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It may be tempting to invoke a very different sense of beauty in the mathematical precision of the piece. This view, however, continues to invest writing with a thoroughly metaphysical hermeneutics, where truths beyond the material conditions of both the form and structure of the piece operate as separate and distinct knowledges. At these moments, it seems especially necessary once again to call tech support; for as its practice demands, tech support is there to remind us that the messages we may think are inherent to the work are not automatically to be opened – that texts need not carry any content at all to be meaningful. Of course, such inspections, as self-evident as they are self-sufficient, also bear out Rilke’s original caveat that even if one were to detect a moment of communication in the ongoing swirl of semantic structures, it remains as detached and distinct as it is illuminating. There is no safe access; “each single angel is terrifying.” To engage with this level of meaning one must be as cunning as Odysseus who took time to apply the proper restraints, corking the ears of his crew and binding his hands and feet to the ship’s mast, before allowing the treacherous magnificence of the sirens’ songs to penetrate. A similar caution, where the terror of the message is somehow confronted or at least addressed, invokes its own particular lineage throughout modern aesthetics, beginning with romanticism’s considerations of the sublime and continuing on through Rilke’s angelic terrors to more contemporary voices such as we might find in the work of Jack Spicer. Spicer explicitly foregoes writing’s formal use-value as a type of semantic technology for a glimpse of the terror beyond it. Hence, most of his poems offer an interpretative position constructed literally from the certainty, perhaps even necessity, of its own annihilation. The poet’s ontological sovereignty as a free and conscious creator of meaning depends upon it. As he writes in his “Imaginary Elegies,” imagining perhaps a Duino that does not exist, “Poet, / Be like God.”

That two-eyed monster God is still above;  
I saw him once when I was young and once  
When I was seized with madness, or was I seized  
And mad because I saw him once. ...  
(*New American Poetry* 146-7).

In deed, God appears as terrifying as Rilke’s angels, but in this particular encounter, we willfully accept the consequences: to be like God, i.e., as God must be, offers the only possibility to create, to communicate, yet it infers simultaneously the “poet’s” destruction. The determination in Spicer’s message derives perversely from its uselessness, constituting an interesting complement to Hennessy’s more functional position as the poet who simply cannot be – the poet, resigned, in other words, to his or her role in support of the text, the poet as text/tech support.

#### Notes

1. Christian Bök “After Language Poetry: 10 Statements” (2001, *OEI*, Sweden).

a translation essay: Alan Prohm (Asger Jorn (Henry Van de Velde) Asger Jorn) Alan Prohm

## 1. JORN AMONG THE SITUATIONISTS

“... a Swiss architect, Max Bill, has undertaken to restructure the Bauhaus where Klee and Kandinsky taught. He wishes to make an academy without painting, without research into the imagination, fantasy, signs, symbols – all he wants is technical instruction. In the name of experimental artists I intend to create an International Movement For an Imaginist Bauhaus.” (Letter from Asger Jorn to Enrico Baj, December 1953)

In the mid-1950’s, Asger Jorn was busy collecting a big decade of his art thinking into a series of essays, published in 1957 as *Pour la Forme: Ébauche d’une méthodologie des Arts (For Form: Draft of an Arts Methodology)*<sup>1</sup>. The book appeared under an imprint of the Situationist International, founded by Jorn, Guy Debord and others that same year, but what the essays preserved was a distinctly pre-situationist thinking. In fact they marked the fullness of a survival effort on the part of artistic culture which the SI would declare long-dead and invalidated in the context of late-capitalist realities. Covering his involvement with the post-Surrealist COBRA group and his campaign to establish the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, they show him struggling urgently to fill the viability gap created for art by the blossoming of design culture on the one hand, absorbing all art production under the model of product design, and the failure of Surrealism on the other, as the last art resistance.

The essay “Form and Structure: On the Cult of the ‘New’ in Our Century” goes to the root of Jorn’s problem by showcasing the moment (Henry Van de Velde and the rise of Bauhaus out of *Nouveau Style*) when “art and design” aesthetics realigned itself towards function as a new beauty, and instituted the functionalist logic as a viral ideology securing the total capitalization of the cultural sphere. The essay is another effort at hacking the hegemonic reasoning behind these developments, and opening a crack for the insertion of some new contestatory action, heuristically, wishfully labeled an Imaginist Bauhaus. Jorn’s argument is that while the modernists were right in their rejection of beauty as a hereditary value dictatorship, they committed a category error (with strong market incentives but dire consequences for humanity) in choosing function to fill its role. Instead he points to ugliness and the salutary shock as foci for an oppositional realignment, one that would reconfirm the aesthetic, tasking it with preserving a certain human aliveness through sensation and counter-stimulus. At the same time he argues, a little conflictedly, for the value of imagination and the irrational as generators of usable new forms, and for sensation as a therapeutic function.

The art-historical trajectory he aligns himself with and attempts to set back on track extends from Futurism (his references here are Russian) through Surrealism, stages in the aesthetics of the new that reveal a declining capacity to generate real novelty in/through the arts, even as they show an increasing commitment to the human amid modernism's progressive onslaught. The idea that what went lost with the failure of the Surrealist project could be redeemed or renewed by a retro-infusion of futurist shock aesthetics shows how at odds Jorn ultimately was with the cultural analysis of the Lettrists he would soon be joining, and with whom he would found the Situationist International. It allows us to observe the spinning of wheels to which all radical art efforts since at least the late 20's had seemed condemned. The socialist revolutions had failed to propagate, industry and then Fascism had shown the final impotence of resistant art activities, and when the Fascist program was finally stopped, the responding ascendancy of commodity culture, of the "Spectacle" as total enclosure of the cultural field and guaranteed recuperation of any actions in it, rendered what before the war had been called progress impossible and the logic of any return or renewal insidious. In the world the situationists were bringing into view, the new was inescapably the old all over again, unless, that is, innovation could attain to the totality of a new world (a new behavior and a new way of life, ultimately a new political economy and the mentality of individual freedom that will have emerged to float it), in which case a perennial goal of artistic renewal would be achieved, and something would be different. But for this the limiting field of art production, in which Jorn was heroically dragging his feet, had to be rejected.

*It is not just returning to the past which is reactionary; even "modern" cultural objectives are ultimately reactionary since they depend in reality on ideological formulations of a past society that has prolonged its death agony to the present. Only extremist innovation is historically justified.<sup>2</sup>*

## 2. FORM AND STRUCTURE: "ON THE CULT OF THE 'NEW' IN OUR CENTURY"

[Asger Jorn, in *Pour la forme*, Paris: Situationist International, 1957.]

### FUTURISM AND SURREALISM

The search for the new as an artistic program appears consciously for the first time around 1894, with the architects and artists of the "modern style" movement.

This movement which first began in England fought against obedience to old formulas and the gospel value of old styles. For the first time, people saw that every age has its own style, that this has to be looked for, discovered and expressed.

The basis of this new style had already been articulated by sculptors and painters such as Rodin, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec. Their work presented itself, organically, as influenced by the ORIENT. The program of the modern style provoked vigorous struggle all over Europe, rapidly achieving tremendous popular success and producing the most astonishing novelties. The creators of this movement (Van de Velde among others) were themselves inundated by this rain of sensational novelties, brought on by industrialisation and encouraged by the curiosity of the public. They found refuge in functionalism.

Within a short period of time rationalist functionalism had chased out all the tendencies of the modern style in France, Germany and the northern countries, connected with the evolution of cubist and abstract styles. The most lively elements of the modern style then reappeared in Italy and Russia under the name of Futurism, an artistic movement organic and universalist in character.

What characterizes this movement is its vitality and its uniqueness on every level: painting, sculpture, literature, architecture, music, etc. The search for the new was part of its dynamic and enthusiastic program.

