

Situationist

The **Situationist International (SI)**, an international political and artistic movement which has parallels with marxism, dadaism, existentialism, anti-consumerism, punk rock and anarchism. The SI movement was active in the late 60's and had aspirations for major social and political transformations. The SI disbanded after 1968.[1]

The journal *Internationale Situationniste* defined situationist as "having to do with the theory or practical activity of constructing situations." The same journal defined situationism as "*a meaningless term improperly derived from the above. There is no such thing as situationism, which would mean a doctrine of interpretation of existing facts. The notion of situationism is obviously devised by antisituationists.*"

One should not confuse the term "situationist" as used in this article with practitioners of situational ethics or of situated ethics. Nor should it be confused with a strand of psychologists who consider themselves "situationist" as opposed to "dispositionist".

History and overview

The movement originated in the Italian village of Cosio d'Arroscia on 28 July 1957 with the fusion of several extremely small artistic tendencies, which claimed to be avant-gardistes: Lettrist International, the International movement for an imaginal Bauhaus, and the London Psychogeographical Association. This fusion traced further influences from COBRA, dada, surrealism, and Fluxus, as well as inspirations from the Workers Councils of the Hungarian Uprising.

The most prominent French member of the group, Guy Debord, has tended to polarise opinion. Some describe him as having provided the theoretical clarity within the group; others say that he exercised dictatorial control over its development and membership, while yet others say that he was a powerful writer, but a second rate thinker. Other members included the Italo-Scottish writer Alexander Trocchi, the English artist Ralph Rumney (sole member of the London Psychogeographical Society, Rumney suffered expulsion relatively soon after the formation of the Situationist International), the Scandinavian vandal-turned-artist Asger Jorn, the veteran of the Hungarian Uprising Attila Kotanyi, the French writer Michele Bernstein, and Raoul Vaneigem. Debord and Bernstein later married.

One way or another, the currents which the SI took as predecessors saw their purpose as involving a radical redefinition of the role of art in the twentieth century. The Situationists themselves took a dialectical

viewpoint, seeing their task as superseding art, abolishing the notion of art as a separate, specialized activity and transforming it so it became part of fabric of everyday life. From the Situationist viewpoint, art is revolutionary or it is nothing. In this way, the Situationists saw their efforts as completing the work of both Dada and surrealism while abolishing both. Still, the Situationists answered the question "What is revolutionary?" differently at different times.

The SI experienced splits and expulsions from its beginning. The one prominent split in the group resulted in the Paris section retaining the name Situationist International while the German section, or the Second Situationist International organised under the name of Gruppe SPUR. While the entire history of the Situationists was marked by their impetus to revolutionize life, the split between the French and the German sections marked a transition from the Situationist view of revolution possibly taking an "artistic" form to it taking an unambiguously "political" form.

Those who followed the "artistic" view of the SI might view the evolution of SI as producing a more boring or dogmatic organization. Those following the political view would see the May 1968 uprisings as a logical outcome of the SI's dialectical approach: while savaging present day society, they sought a revolutionary society which would embody the positive tendencies of capitalist development. The "realization and suppression of Art" is simply the most developed of the many supersessions which the SI sought over the years. For Situationist International of 1968, the world triumph of workers councils would bring about all these supersessions.

May 1968 – Uprisings and the Strasborg Scandal

May 1968 An important event leading up to May 1968 was the so called Strasbourg scandal. A group of students managed to use public funds to publish the 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"*. The pamphlet circulated in thousands of copies and helped to make the situationists well known throughout the nonstalinist left. The occupations of 1968 started at the university of Nanterre and spread to the Sorbonne. The police tried to take back the Sorbonne and a riot ensued. Following this a general strike was declared with up to 10 million workers participating. The SI originally participated in the Sorbonne occupations and defended barricades in the riots. The SI distributed calls for the occupation of factories and the formation of workers' councils but disillusioned with the students left the university to set up the C.M.D.O., The Council For The Maintenance Of The Occupations which distributed the SI's demands on a much wider scale. The government and the unions agreed a deal but no-one went

back to work. It was only after President de Gaulle had threatened to start a civil war and the army was deployed on the streets of Paris did the general strike fizzle out. The police retook the Sorbonne and the C.M.D.O. disbanded.

Key ideas in Situationist theory

Ideas central to Situationist theory include:

The Situation: a notion which had been circulating in philosophical, scientific and artistic circles for some time. Asger Jorn was greatly influenced by Niels Bohr, and we can see within the concept of situation a connection with the notion of locality in Quantum physics.

The Spectacular society: "We live in a spectacular society, that is, our whole life is surrounded by an immense accumulation of spectacles. Things that were once directly lived are now lived by proxy. Once an experience is taken out of the real world it becomes a commodity. As a commodity the spectacular is developed to the detriment of the real. It becomes a substitute for experience."- Larry Law, from Images And Everyday Life, a 'Spectacular Times' pocket book.

