of Paris X: Nanterre and eventually the Sorbonne.

In 1960, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam invited several SI members --Debord, Asger Jorn, HP Zimmer, Constant Nieuwenhuys, and several others--to install their "World as Labyrinth," an interior gallery that featured situations placed within a labyrinth that led visitors to an exit, leaving viewers to confront the street as part of the exhibition. Not surprisingly, the SI exhibition never happened, but several nouveaux realistes and other collaborators (including Rauschenberg) transformed the Stedelijk only two years later when they built "Dylaby," a labyrinthine free-for-all that garnered loads of attention. Today, a fragile drawbridge separates publicly displayed from privately consumed sectors of the marketplace. Rather than submit to Debord's doctrinaire anti-exhibitionist tenet, museums and art punks alike must strive to keep the bridge raised. Whenever private interests risk encroaching on public space, however, the bridge comes crashing down. Needless to say, Debord's privileging of underground activities over public exhibition merely hid the averred revolution from the site where it could be most effective, even at the risk of total censorship.

Without a public, there are only false starts, no documented memories. Debord and the others clearly recognized this in their "Address to All Workers Enrages--Situationist International Committee Council for Maintaining the Occupations, Paris, 30 May 1968," in which their memorable "Just as we have made Paris dance ..." sound byte occurs. And similar SI slogans and posters had been plastered across Paris weeks before ten million French workers went on strike. But whatever SI's role in sparking the riots, today's public mostly associates May '68 with old TV broadcasts of protesters and strikers airing 24/7 on YouTube. Debord called the Paris riots "a festival, a game, a real presence of real people in real time."6 No wonder SI's effective withdrawal to a safe distance during the violent confrontations of May 10 and 11 seemed so frustrating (though Debord himself fought briefly on the barricades). Since ideology's effectiveness depends upon its intangibility, was Debord's allout effort to hitch SI to France's media coverage of the countercultural uprising merely a clever ploy for dissembling his ideology of creative freedom? Exhibitions like "Lost Paradise" should hopefully help to tease apart the gross inconsistencies of this much conflicted movement, at least before anyone else gets inspired to do something they might regret.

DETOURNEMENT (DIVERSION)

Being so skeptical about SI's actual art, I was eager to go see "Lost Paradise" so I could find out more about Debord and his merry band of agitators. As anticipated, this super-balanced show works equally well as an exhibition and an archive, partly because it doesn't claim that LI or SI theories inspired its members' art. Most likely, SI did not

inspire the art on view here, since Guy Debord was more prone to expel rather than recruit artists. And by 1962, most of the artists had been driven out, in a dastardly attempt to purify this aimless movement. Even so, SI participants (totaling 72 members from 16 countries who organized ten independent SI chapters and held seven conferences over 15 years) were mostly artists, who found this eccentric platform for camaraderie and critical engagement beneficial for their production, if only temporarily. While most of the art produced during SI's early years looks pretty much the same (violent, aggressive postwar painting a la tachisme, art informel and/or CoBrA), the most innovative LI and SI projects employed detournement, a method--which Debord distinguished from collage--of reusing recognized media to create a different message. Among the LI's greatest accomplishments are the self-taught architect Constant's visionary New Babylon series of drawings and models, which he began in 1949 and worked on until his death in 2005. Using so-called "sectors" as building blocks, rather than apartments or rooms, he conceived of architectural spaces that maximized creativity and mobility, thus contesting Corbusier's relatively rigid hybrids.

SI members continued LI's strategy of rewriting cartoon quote bubbles and reworking popular ads. Strangely, art historians have been rather quick to compare their approach to pop art. In those days, not only the SI, but also Britain's Independent Group, France's nouveau realisme, Germany's Capitalist Realism, and New York's neo-dadists (pop's parents) regularly juxtaposed disparate found imagery, whether painted or collaged). (7) For example, when one encounters a James Rosenquist painting, one is startled to find a few drill bits dangling above a shiny metallic hair dryer hood positioned to resemble the nose of a jumbo jet barreling through a lipstick blockade. By comparison to the aforementioned art movements, SI production looks incredibly impoverished, something strikingly ad hoc. Re-worked posters and cartoons are not just handmade or homemade, they feel downright homey, not to be seen by anyone outside one's immediate family, the SI circle included. Debord's tendency to accuse members of "collaborating with the art market" led everyone with real aspirations to take their energy elsewhere. While it is impossible to say whether Debord's tyrannical behavior reflected a necessary leadership style, his purist ideal of revolution, or some never-diagnosed psychosis, most everybody agrees that by steering a trim ship he enabled SI to stay the course, free from public scrutiny, but which in the end proved its downfall, leaving Debord to latch onto May '68.