The lack of social consciousness and the hardening of dialectical contrasts in Russia and Italy provoked the progressive weakening and disappearance of the impulse to novelty in Futurism, which ultimately depleted itself in an alienated conformity. And yet this trunk bore fruit before its depletion, transplanted by the Italo-Polish Apollinaire and by the Russian Kandinsky, who was named professor at the Bauhaus. Kandinsky had written: "an object that we do not know, seen for the first time, provokes a particular effect in us"; and Apollinaire declared: "what distinguishes the art of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century from every other period, is the importance of the element of surprise" – of the Futurist element. And this, in a certain sense, is Apollinaire's legacy to Surrealism, for which he laid the basis: the theory of shock.

Surrealism and its brother – almost twin – Dadaism were in retreat if you compare them to the Futurist conceptions of Apollinaire. They lacked creative vitality. Dadaist and Surrealist shock is not the product of human inventions, but is rather provoked by the unexpected rapprochement in which already known elements are presented, an extremely valuable thing incidentally.

And yet history had a surprise in store of such gravity that by comparison the Surrealist shock is a child's game. War, again, the concentration camps, the atomic bomb.<sup>3</sup>

Today desire for the new in art has accelerated and proceeds with an unthinkable rhythm and speed.

Today we have come to recognize the importance of the new in art, and at the same time of its non-necessity.

This conscious search for the new is what we call *experimentation*<sup>4</sup>; it's a matter of locating the experimental point. Toward this end was formed in 1948 *The International of Experimental Artists (Cobra)*<sup>5</sup>.

## THE NEW AGES

Already Le Corbusier understood that the beginning of our century had been the dawn of a new era, and he felt the need to lay down, along with his architectural brethren, the doctrines of this new life. We have now arrived at a moment when the doctrines of the inter-war generations have lost their validity and must be updated.

Shortly before his death, Einstein, representing what was most typical of the intellectual spirit of his time, admitted that if he could start his life over, he would have preferred the profession of a tinsmith to that of a scientist.

His theories of an *absolute relativity* in a world conceived as a strictly *determined* and *limited* entity had allowed man to penetrate the microscopic secrets of the atom; everything worked wonderfully as long as it stayed at the analytic level. The disaster occurred when people began to use this new knowledge for interested or – according to our definition – artistic ends. The day, with the consent of the *pacifist* Einstein, the first atomic bomb exploded on Hiroshima, the illusion of mechanistic determinism was no longer possible even for the blind. Man is free to choose his path towards life or towards death. The young nuclear scientists introduced chance into their observations. There we can see Einstein apparently arriving at a moral failure by way of a false calculation in his scientific theories. In the same period, an identical determinism was reigning in the domain of architecture under the name of *functionalism*, a theory especially elaborated by the friends and patrons of the old Bauhaus, among whom we must count Einstein. And their failure was the same failure.

“A NEW AGE HAS BEGUN, AN AGE OF SOLIDARITY” said Le Corbusier at the moment when German Nazism was already preparing the Second World War with its concentration camps and its gas chambers. Some years earlier, the architect Henry Van de Velde, creator of the New Style, declared: “We had recognized this truth: the current generations are more disposed to be convinced by reason and good reasoning, than to be moved and led by the heart.” The historic reality of this period is too flagrant to provoke the least smile at the levity of these remarks. We should however take them seriously if we don't wish to lose everything and end up in despair; research where their authors were right and where they were profoundly mistaken. Their error resides precisely in these deterministic ideas, so characteristic of their period, and concretized most brilliantly in Einstein's theories.

We are still at the beginning of a new era, the era of industry, of the machine, but it must be recognized that the essential structures of this period have not yet been specified. Also all the theories that impose deterministic doctrines that affect the fundamental structuring elements of our historical period should be submitted to perpetual critique. The topic we have chosen is that of the practical and non-practical arts.

## THE UTOPIAN ORIGIN OF OUR IDEAS ON ARCHITECTURE

*To me, stones have always been bread.*

–Ruskin

Why are we, free artists, so interested in the doctrines of modern architecture? Because they exclude us and because, in today's society, they rob us of our *raison d'être*.

An old profession, outdated and surpassed by others, ought obviously to be eliminated as a human activity, but we wish precisely to demonstrate the danger to cultural evolution of spreading doctrines that merely repeat the anti-poetic perspectives of old Platonism.

The doctrines of modern architecture have not yet managed to overcome the utopia of their origins to arrive at a scientific plan that is scientifically acceptable and controllable. Therein lie their ties with Platonism in particular, and more generally with the whole of Hellenic idealism.

We find the origin of modern ideas on architecture and industrial forms in the utopian dreams and experimentation of two Englishmen, Ruskin and Morris, in the second half of the XIX<sup>th</sup> Century.

Around 1894, Ruskin's words were finding their echo among young architects and artists. “We had a sense of rebellion in common”, said Henry Van de Velde, one of the pioneers of the *Nouveau Style*. Their enthusiasm did not come without criticism: “Tradition is sterile as soon as it is no longer fed with new elements, and the cold given off by all startings over should alert us to the fatal approach of death. Everything conceived by Morris, everything that came from his hands was perfect. And yet, these creations leave us perfectly cold. We had been better served and better guided by one single work executed with less perfection but animated by that spark that leaps suddenly at the instant our sensibility feels contact with life: the life of the moment – this present moment – this moment that distinguishes itself from every one that will follow” (1917).

## ALL EVOLUTION IS AN OFFENSE

Henry Van de Velde makes a neat summation of Ruskin and Morris's activity when he says that they were violently objecting to an offense against *the dignity and human nature* of the worker and the artisan, this offense consisting of a colossal and grotesque invasion by a new, experimental industry. They took the side of those who wanted to destroy these machines that could copy anything but to the detriment of real qualities. It was the factories that ultimately won this struggle, and Ruskin's efforts were drowned in the immense and swelling flood of machine-made products.

The first founder of the old Bauhaus in Germany was Henry Van de Velde. Before launching into a discussion of the “sclerotic” doctrines of the architect, Gropius, chosen by Henry Van de Velde as his successor in directing the Bauhaus, it seemed use-

ful to summarize Henry Van de Velde's defining ideas as expressed in *Pages de Doctrine* (1942 edition). The pages hold, alongside some false conclusions, a series of extremely intelligent observations. Today we can apply to him his own phrase relating to Ruskin and Morris: "We had a sense of rebellion in common."

Ignoring the fact that *the cult of the new is always an offense to dignity and human nature*, Van de Velde took refuge in rationalism under the hygienic banner of "functionalism" at the moment he perceived the uncontrollable consequences liberated by the *Art Nouveau* movement.