"The spectacle is not a collection of images but a social relation among people mediated by images... The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living... The liar has lied to himself"- Guy Debord

The Situationists would argue against any separation between a "false" spectacle and a "true" daily life. Debord reverses Hegel by arguing that within the spectacle, "the true is a moment of the false". The spectacle is not a conspiracy. The Situationists would argue that society reaches the level of the spectacle when nearly all aspects of culture and experience have become mediated by capitalist social relation. This concept of modern life being a step removed from reality shares common ground with Jean Baudrillard's ideas of Hyperreality, which examines societies that replace real experience with spectacle.

Guy Debord

Guy Debord argues that the spectacle manifests itself into three different forms:

The concentrated spectacle: The spectacle associated with concentrated bureaucracy. Guy Debord associated this spectacular form mostly with the Socialist Bloc and Fascism, although today mixed backward economies import it, and even advanced capitalist countries in times of crisis. Every aspect of life, like property, music, and communication is concentrated and is identified with the bureaucratic

class. The concentrated spectacle generally identifies itself with a powerful political leader. The concentrated spectacle is made effective through a state of permanent violence and police terror.

The diffuse spectacle: The spectacle associated with advanced capitalism and commodity abundance. In the diffuse spectacle, different commodities conflict with each other, preventing the consumer from consuming the whole. Each commodity claims itself as the only existant one, and tries to impose itself over the other commodities: "Irreconcilable claims jockey for position on the stage of the affluent economy's unified spectacle, and different star commodities simultaneously promote conflicting social policies. The automobile spectacle, for example, strives for a perfect traffic flow entailing the destruction of old urban districts, while the city spectacle needs to preserve those districts as tourist attractions."- Guy Debord

The diffuse spectacle is more effective than the concentrated spectacle. The diffuse spectacle operates mostly through seduction, while the concentrated spectacle operates mostly through violence. Because of this, Debord argues that the diffuse spectacle is more effective at supressing non-spectacular opinions than the concentrated spectacle.

The integrated spectacle: The spectacle associated with modern capitalist countries. The integrated spectacle borrows traits from the diffuse and concentrated spectacle to form a new synthesis. Debord argues that this is a very recent form of spectacular manifestation, and that it was pioneered in France and Italy. According to Debord, the integrated spectacle goes by the label of liberal democracy. This spectacle introduces a state of permanent general secrecy, where experts and specialists dictate the morality, statistics, and opinions of the spectacle. Terrorism is the invented enemy of the spectacle, which specialists compare with their "liberal democracy", pointing out the superiority of the latter one. Debord argues that without terrorism, the integrated spectacle wouldn't survive, for it needs to be compared to something in order to show its "obvious" perfection and superiority.

Debord points out that the integrated spectacle is the most powerful and dangerous form of spectacular manifestations.

Unitary urbanism: "Unitary urbanism is one of the central concerns of the SI" (Internationale Situationniste #3, December 1959). One example of how the Situationists synthesised/superimposed from theory and practice - see separate articles on Unitary urbanism, psychogeography, and dérive.

Recuperation: "To survive, the spectacle must have social control. It can recuperate a potentially threatening situation by shifting ground, creating dazzling alternatives- or by embracing the threat, making it safe and then selling it back to us"- Larry Law, from *The Spectacle- The Skeleton Keys*, a 'Spectacular Times pocket book.

"Ha! You think it's funny? Turning rebellion into money?"- The Clash, *White Man In The Hammersmith Palais*.

Recuperation is the process by which the spectacle takes a radical or revolutionary idea and repackages it as a saleable commodity. An ironic example of recuperation, it could be argued, was the 1989 Situationist exhibition staged in Paris, Boston, and at the ICA gallery in London's Mall, wherein both original situationist manifestos, and contemporary Pro-Situ influenced works (records, fanzines, samizdat-style leaflets and propaganda) were presented as museum artifacts for the mass consumption of the art establishment. This event of course contrasts sharply to the occasion when the Situationist International gave a presentation at the ICA themselves, which famously ended when an audience member asked the group "what is situationism?" to which one of them answered "we are not here to answer cuntish questions" before marching off to the bar. Although all would agree that a lot of water has gone under the bridge since 1989 with regard to the image of the SI in the media, another example that might be cited would be the exhibition and other events on "The SI and After" that were staged by the Aquarium art gallery in London in 2003.