Unlike pop art, whose borrowed imagery tended to celebrate its prior context, situationism, however recuperated from everyday sources, sought to obliterate reference. But can imagery appropriated from particular contexts really lose all referentiality? If the SI had won this battle over referential convention, a strategy that Oliver Stone's Natural Born Killers (1994) also attempted, the SI would not only have overturned capitalism's bid to corner spectacle, but the power of spectacle to market particular products as well. Certainly, it would have taken an army of detournement specialists to defuse spectacle's constant stream of imagery. But Debord deserves all the credit in the world for being among the first to recognize the infinite inexhaustibility of the late capitalist sublime.

PERMANENT REVOLUTION

It's difficult to imagine a sprawling posse of painters, filmmakers, and writers surviving the LI slogan "Never Work" (a feat that the pro-work fluxus artists avoided), let alone living revolution every day of their lives. In 1953, Debord tagged Paris with "Ne travaillez jamais!," only to become embroiled ten years later in an artistic property lawsuit when

the eighth issue of Internationale situationniste printed an image of a well-known postcard featuring Debord's wall scrawl without first obtaining the postcard photographer's permission. Running the streets in droves to lose themselves in permanent surprise, LI and SI alike staged the derive (or aimless drifting), eventually envisioning ways to vitalize that era's burgeoning concrete urbanism, its post-WWII vertical ghettos. Paradoxically, Western artists, architects, and urban planners must brainstorm strategies to preserve today's rapidly "shrinking cities." Since the SI typically attacked the new and not the old, modifying something worn-out for contemporary needs seems like a perverse aberration of situationist detournement.

However revolutionary Debord considered himself and his cohorts to be, he explicitly denounced violence and no SI members were ever proven to have knowingly promoted bloodshed (though they were constantly involved in cafe brawls). No wonder, then, that Debord was deeply distressed when Khayati left the SI in 1969 to join the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the group responsible for the 1970s airplane hijackings. Even when Khayati returned to the fold two months later, the SI apparently didn't reinstate his membership. (The thought arises, which I tend to doubt, that the PLO's incredible media savvy during these hijackings could be marginally attributed to particular skills of Khayati's honed during May '68.) In 1978, Gianfranco Sanguinetti, one of Debord's closest allies, SI stalwart, and author of On Terrorism and the State (1979), was actively suspected by Italian police of murdering Aldo Moro, the Prime Minister of Italy. Later on, the French press even saw fit to accuse Debord of the 1984 murder of one his long-time backers, the movie mogul Gerard Lebovici (evidently the newspapers were so anxious to print photographs of Debord that they had to request them from the man himself, since no one else had any in their possession). As a matter of routine, Debord tracked the activities of various European terrorist groups like the Baader-Meinhof and Red Brigades, and even corresponded with some of them. (8)

These days, probably thousands of artists claim to have been influenced by the SI's real or imagined urban interventions. One immediately thinks of Jens Haaning blasting racist jokes from loudspeakers in a Turkish neighborhood of Oslo (Turkish Jokes, 1994); of Patrizia Giambi liberating pedestrians throughout Europe by installing zebra crossings overnight at busy intersections in several cities (Mille Miglia, 1997); of Francis Alys "redrawing" Israel's and Palestine's pre-1967 border on foot, dripping about 15 gallons of green paint along the way (Sometimes Doing Something Poetic Can Become Political and Sometimes Doing Something Political Can Become Poetic, 2005); or Renzo Martens teaching the Congolese how best to photograph local tragedies like rival rebel skirmishes in order to reap billions from the sale of images of poverty and murder (Episode Three, 2005-07). Art that impacts politically needs witnesses and audience response, a point that the LI cherished as they strolled about the city, but which the SI somehow forgot, until it was practically too late. Without a public, there is no situation, a point that Duchamp first recognized in his 1957 essay "The Creative Act." The power of experience to cause things to happen lies in and with the people.

NOTES: (1.) Although a Society of the Spectacle excerpt is yet to be broadcast on www.youtube.com, several shorts exist in the SOS spirit, including a cute animated Alice in Wonderland, plus a listing of several of Debord's films, including Howling in Favor of Sade. There's also a TV interview with Greil Marcus and two alternative accounts of May '68, of which only one vaguely references SI input. An extra-sharp Guy Debord website can be found at www.guydebordcineaste.com, while a 10-minute digital remix exists at www.djrabbi.com/sos/. (2.) "In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni": The Lost

Paradise of the Situationist International, eds. Heinz Stahlhut, Juri Steiner, and Stefan Zweifel (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2006), 9. The Latin phrase is the title of a 1978 Debord film, and loosely means, "We go into the circle at night and are consumed by fire." (3.) Ibid., 12. (4.) Juri Steiner, "Night Flight--The Avant-Garde Urge Toward Action, Destruction, and Terror," ibid., 67. (5.) You can read this for yourself in French by clicking on the film at Debord's aforementioned website. (6.) "In Girum Imus Nocte et Consumimur Igni," 13. (7.) Of course, appropriation originates in the teens with synthetic cubism and Marcel Duchamp's assisted ready-mades. (8.) Steiner, 72.

Philadelphia-based curator SUE SPAID is adjunct associate professor at Temple University.