### WHY ALWAYS THE NEW

(Henry Van de Velde, *Pages de Doctrine*, 1929.)<sup>6</sup>

### AGAINST UGLINESS

*Never, at any period, under any reigning style, has public taste been so degraded as it was in the second half of the XIX<sup>th</sup> Century. This ugliness was the result of the constant repeating, less and less perfect, of models from ancient styles, and of the absolute lack of control both as regards the relation of the form of these models to the practical purpose for which they were intended and as regards the meaning of the ornaments heaped onto them.*

*The action undertaken by the great apostles Ruskin and Morris to escape these straits failed or more precisely missed its mark. Their efforts produced no results beyond the echo of the former's fiery words and the respect which the exceptional perfection of the latter's works commanded from everyone – and which we still share today.*

*It could not have been otherwise. Both Ruskin's dazzling diatribes against the invading ugliness and W. Morris's admirable creations in all branches of the artistic professions were anachronistic.*

### BY WAY OF RETURN TO THE GOTHIC

*Imagine wanting to revive the gothic style on the threshold of the XX<sup>th</sup> Century. Today, we wonder how two men of such exceptional intelligence could have given themselves over to such an illusion and passed it on to so many disciples.*

*But this illusion can be explained. The revelation of what the gothic style had really been, that is, one of the sublimest culminations, and the cathedral one of architecture's boldest and most radical ideas, was of recent date when Ruskin published in *The Stones of Venice* that famous chapter on the gothic style, of which Morris said "it was from the day that he and his friends read it that a new orientation towards the world began for them". To accept that a "new" orientation of thought, on the threshold of the XX<sup>th</sup> Century, could*

*be directed toward the past, one would have to have felt nothing of the hypertension of active forces that would provoke, in all domains of human activity, such an upheaval as no other century has seen.*

*Ruskin and Morris's attitude would therefore be incomprehensible were we to lose sight of what I have just said about the revelation of the gothic, and of the kind of moral support such a revelation brought to Ruskin's "conservatism" and, at the same time, to W. Morris's socialism.*

### THE NEW ORIENTATION TOWARDS A NEW STYLE

*It was on the continent – in Belgium – that the movement begun in England made a turn towards the future and towards a bolder and more adventurous goal: a new style. This did not happen without certain decisive interventions.*

*A group of English innovators, none of whom had much genius, accomplished a miracle.*

*It seems that none of the artists or artisans of this new group, "Arts and Crafts", shared Ruskin and Morris's illusion of a return to the gothic style. They reached agreement on a more modest program: that of the creation of a very simple architecture, furniture and object, sanely conceived outside of any imitation of styles. The repercussions of this small group's efforts were considerable.*

*Without grand gestures, without great pronouncements, the "Arts and Crafts" group, around 1894, knocked down the doors by which – as soon as the creations of this English group became known on the continent – a torrent of individualists would break free who, carried along by the frenzy of their reclaimed liberty, by the joy of having swept away the nightmare of the imitation of styles, would for a certain time cease respecting anything that resembled a discipline, or measure, anything that might have threatened to hamper this freedom.*

*What we experienced around 1890 can only be compared to the sense of deliverance we feel at the first signs of Spring. Spring always comes as a surprise. We feel, each time it returns, the relief of having conquered a morbid apathy, of having freed ourselves of the weight each winter imposes.*

*In the end we might have kept to these things, these simple things, sanely conceived, charming; but then that would have been a constraint. Too many latent creative forces were demanding manifestation. And in most countries artists were rising up to claim their right to create new things, that is, forms and ornaments freed from the imitation of any style. There were, at the end of the last century, a legion of pioneers in the free search for a new style and each one of them was disgraced and resisted in his respective country. Few were compelled as I was by circumstances, and constrained by destiny to leave their country and become apostles to an idea.*

*I am aware of having allied my life so tightly to this aesthetic and moral correction that since 1894 has been pressing for the "new". Born of the conviction of an end in itself, this*

*new was at first pretentious, full of itself. This would lead to escalations which today, at a distance of more than thirty years, put one in mind of a carnival, an orgy of individualism.*

*Yet on such occasions, certain individuals sober up more quickly than others. It appeared to us at the time that the movement for a new style had a banner, but lacked a precise program. We unfurled the banner boldly. The manufacturers and the merchants supplied music for the parade.*

#### NOVELTY AND THE NEW

*There was, in this pernicious enthusiasm, enough to make us all lose our wits, enough to negate the tenacious efforts of some of us, who tirelessly pursued discovery of the formula that would give our movement its true meaning and its program. So long as we were unable to dissipate the misunderstanding that existed between us and our manufacturers, the merchants and the public, we felt at risk. We foresaw the danger of our efforts leading in a direction opposite to the one we wanted.*

*We had urgently to explain ourselves. Remove from all those who saw in us only the “bringers of the new,” the illusion that after this new, we were just going to bring them another.*

It seems to us today that values of too great importance were abandoned on the field of battle at the moment we turned our back on the New Style by creating static doctrines where only an illusory chance remains for renewal. Today we put forth this critique by means of creating the “International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus”. In “Image and Form”<sup>7</sup>, we cite a letter from Max Bill in which he writes: “Bauhaus is not the name of an artistic inspiration, but signifies a movement representing a well-defined doctrine.”

It has been a century already since this new development began, if we ignore classicism and the Empire style taken up by the great French revolution, a phenomenon decisive for Ruskin's Gothicism. In a long view of this kind, doctrines lose their particular value. Modern science has reached the point where it recognizes that phenomena consisting of a sufficiently large number of separate phenomena acting without causality, nevertheless strictly obey the law of causality in their ensemble. We are able with such distance to see the whole of this development, seemingly incoherent and contradictory in its details, from the perspective of necessity. We are able to apply to this development our laws regarding formal conservatism and formal radicalism: the necessity and at the same time the insufficiency of Ruskin's *naturalism*, Henry Van de Velde's *inventive ideation* and Gropius' *rationalism* are inscribed in an inevitable dialectic of the movement. This new view of the whole leads us to the awareness of a new dynamic method in formal and artistic creation. But this also teaches us that we must throw ourselves into the confusion and act directly on the contradictions by creating new ones, if we want to fertilize development.

#### AGAINST IMAGINATION, FOR THE NEUTRAL APPEARANCE

*The moral value of forms conceived according to a strict *raison d'être* no longer interested anyone. What Ruskin and Morris had condemned in the name of Beauty, I didn't cease to denounce in the name of morality. (p.88)<sup>8</sup>*

*There could be no harm nor any danger in denouncing ugliness, or in searching out its causes, for ugliness is an evil and a sin. Let us make no mistake about it; recourse to imagination ultimately denotes an indigence of the creative faculty and a cowardice. It is when one can find nothing to satisfy aesthetic feelings by way of normal thought that one has recourse to fantasy. This latter is the harlot who brushes her hand across the forehead of the suffering artist, and makes him believe he is a creator because he feels inspiration! (p.34)*

*There is no limit to the stupidity of certain forms sprung from imagination, and it would be just as entertaining as it would be instructive to bring them all together and parade them before the eyes of those attempting to build on the disastrous results of ungoverned thought.*

*It is in objects whose particulars have been systematically studied that we will find the ideal of what we can achieve today. For we are evolving in a favorable direction: we are taking our directives less from an object's Beauty than from its practical qualities. This priority of the practical over Beauty has instilled the numerous things with a perfectly neutral appearance. (p.90)*

*A new discipline applied like a law of hygiene, this is the program that, as I understand it, would refute ugliness, put an end to evil, to all the evil provoked by the intervention of fantasy. (p.32)*

*As a result they realize this neutral state to which we are appealing in our struggle against the onslaught of ugliness and the debasement of taste. (p.39)*

*Fanatical about the principle of rational invention and moved by the idea that all things must have a truthful and moral appearance, we revised – without weakness – all our opinions on style, on forms and ornaments. (p.54)*

*According to the frame we would choose for our existence, we would create a propitious or a pernicious home for our thoughts and actions.*

*To live in society with deceitful objects is no less dangerous than to live in a society of aberrant individuals, and indigence is no more excusable when the lie is skillfully perpetrated. We have sought, by all our means, to debunk the notion of the “innocent lie.” (p.88)*

*Ugliness does not appear, neither it nor its grievous consequences, until things begin presenting themselves to our eyes otherwise than they must to correspond strictly with their most immediate meaning and purpose. (p.106)*

#### AGAINST BEAUTY, AGAINST THE AUTONOMY OF THE AESTHETIC

*Beauty was able to prevail in the human imagination over intelligence, at the point where it appropriated the latter's existence. This great misunderstanding has shaped the fate of*