A longer-lasting example, it could be argued, would be the "Hacienda" nightclub in Manchester (1982-1997). Highly commercially successful, this was named by its owner, British music-industry businessman Tony Wilson, after a reference in the 1953 work "Formulary for a New Urbanism" by Ivan Chitchevlov. Millionaire Wilson's company Factory Records was one of the sponsors of the 1989 ICA exhibition (along with Beck's beer). Later, in 1996, he allowed a conference on the SI to be staged at the Hacienda night-club. Veteran Situationist-influenced critics of recuperation were not surprised to learn that Wilson had invested funds in collecting Situationist-linked artworks, including Debord's "Psychogeographical Map of Paris" (1953), some of which he allowed to be shown in public at the Aquarium event in 2003. An index of the financial astuteness of such speculation is the fact that there are now dealers in artworks and fine books who count Situationist-linked works among their specialisms.

Detournement: "short for: detournement of pre-existing aesthetic elements. The integration of past or present artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu. In this sense there can be no Situationist

painting or music, but only a Situationist use of these means.",
Internationale Situationiste issue 1, June 1958.

One could view detournement as forming the opposite side of the coin to 'recuperation' (where radical ideas and images become safe and commodified), in that images produced by the spectacle get altered and subverted so that rather than supporting the status quo, their meaning becomes changed in order to put across a more radical or oppositionist message.

Such a pro-situ technique can be seen in action in the present day when looking at the work of Culture Jammers including Adbusters 1, whose 'subvertisements' 'detourn' Nike adverts, for example. In this case the original advertisement's imagery is altered in order to draw attention to said company's policy of shifting their production base to cheap-labour third-world 'free trade zones'. However, the line between 'recuperation' and 'detournement' can become thin (or at least very fuzzy) at times, as Naomi Klein points out in her book No Logo. Here she details how corporations such as Nike, Pepsi or Diesel have approached Culture Jammers and Abusters (sometimes successfully) and offered them lucrative contracts in return for partaking in 'ironic' promotional campaigns. She points up further irony by drawing attention to merchandising produced in order to promote Adbusters' Buy Nothing day, an example of the recuperation of detournement (or of culture eating itself) if ever there was one. Klein's arguments about irony reifying rather than breaking down power structures is echoed by Slavoj Zizek. Zizek argues that the kind of distance opened up by detournement is the condition of possibility for ideology to operate: by attacking and distancing oneself from the sign-systems of capital, the subject creates a fantasy of transgression that "covers up" his/her actual complicity with capitalism as an overarching system. In contrast, evoLhypergraphHyCx are very fond of pointing out the differences between hypergraphics, 'detournement', the postmodern idea of appropriation and the Neoist use of plagiarism as the use of different and similar techniques used for different and similar means, effects and causes.

In San Francisco a gang of moped riders called the "Creatures of the Loin", recontextualize situationist drift, as the new SF Psychogeographic Society

Legacy of the SI

The SI dissolved in 1972, but despite their membership never having risen above 40 at any one time (and sometimes numbering as few as 10),

Situationist ideas have continued to echo profoundly through many aspects of culture and politics in Europe and the USA.

The Situationist movement exerted a strong influence on the UK punk rock phenomenon of the 1970s, for example, which in itself could be said to have changed the English cultural landscape during the last quarter of the twentieth century. To a significant extent this came about due to the Situationist inputs of Malcolm McLaren, Vivienne Westwood and particularly Jamie Reid into the marketing and imagery of the Sex Pistols.

One can also trace situationist ideas within the development of other radical currents within society such as the Angry Brigade, Class War, Neoism and more recent Reclaim the Streets, Adbusters campaigns, Seahorse Liberation Army, Libre Society neo-Dadaists Mark Divo and Lennie Lee and musical artists such as The Nation of Ulysses, Orchid (band) and the Make up, Swedish hardcore band Refused and the Welsh art-rockers Manic Street Preachers.

The development of Parkour, originating in Paris, is an attenuated example of the influence of SI. Parkour is redolent with many of its ideas, including the reclaiming of the city environment, and the freeing of the citizen from urban and psychological constraints. It also is following a similar path to SI of widening influence, but destructive factionalism among its practitioners.

Classic Situationist texts include *On the Poverty of Student Life*, "Open Creation and its Enemies" by Asger Jorn, "Society of the Spectacle" by Guy Debord, "The Revolution Of Everyday Life" and "The Book Of Pleasures" by Raoul Vaneigem, "Leaving The 20th Century" edited by Chris Gray and "The Situationist International Anthology" edited by Ken Knabb.

Also of interest is an earlier book produced by Debord in pre-SI times, called "Memoires," the original edition of which featured a sandpaper cover. The idea was that it would destroy any books that were placed either side of it on the shelf, thus serving as a metaphor for the supersession of 'old ideas' by a radical avant-garde. This idea is also an interesting forerunner of the SI's later determination not to be 'recuperated' and thus rendered harmless by spectacular society, instead remaining aloof and refusing to 'explain' themselves or their ideas.