*beauty. It believed it could lay claim to its own, independent existence, while in fact it is by this error that, at the level of architecture, it has achieved its greatest misfortunes. (p.122)*

*During four centuries and more, that is since the gothic style began incurably preparing its decline and hastening its end by yielding to the advances of the worst suggestions of fantasy, it gradually triumphed over Reason. (p.105)*

*Will we one day be forced to abjure the cult of Beauty and accept a new faith? Beauty's defeat appears immanent, but it has not yet been declared. There may yet be time to save her from disaster. Let her renounce her erring ways and repudiate all the styles with which she has led a life of lies and levity, from the splendid hysterical explosion of the Middle Ages to the style of coiffed wigs and ceremonious bows, up to that in which we have all but suffocated under a mass of senile madneses and pretentious vanities.*

*So long as we have not heard this renunciation, and so long as we have not succeeded in restoring to beauty its virginity, we would do well to ignore it. A new age will at once be an age without ugliness. The exclusive practice of rational invention will earn us this compensation, ugliness being unable to resist the application of a rigorous hygiene. We must seek to replace as soon as possible that which a cruel analysis caused us to lose, and the place that it had occupied in our hearts we should ready for a new goddess born in the land of healthy reason, far from miracle, far from mystery, and far, especially, from the formulas which philosophers and aestheticians have been assiduously accumulating since Antiquity. (p.103)*

#### **AGAINST TALENT AND GENIUS, FOR ORDER AND DISCIPLINE**

*Towards the end of the last century, the degradation of taste reached a depth and degree without comparison in history. Up to that point, thanks to the genius and talent of artists, we can say the corruption had known some "grand époques", and ugliness, which could not fail to follow this corruption, certain "fine moments". One should not be surprised to see genius, talent and ugliness brought together in this way. For genius and talent do not instinctively abhor ugliness. They have, on the contrary, frequently distinguished themselves by certain very vile deeds in the fields of architecture and the industrial arts. And no matter: the presence of genius seems to excuse everything. Has not all of our education, furthermore, for centuries been focused in a direction to enable us to recognize genius and talent and to appreciate it, whereas we have become incapable of recognizing ugliness? (p.79)*

#### **AGAINST THE NEW, FOR THE ETERNAL FORM**

*Scorn? Inability to discern genius and talent? No. Were we unable to recognize them when we noted that the genius and talent of artists of earlier ages (Van Gogh, Gauguin, A.J.) had made up for the ugliness of whole eras? The principle of the rational conception of Beauty,*

*that of the rational conception of forms and construction, are as old as the world. It was therefore but an illusion, but a naïveté to believe that modern architecture, the architecture that would voluntarily accept the strict rules corresponding to these principles, would bring the world something new.*

*The "New" which architecture is revealing to our era, it discovered on the plane of eternity. (p.114)*

*A method as old as Reason is incapable of producing a new style. A truly "new" style could only be an abomination, a new victory of ugliness, because necessarily any novelty would be the result of an abnormal conception, opposite to that of rational conception. (p.84)*

*The threat of novelty has remained constant. So long as it is not put off, it will extend not only the decadence of taste indefinitely, but it will demoralize all those having directly or indirectly to do with creation. (p.65)*

*What attracted the manufacturers was the "novelty" of the forms and ornaments, the originality of our inventions. No creation, setting itself apart by its novelty in the realm of architecture and in that of the industrial arts, but was announced, loudly debated, lauded beyond measure. (p.51)*

*Here we get to the problem of the instinctive haunting and debasement of taste by ornament.*

*The lure of variation could not work as easily as today its ravages upon form.*

*The need for variety had to seek the assistance of ornamentation, more easily varied, better able to seduce by its newness. (p.63)*

*Throughout the course of human history, this observation is confirmed, and the curse that today burdens our manufacturers is noticeably the same as that which led the first merchants based on the shores of the Mediterranean to trade abroad – to demand "the new", "always the new", from the artisans who traded their products. In this domain, nothing has changed, and the Cretan of the Minoan period, the Phoenicians from the time of the destruction of Troy are not much different from the modern manufacturers who are condemned every year to produce new models for the World Fair. (So the principle of the new, too, is as old as the world. A.J.)*

*As afflicting as the prospect of a general demoralization may be, only this would be capable of converting the public, of bringing it to renounce novelty, and at the same time all the ornamental motifs that for centuries have afforded it such thoughtless satisfactions.*

*The fact that the woman's toilette freed itself a few seasons ago (1929) of the whims of fashion to pursue the pure line, this could provoke certain transformations whose importance no one could miss. We judge that henceforth abstention from decorative elements is just as possible and likely in the woman's toilette as in architecture. (p.63)*

*We promptly took a stand against novelty and against those who, at any cost, and whatever it took, demanded the new. (p.54)*

*In so doing we swept away all recent and ancient novelties, and restored our ties with*

*tradition: the primordial tradition of invention, of the adequate form, pure and eternal, of the fatal determination of form by its function! Had we ever asked ourselves what the "new" was, what laws create it and what principle justifies it? (p.55) – (Apparently not. A.J.)*

#### AGAINST ROMANTICISM, FOR A CLASSICAL ARCHITECTURE

*In architecture since the "Cromlech", the "Dolmen" right up until the "Doric" temple which seems to us the fulfillment of primitive architecture, we recognize the perpetuity of the logical form, of the perfect agreement between the form and its purpose. Since pre-history invented the wall, roofs, the column, the architrave, the encorbelment and vault, we can count on one hand the number of times something "new" has appeared in architecture. (p.58). There is no doubt that today the desire is rising to surround ourselves with nothing but pure forms and with objects stripped of ornaments. The aspiration is spreading to want to live only in interiors whose atmosphere has been freed of every problematical or sentimental suggestion. (p.115)*

*Unarguably, intelligence today has triumphed over feeling and those who persist in wishing for the predominance of the latter to the detriment of the former should begin their grieving.*

*Feeling has found itself hemmed in, on the one hand by a will to discovery that feels bound by no limit and, on the other hand, by the power of reasoning that pushes toward the fatality of logical deductions with an eternal relevance. Caught between these two claws feeling and sentimentality will suffocate. (p.60)*

*Who could resist the emotion I felt before that axe of polished granite in the museum of prehistory in Copenhagen, before the long blade of a dagger, impeccably shaped in chipped green onyx, dating from prehistoric Egypt, preserved in a case in the Berlin museum, etc. (p.97)*

*Among all the structures that exist in the world, the Parthenon is the most powerful. A superhuman emotion makes one clench one's fists and shake as if one felt in the presence of the God of life Himself, in the presence of Dionysus, the god of Passion, the god of the Ecstasies and the Mysteries. (p.98)*

*It is not Beauty that confronts us on the Acropolis, but the divine ray of Intelligence. (p.99)*

*Stripped of everything with which the imagination of the Greeks of the Age of Pericles had thought to embellish it (sculpture and polychromy), it appears, as the metal bridge, in a state of grace.*

*Thus it was necessary for the Greek temple to strip itself of everything which the imagination had found to embellish it for it to be brought to the state of grace and for its original splendor to revive. (p.100)*

*This connection was intended only to recognize, in principle, the order and discipline which we are opposing to the lawlessness that, since romanticism, has triumphed over Classicism.*

#### CRITIQUE OF THE DOCTRINES OF THE ARCHITECT HENRY VAN DE VELDE

The theories put forth by Van de Velde and his collaborators had their day of "rigorous puritanism". Architecture became strictly functional, Van de Velde believing that this was a treatment critical to its health. This attitude creates many a preconception that has become unbearable to us, now that we are beginning to feel "the chill of the desolate quarters". Utilitarian rationalism can no longer afford to refuse a critical confrontation with "the formulas the philosophers and aestheticians have been accumulating since antiquity".

Architecture and industrial forms condition the life and environment of humanity. Architecture is, they say, the mother of the arts. But the moment a mother begins systematically killing its children, it is no longer a mother, it's a monster. *Architecture today is a monster.*

We are obliged to go back over the doctrines of modern architecture to save that which lends itself to art, to common thought, to modern philosophy and the scientific spirit. Most of Van de Velde's observations are valid and valuable, but his conclusions are false, because they were guided by a non-objective spirit towards an *a priori* position of *honesty, morality, health and reason*. In taking a stand exclusively for everything that is *good and well*, he has taken a position that is *unjust, idealist, and unreal*.

#### EVOLUTION IS A PERPETUAL PROFANATION OF ETERNAL FORM

Van de Velde declares: "*The Greek temple had magnified the elements, the organs man had ingeniously invented since prehistoric times: the wall and the roof, the column and the architrave. The Greek temple had magnified these elements in the most absolute agreement of their form and their action.*

*When the official Roman architecture was born, it tore from the Doric temple its elements in order to set them among the ornaments. The "triumphal arch" is the classic example that should have rebuked all those who recognized in it the apotheosis of an amassing of organs none of which has a true function, nor serves the purpose it should serve. The Renaissance, the Baroque, the Rococo contributed generously to filling out the collection of the decorator-ornamentalists."*

This profanation targeted the most secret essence of construction and those of the organs without which it could not exist.

*The example of the architects of the Italian Renaissance is, in this regard, quite striking. Did they not commit the most fundamental error: that of the inversion of functional and decorative elements?*

## NEW FORMS PRECEDE NEW REALIZATIONS

Now we will draw our own conclusions from Van de Velde's remarks.

Van de Velde's declarations are very typical, and at the same time bizarre. We must of course admit that there are structural functions just as there are decorative functions, without which his explanation concerning inversion becomes ridiculous. This is precisely what Van de Velde denies, because he fails to show *how decorative elements become constructive elements*, one of the most important phenomena in the development of form.

We can see that Van de Velde, just like all the modern architects (except Erik Lundberg, cf. *La langue formelle de l'Architecture (The Formal Language of Architecture)*), has no understanding at all of the evolutionary dialectic in *Italo-Roman* architecture.

The rationalists seek *an absolute symmetry between form, structure and function, while evolution occurs precisely through an increasing dissymmetry among these three elements*. This movement in several directions provokes a qualitative transformation guiding it towards a new synthesis, towards a new symmetry. There is no such thing as an innocent virginal evolution. Birth is the result of a necessary violence. The rationalists think it is purposes that engender new forms. This is only true within *certain frames*. The new uses that revolutionize our life are unexpected and provoked by the introduction of useless forms whose usefulness is imaginary and decorative. *A long time can pass between the creation of a new form and its practical use*.

Thousands of years before using it for pottery, man had used clay for sculpture. Metals were used in jewelry a long time before they were used to make tools. In Mexico, just as here, use of the wheel was originally justified only for sacred and magical, and never for practical reasons. The only application the Chinese ever discovered for gunpowder was fireworks. *We never know the ultimate purpose of a new form*.

## ITALIAN ARCHITECTURE AND THE LAW OF FORMAL CONSERVATISM

There is a distinction between the function or formal purpose, and the structural purpose. This distinction appears clearly when we find ourselves confronted by a new structure. We have already given this definition: *When a new type is invented to satisfy a function, it will be influenced in its form by the type it is replacing or by known and familiar forms. The known form provides a surface appearance for the unknown object. The old structure is reduced to a façade*.

*The vault of the Triumphal Arch was the triumph of Roman architecture over Greek architecture*. Its possibilities were explored in subsequent ages and surpassed by the end of the Gothic. The need for a new architectural structure made itself felt to the architects of the Renaissance. The elaboration of modern structures was underway. Once again

the Italian architects triumphed. Today, thanks to the novel experiments they pursued throughout the Baroque, Rococo, Classicism and the New Style, we have arrived at a new architectural structure, hidden behind the Greek and Gothic exteriors.

The absolute detachment between the unreal and the real—theatrical décor, pure décor – as well as the great abstract structures, the pure and realist structures (the roman code, the catholic church – the banking system) this is the power of the Italians, their essential relation to European culture, their secret and their weakness.

## SENSATIONAL CONCLUSIONS

### AN AGE WITHOUT UGLINESS WOULD BE AN AGE WITHOUT PROGRESS

What is the position of the “new” in art? Its effect is well known to the man of today, it is a superficial effect of modernism. There is indeed in contemporary life a cult of the new, in the press, in literature, in film, advertising, sports, etc. These manifestations that present themselves in chaotic form and accompanied by the most vulgar, the cruelest and most aberrant images are condemned by religion, by morality and by reason. We, on the other hand, do not condemn *a priori*, but seek to understand out of simple curiosity; a curiosity that shuts off in those who enjoy these emotions. This desire for sensations is thus formulated in terms of pure knowledge, to the exclusion of all moral judgement.

The sensational and unanticipated surprise effect, what we call shock, can be provoked in an extremely primitive way with a little violence and through unusual impressions of light, color or sound. We have long known that effects of this kind can be used to treat certain psychic states. Normal people also need such violent shocks, every bit as much, to restore their vitality. The surrealists have already demonstrated the importance of the shock effect in the arts. Here it is a matter of abnormal states, of more complex phenomena brought on by exceptional and aggressive situations. We are dealing with a very important phenomenon in the arts, and which the classic scholarship ignores. This explains the widespread popularity of every form of the fantasy genre in modern popular art, but more importantly it allows us to establish a new objective systematization of aesthetics, which surpasses the studies of harmony and classical beauty. The conclusion of this formulation is that the ugly (meaning that which strikes us) is at the basis of our true aesthetics. When we overcome the state of unawareness and total ignorance, we enter the field of the partial knowledge of things: and this is precisely the vast field of artistic activity.

The feeling of being stunned and surprised by novelty transforms, in the presence of things whose representation is already partly known, into a surface feeling of admiration or disdain, tragic or comedic, but always different between the spectator and the creative

activity of the artist; this distinction gradually diminishes as the art becomes ever more obvious. Thus we arrive at the poetic peak, the moment at which the work of art fuses with popular sentiment, and the drama of the emotion becomes poetry.

Feeling cannot find itself hemmed in by a “will to discovery that knows no bounds and the power of reasoning”, because *feeling is the will to discovery*. Discoveries, inventions do not owe their existence to logical reasoning, because the only basis for logical reasoning is existing reality. Evolution is driven by desires, *imaginary* aims, dreams, longings, strong feelings and emotion: “The new – always the new” — this is the form that guides evolution.

### BEAUTY ONLY EXISTS BY VIRTUE OF UGLINESS

The truly “new” is abominable because abnormal and irrational. Ugliness is no less rare than beauty. The truly “new”, this is the unknown, the unknowable, chaos, ugliness. Ugliness decreases or shifts ground as our knowledge spreads; the same is true for beauty. Nothing is perfect except at first sight. Aesthetics is the ugliness-beauty antinomy. The opposite of aesthetics is boredom. The attractive and positive tension implies a complementary tension that is repulsive and negative. If you want to get rid of ugliness you have to get rid of beauty too; nothing remains but the neutral state, the boring or non-aesthetic state. An autonomous aesthetics cannot emerge from just studying beauty, only the ugliness-beauty antinomy. The architects want simply to eliminate the aesthetic side of our problem, to base everything on morality, *but morality only exists by virtue of aesthetics*.

An autonomous ethics cannot emerge from just studying the good. It must be based on a study of the evil-good antinomy. Ugliness is an evil but a sovereign beauty is too. All aesthetic activity, that is every tendency towards renewal, should be seen as a perpetual sin from the moral point of view. If you don't accept this intrinsic opposition within morality, there will be neither good nor evil, but only the neutral state.