As many of the original Situationist texts tend to be carefully written, some people have found them dense and inaccessible. However, during the early 1980's English Anarchist Larry Law produced a series of 'pocket-books' under the name of "Spectacular Times" which aimed to make Situationist theory more easily assimilated into popularist anarchism. .

Some people, though, feel that he much reduced the theory by this process.

More recently, a book called *The Situationist City* by Simon Sadler (MIT 1998 ISBN 0262692252) focuses on Constant's unitary urbanism vision but also provides a useful overall perspective.

Criticism

Criticisms of the Situationists frequently assert that their ideas are not in fact complex and difficult to understand, but are at best simple ideas expressed in deliberately difficult language, and at worst actually nonsensical. For example anarchist Chaz Bufe asserts that "obscure situationist jargon" is a major problem in the anarchist scene [2].

Quotations

"Workers of the world, have fun!" - Travailleurs de tous les pays, amusez-vous!

"live without dead time" - vivez sans temps mort - Guy Debord

"The system of teaching is the teaching of the system" - Guy Debord

"It is forbidden to forbid" - Il est interdit d'interdire - Anonymous graffiti, Paris 1968

"I take my desires for reality because I believe in the reality of my desires" - Guy Debord

"What beautiful and priceless potlatches the affluent society will see -- whether it likes it or not! -- when the exuberance of the younger generation discovers the pure gift; a growing passion for stealing books, clothes, food, weapons or jewelry simply for the pleasure of giving them away"- Raoul Vaneigem, "The Revolution Of Everyday Life"

"Be realistic - demand the impossible!" - Soyez réalistes, demandez l'impossible! - Anonymous graffiti, Paris 1968

"Beneath the city sidewalks - the beach!" - Sous les pavés, la plage! - Anonymous graffiti, Paris 1968

"Never work" - Ne travaillez jamais - Anonymous graffiti, Paris 1968

"People who talk about revolution and class struggle without referring explicitly to everyday life, without understanding what is subversive about love and what is positive in the refusal of constraints, such people have a corpse in their mouth"- Raoul Vaneigem, "The Revolution Of Everyday Life"

Political organisations that share SI ideas

The Yes Men - organisation of pranking oppressive establishments

Biotic Baking Brigade - activist group famous for throwing pies in faces

Angry Brigade - 70's British terrorist group

King Mob - 60's London anti-consumerist group

Yippies - 60's American political party
Red Army Faction
Autonomia
Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers
Os Cangaceiros -similar to situationist, longer lasting

Activities or publications that share SI ideas

Not Bored! - situationist publication in New York City
CrimethInc - creators of anarchist publications
No Logo - corporate reform book
Adbusters - current anti-consumerist magazine
Anarchy: A Journal of Desire Armed - long-running post-leftist anti-authoritarian publication
Autonomea/Semiotext(e) Collective - non-profit publishers of much situationist influenced thought

Notable people that share SI ideas

Hegel
Raoul Vaneigem
René Viénet
Jamie Reid
Stewart Home
Asger Jorn
Tad Kepley
Charles Radcliffe

Members of the Situationist International

The members of the Situationist International were:

Algerian Section (2)

Mohamed Dahou
Abdelhafid Khatib

American Section (4)

Robert Chasse
Bruce Elwell
Jan Horelick
Tony Verlaan

Belgian Section (6)

Walter Korun
Attila Kotanyi
Rudi Renson
Jan Stijbosch
Raoul Vaneigem
Maurice Wyckaert

Dutch Section (5)

Anton Alberts
Armando
Constant
Jacqueline de Jong
Har Oudejans

English Section (5)

Timothy (T. J.) Clark
Christopher Gray
Donald Nicholson-Smith
Charles Radcliffe
Ralph Rumney

French Section (15)

Francois de Beaulieu
Michele Bernstein
Patrick Cheval
Alain Chevalier
Guy Debord
Edith Frey
Theo Frey
Jean Garnault
Anton Hartstein
Herbert Holl
Mustapha Khayati
Ndjangani Lungela
Rene Riesel
Christian Sebastiani
Rene Vienet

German Section (11)

Ervin Eisch
Lothar Fischer
Heinz Hofl
Dieter Kunzelmann
Uwe Lausen
Renee Nele
Hans Platschek
Heimrad Prem
Gretel Stadler
Helmut Sturm
Hans-Peter Zimmer

Italian Section (10)

Giors Melanotte
Walter Olmo
Claudio Pavan
Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio
Eduardo Rothe

Paolo Salvadori
Gianfranco Sanguinetti
Piero Simondo
Elena Verrone
Glauco Wuerich

Scandinavian Section (8)

Ansgar Elde
Asger Jorn
Stefan Larsson
Peter Laughesen
Katja Lindell
Jeppesen Victor Martin
Jørgen Nash
Hardy Strid

No Section (4)

Ivan Chtcheglov
Andre Frankin
Jacques Ovadia
Alexander Trocchi

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