### AESTHETICS PRECEDES ETHICS

“In the beginning there was the deed”, Goethe says. Evil, the senseless act, the pure act, is older than the sensible and rational act. Thus evil precedes the good. Where morality starts, there its opposite, aesthetics, starts too.

Hence *evolution is a perpetual anomaly*. What already exists and continues to exist represents that which man calls the *normal, the rational and the necessary*. What has never existed can obviously not be considered normal or necessary. *Every renewal occurs moving from the particular to the common*. The “new” is necessarily a *rarity, an oddity, an anomaly, a particularity*.

To avoid the abnormal, to destroy the particular, is to stop evolution, that perpetual rupture with morality. It is variety that sets the theme. It is the exception that makes the new rule.

*Only feelings make you think*. It is in *excitement, emotion, passion and ecstasy*, that even Van de Velde expresses his first judgement of cultural and artistic value, *and not in neutrality*.

To live in a society from which the fantasies that dominate certain of our activities had been excluded would be to lead a sclerotic and mechanical life. It is our desires and our fantasies, our dreams, that make us lie. *Lies are truths about humanity's future possibilities*.

A lie is an expression that contradicts existing reality. Everything there is that is new is at first taken for a lie, a deception, and can be distinguished from other deceptions only by virtue of experiences that will later establish its *probability*, and transform it into real truth. Evolution is a drama, a perpetual struggle, and *the hardships are the price of progress*.

### EVOLUTION IS SENSATIONAL AND NOT RATIONAL

The power of the sensational is the power of fermentations, the apparently imaginary forces that act like the yeast in bread, adding nothing, except the superficial, that which will transform the compact mass into countless surfaces: the distinctive, radiant power of existence. The distraction created by sensational tensions transforms the thing provoking our sensations into a phenomenon at once monstrous and marvelous, enormous and diffuse, real in the sharpest sense of the word, and at the same time fantastic and unreal.

The sensational or modernism is not a superficial and insignificant phenomenon separate from real, profound culture. It is the very process of cultural creation, whose results once clarified belong to us definitively. Our era does not lack for the sensational, but we are no longer capable of employing the sensational process as a *cultural method*: either we resist it in the name of objectivity or we use it to draw the most immediate advantages of public attention. Culture in general is no longer a sensational field. Culture no longer takes place in a situation, because we can only speak of situation where there is an event, and an act only becomes an event at the moment it is able to trigger sensation.

*Only the fantastic can bring reasoning to life*. A life completely rationalized and ordered puts our intelligence to sleep, replaced by routine, automatic and somnambulant reflexes. Intelligence and creative thinking ignite upon encountering *the unknown, the accident, disorder, the absurd and impossible*. *Intelligence means making the impossible possible, making known things unknown*.

FIN

### 3. CRITIQUE OF THE CONCLUSIONS OF THE ARTIST/THEORIST ASGER JORN

When Debord promoted Jorn's book by commenting on a publication of extracts from it in the Dutch review *Museum-Journal* (vol.4, no4, October 1958: "Dix Années d'art expérimental: Jorn et son rôle dans l'invention théorique"), he qualified his evaluation carefully:

"Jorn's merit, while many others promptly satisfied themselves with the semi-results of rather poor programs, was to pursue a critique that grew ever more radical. Thus he was able, at the same time he was revindicating a total experimental action, to formulate the fundamental question of a new avant-garde: 'Where and how to find a place for the artist at this stage of world development?' ...

The following extracts from *Pour la forme*, brief and chosen from a rather large book, are necessarily chaotic. But we're dealing here with the most confused period ever, and the effort for change in this period did not go without confusion."<sup>9</sup>

The clarity in Jorn's theory consisted in recouping a whole dimension of human value lost in modernism's abdication of the aesthetic in favor of the functional, as it had previously been suppressed in the lop-sided aesthetics of beauty only. The confusion resided in the vagueness of the notion of aliveness (vitality) his shock aesthetics was intended to restore. If the relative lucidity and well-being of the 1950s was a sleep, to what, for what, was one to be awoken? On the basis of what aliveness could one still argue that wakefulness was better than sleep?

Without clarity on this, an aesthetics that restores ugliness to its position at the generative pole of an experiential antinomy merely doubles the opportunities for a pointless impressionism. Where efforts to change fundamental social models have so spectacularly failed, sensation for novelties's sake, or for the sake of a smelling-salts sort of efficacy, has little to recommend it as theory over *l'art pour l'art*. Jorn acknowledges this lostness when he says his age lacked the tactical know-how for applying "the sensational process as a cultural method." But to the clear logic of his own call for a method, he can respond in this essay only with the restatement of certain surrealist vagueries about the power of fantasy and the irrational.

#### INNOVATION AND OUR IDEAS ON ARCHITECTURE

The most elegant games of the intellect mean nothing to us. Political economy, love and urbanism are the means we must control for the resolution of a problem that is first of all ethical.

Nothing can excuse life from being absolutely impassioning.  
We know how this is done.<sup>10</sup>

The Situationist International (SI) was formed with the explicit aim of overcoming the confusions it saw plaguing all brands of post-war avant-gardism. Nearly a generation younger than Jorn, Debord and the French situationists had entered the stream at a later moment, initially through the Lettrism of Isidore Isou. To others had fallen the task of reactivating the avant-garde impulse after the trauma done to cultural resistance movements by the war, and both the new efforts and the working models of the past were easier to evaluate. Already Isou had seen that any renewal of a vital avant-gardism would require correcting the wrong turn represented by Surrealism and its hermetic drift. Where Jorn invokes Futurism, whose development directly anchored the rise of commodity design aesthetics, Isou reaches back to the less compromised negativities of DADA, before Tzara, that is, fellow Romanian, lost the thread of it in Paris. Like Tzara and Breton in the 20s, Isou assumed the next step was a "positive" Dadaism<sup>11</sup>, a positive he saw paired with the negative in a dialectic ensuring perpetual creativity and renewal in the arts. Despite the rhetoric of heated intentions, however, this dialectic failed its anarchist inspirations by lodging to spin strictly in the realm of formal innovation (letter poems, letter paintings, *discrepant* cinema, etc), abdicating its tractions on the social whole beyond art. Despite the real disturbance value of some actions in the early years (public disruptions by Isou or Michel Mourre, or the impact of films by Isou, Wolman and Debord – real *coups* in the aesthetics of ugliness), what Isou finally made of the Dada seed culture he had appropriated amounted to little more than an innovation industry of avant-gardist art forms.

Isou's Dada revival amounted oddly to a new cult of the new that effectively collapsed much of the distance separating the Dada impulse from the Constructivist ethos of late Futurism. Though thoroughly non-productive in an industrial sense and (mostly) anti-beauty in its aesthetics, the movement Alain Satié proposed rebranding as *hyper-novotisme* ultimately established itself by assimilating to the same market logic that had turned the experimental Bauhaus into an engine of corporate advancement. In Satié's words: "To subsist, political, artistic or economic systems must bend to the will of innovation; their continued success depends on their determination to promote it."<sup>12</sup>

Neo-futurist adoption of industrial means as expressive media, or a Dada industriousness to keep pace with the commodity production cycles; Debord for one saw the non-choice in the art alternatives uncovered by Jorn and Isou respectively. Determination to promote innovation, though it matches the dominant (Greenbergian) conception of that age, is not a definition of the avant-garde Debord would have recognized. It is rather the essence of an experimentalist agenda he was busy denouncing – at the same time Jorn was reexamining his own version of this agenda in *Pour la forme* – as a neurotic

distraction at the heart of Lettrist practice: “vertiginously accelerated evolution spinning its wheels, in evident rupture with all human needs”.<sup>13</sup>

When Debord and the “Ultra-Lettrists” broke away from Isou in 1952, it was to escape the trap Lettrism had (re)set for its own radicality. Dedicated to staying in the game, Lettrism could be nearly apocalyptic in formal terms, while its positioning as an art movement kept it socially harmless. The secessionists, on the other hand, were interested in a different kind of innovation, researching ways to break through the thickening glass wall holding avant-garde action off from a real social impact. They were not developing new art forms but rather modes of cultural engagement that could escape the specific gravity of art as a separated sphere, and gain real purchase on the form-giving and form-shattering of everyday life. “Novelty,” wrote Debord just before he and Wolman joined with Jorn and others to pursue this breakthrough as the SI, “now depends entirely on a leap to a higher level.”<sup>14</sup>

Architecture emerged as the transition field, quickly identified as the arena of aesthetic intervention with the greatest potential to affect daily life: “Architecture is the simplest means of articulating time and space, of modulating reality, of engendering dreams.”<sup>15</sup> Ivan Chitchevlov’s seminal “Formulary for a New Urbanism” (1953) was itself still full of surrealist residues, picturing the city as a canvas for projecting the atmospheres of a Di Chirico or a Paul Delvaux at life size, but it introduced psychogeography and the *dérive* as experimental practices that would anchor a critical evolution transcending these beginnings. It was the project of a “unitary urbanism” that brought Jorn to the ultra-lettrists, along with Constant who would become the architect of the SI until architecture was abandoned. As Jorn writes, architecture was the natural place to start precisely because it was the art form that had come to exclude artists. It was art taken over into everyday life, shaping it within the real weather of economic and technocratic forces. It was the outside of art, joined by a back door artists naturally imagined they might one day sneak out through.

This illusory hope was one that the American avant-garde would encounter ten or twenty years later. After various efforts to move out of the “white cube” and into the “literal” environment, many progressive artists of the late 60’s and 70’s were seduced by the prospect of taking a role in the design of public spaces, primarily through public art and art in architecture funds set up by the major granting agencies. The disappointment many of these artists experienced at finding their role as artists subordinated to the priorities of developers and the authority of architects only confirms the instinct that guided the situationists away from any such entanglements before they could begin. By 1960 Attila Kotányi, a key situationist critic of urbanism, was acknowledging that the project of “unitary urbanism” would remain a meaningless fiction until people in general could influence the legislative process that continued to assign all power over public space to a small class of professional insiders. And as a group the situationists were

sophisticated enough to understand that the barriers to any citizen’s control over the built environment were as structurally basic to the reigning political economy as were the general powerlessness with regards to use of the media or to the organization of labor and free time. This understanding, central to the deepening political critique of their maturing psychogeography, soon brought the SI to a more total rejection of cultural activity than they had started from. Fearing a collapse into avant-gardist play with an edgy and ambitious new medium (à la Constant, who advisedly excluded himself in 1960), the SI formally repudiated architecture and design, along with more conventional art practices, in favor of the revolutionary theory and organizing they viewed as prior to any possibilities for real change.

If an avant-garde questions the very importance of life, and seeks to realize its revindications on this terrain, it finds itself separated from all the social possibilities. The avant-garde’s aesthetic by-products, for example its paintings, films, poems, [and, one should add, its architectural drawings and models A.P.] ... — are immediately in demand, but they are without effect. What is not acceptable is the program of the formation of entirely new conditions of life that will change society fundamentally.”<sup>16</sup>

The situationists’ ultimate rejection of artistic activity was a gordian-knot solution to an entanglement Jorn and Isou were not oriented to escape. It is natural to see this as a refusal of art in favor of politics, but it is just as much a radicalization of the artistic concepts of invention and the new, evolving and deploying a revolutionary theory in the interest of finding where and how actual, meaningful novelty might be accomplished. Revolution in this view would be a resolution of the primary ethical problem rendering all current art production unjustified. It would also amount to the next possible and only valid artistic innovation, simultaneously a penetration of creative (cultural) agency into the separated sphere of the everyday, and a liberation of art as a valid human endeavor or by virtue of abolishing that separation. This is the meaning of the situationist slogan “not poetry at the service of the revolution, but revolution at the service of poetry”<sup>17</sup>.

#### SITUATIONAL BEAUTY AND EVOLUTION

*I scarcely know of anything but those two harbors at dusk painted by Claude Lorraine – which are at the Louvre and which juxtapose two extremely dissimilar urban ambiances – that can rival in beauty the Paris metro maps. It will be understood that in speaking here of beauty I don’t have in mind plastic beauty—the new beauty can only be a beauty of situation—but simply the particularly moving presentation, in both cases, of a sum of possibilities.*

—Guy Debord

The idea of aliveness that animated the SI was far more articulated, if not always more concrete, than the vague “vitality” referred to by Jorn in his essay. It was carefully nurtured by Debord and his friends as simultaneously the memory and the myth of a youth intensely lived, in particular the summers of 1952 and 1953 in the streets and bars of St. Germain. Preserved most lyrically in the found poetry of Debord and Jorn’s collage work, *Mémoires* (1953)<sup>18</sup>, the real romance of these years of drunkenness, love and drifting would be lastingly referred to as the source and aim of situationist striving. It is equally present as the constant, silent counter-example of authentic living that anchored Debord’s analysis of alienation, most notably in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). The spectacle is precisely what renders wakefulness indistinguishable from sleep, and aliveness in the situationist vision is the state of wakefulness that emerges when the spectacle is thrown off.

The situationist rejection of art does not reflect the same inversion of aesthetic values espoused by Jorn. Many commentators have observed how classical Debord ultimately is in his tastes and values. The anti-aesthetics of the situationists is not against beauty in favor of ugliness, though trashing the acquired tastes of commodity culture and assaulting its grounding “idea of happiness” were daily labor for the SI. It is rather in favor of a truer, more dynamic and participatory beauty, one reflected in the reframing of the notion from formal perception to situational awareness and engagement. And given the revolutionary agenda that motivated the SI, situationist aesthetics is also not about returning sensation to the position reason had usurped from it in the modernist drama Jorn’s essay narrates. The *revolution* was about restoring lived experience – passion and sensation – to a central position in the value system, but the aesthetic agenda evolved to further that was itself eminently rational, even functionalist. The one mode of art the SI never rejected, *détournement*, was valued and evaluated entirely on the basis of its possible efficacies, efficacies aimed at tapping the human passions put to sleep by the spectacle, but which required rational critique and calibration to the contemporary moment. And the larger notion of cultural agency into which the SI’s early identification as artists was sublimated as the group radicalized politically – a threshold agency often referred to today as cultural activism – was formulated in similarly goal-oriented terms. Creative work as the situationists rededicated it shifted from the production of artworks to the cultivation and triggering of situations, with the tipping-point of a self-organizing world revolution being the extreme masterpiece against which all more modest actions could be judged.

Identifying beauty with the presentation of possibilities is already a classic notion. It parallels the evolutionary theory by which taste is based on the perceptual coding of features that support survival. Grassy planes with scattered shade trees and access to fresh water make the most beautiful landscapes because early hominids came to identify these features with safety and abundance. A certain eye color or cut of the jaw, a certain roundness of the breasts or buttocks are attractive to someone because they carry the

promise of healthy offspring, or of the survival and evolution of certain genes. The beauty of a graffiti seen in the middle of a street fight, reading “beneath the paving stones the beach”, or of an action that turns a busy traffic intersection into a crowded dance party, is similarly a beauty based on certain possibilities for survival or evolution. And in a critical appraisal this beauty can be rated according to how far it goes towards actualizing those possibilities. The theory of recuperation plays into this aesthetics here, as a critical term for assessing the die-off of real possibilities in a given gesture or action as the contextualizing situation evolves, regardless of how personally gratifying the gesture or action remains. And as an answer to how artists at the current stage of world development can not only avoid but in fact work to reverse the complicities of their modernist forebears in that very development, the situationist aesthetics confronts recuperation as its principle challenge and hence as the primary and necessary engine of innovation.

#### SENSATION AND THE AESTHETICS OF ANY NEW UTOPIA

Our era does not lack for the sensational, but we are no longer capable of employing the sensational process as a *cultural method*.

—Jorn

When the students, workers and agitators of France seemed close to accomplishing the situationist masterpiece and then failed, with the recuperation of the revolutionary momentum they had mustered in the Spring of ’68, the horizon of possibilities underlying this situationist aesthetics was eclipsed. Whether permanently or temporarily remains a matter for debate. For over twenty years from its disbanding in 1972, the situationist project itself seemed on its way to being forgotten outside of France, as something less than a point on the map of 20<sup>th</sup> Century avant-gardism. The surprise return and flourishing of situationist-inspired cultural activism since the mid-1990’s, however, has shown that these currents in fact persist, forming the base for dominant modes of experimental action in the cultural sphere today. Social and political developments since the early 70’s have both confirmed and evolved the situationist analysis, the phenomena of spectacular power have grown more universally apparent, and situationist critiques and tactics have re-emerged as important points of departure for a broad renewal of contestatory cultural practice. Over the same time period, however, political analysis of world developments has seriously shaken faith in confrontational action of any kind. Where the energy resumes to apply these critiques and tactics in the age of neo-liberal globalization, we are again living a moment when the legacy of renewal in the arts, and hence the possible place for the artist in the social dynamic, require fundamental reexamining.

The popular success of a group like the Yes Men, whose interventionist media stunts<sup>19</sup> draw cheers from contemporaries eager to see corporate power challenged on the

grounds of its own spectacle, or of a graffiti artist like Banksy whose masterpiece street stencilling and museum attacks replay many situationist themes, show both the vitality and, by situationist standards, the already-deadness of oppositional gestures that have been allowed the leisure of perfecting themselves as artworks. The more sustained and theoretically serious contributions of Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) and other tactical media projects since the early 90's, for their part, show how robustly an analysis begun with the situationists is being furthered in new terms to keep abreast of the spectacle's own rapid evolution. And yet by CAE's own admission, this analysis has had to develop in the absence of any vision of feasible change that would renew the horizon of possibilities. That horizon may not be completely dark, and indeed the general philosophical defeatism that reigned in the 90's (power, having abstracted itself beyond state structures into a condition of liquescence, is now not only overwhelming, it is unconfontable<sup>20</sup>) has loosened a little. The moment of undeniable (if momentary) beauty that took place in Seattle in 1999 contributed to this, and developments in emergent social organizing in South America keep many people hoping. Still, however, the point and purpose of critical art activities today remain seriously in doubt, without an earnest of social transformation that would underwrite their beauty with a little more hope.

Jorn's essay on the cult of the new in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century represents a pivotal moment of confusion and hesitation, between outdated models of experimentalism from the early modern avant-garde and what was soon to emerge, with Jorn's support, as a vital new project of cultural action in an age that had lost the thread and sense of experimentalism as anything beyond technical or commercial innovation. His urgency to retrace the logic by which the total opening of aesthetic options in modernism had collapsed into the promiseless certainties of an industrial rationalism had to do with the urgency radical artists of his day felt to understand on what basis new directions could be evaluated and pursued. More particularly, it concerned the need to understand how the creative oppositionality of earlier movements could escape the marginalization they suffered with the solidification of art as a spectacularly separate sphere, segregated off from design and planning where the concrete impacts were possible. As I have argued, Jorn's conclusions on the possibility for renewing creative production in this context were but confusedly in line with the situationist trajectory he would soon commit to. But that trajectory having (permanently or temporarily) played itself out as a revolutionary paradigm with concrete possibilities, his conclusions may yet contain an important pointer toward a new "new" for radical art.

A basic premise of the defeatism that has plagued radical art and politics since the twenties has been the observation that successful revolutions merely reinstate the same in another form. The situationists revalidated hopes for radical change partly by espousing the anarchist principle that a society of alienation cannot be overturned using alienated means<sup>21</sup>. In other words ends are poisoned by their means, and unless the

modes of life and behavior desired of a revolution are pervasively symptomatic of the events that bring it about, the change accomplished is no change. Real innovation beyond the situationist moment, and in line with the avant-garde impulse that refuses separations between art and everyday life, is forced back to a challenge more primary and fundamental than transforming society: transforming humanity. On these grounds, of course, the defeatism is only more entrenched, and yet it seems reasonable to conclude that "the program of the formation of entirely new conditions of life that will change society fundamentally" lacks a certain leverage, and that that leverage can only come with "a leap to a higher level", or rather to a deeper one.

The exploratory aesthetics Jorn hints at at the end of his essay is focussed on sensation as a path to fundamental discoveries into the human, and as a vector of therapeutic leverage for restoring deadened faculties. As a theme this remained entangled for him with the Surrealist mystifications he was trying to escape, and as a project it ran counter to the situationist project that finally made that escape possible for him. The situationist project, despite its real valorization of pleasure and desire, and its constant appeal to these as motivators of revolutionary action<sup>22</sup>, did not view sensation or the body as a strategic front in the struggle for social transformation. And yet, today, in a phase of late capitalism characterized by the ascendancy of cognitive science and biotech, a new horizon of possibilities can perhaps be discerned, based in part on sensation and aiming for the transformation of the human. As with previous revolutions in communications and manufacturing, this horizon of possibilities has already been heavily staked by the sectors of industrial rational-ism best positioned to capitalize on the new margins of organismic performance (enhanced consumption and production capacities) it offers for extraction from the human.

Critical Art Ensemble deserve credit for keeping the spotlight of situationist-informed critique trained on the dissembling and terrible emergences at this horizon,<sup>23</sup> but in their case this does not correspond to a "cultural method" whereby possibilities latent in human embodiment could be mobilized against existing conditions. To see in Jorn's urging towards a "sensational" evolutionary process more than the sign of an incompletely repressed surrealism we must manage what Jorn was never able to, namely to conceive of an experimentalism that could take the project of sensory awareness as seriously as the situationists took the project of social analysis and organizing. It is hardly obvious, beyond a facile appeal to hedonic practices as somehow inherently subversive, what sensation might have to offer in the way of revolutionary cultural strategy. Yet, in an integrated framework, from the perspective of a rich psychology of emergence that locates the sensory near the source of complexifying streams determining perception, thought-patterning and person-formation, it becomes at least imaginable how one might begin strategizing a "sensational" intervention into the fundamental configuring of human nature, and so into the fundamental potentials of social functioning.

The *Reversible Destiny* project of Arakawa and Madeline Gins represents an experimentalism and a cultural method of this sort, and interestingly one that returns us to architecture as the arena of greatest potential impact in transforming humanity. Though superficially the focus on disorienting and labyrinthine architecture would seem the only point in common between Reversible Destiny and the situationist project, (most specifically the early formulations of “unitary urbanism” and Constant’s New Babylon designs), the scale of Arakawa and Gins’ project and the radicality of its claims ultimately demand comparison with the SI<sup>24</sup>. By a somatic-architectural methodology probably unimaginable to Debord, though not entirely so to the Jorn of *Pour la forme*, Reversible Destiny targets, to détourne Debord’s words, “the formation of entirely new conditions of life that will change society fundamentally”. It does so from an analysis of the constituting dynamics of perceived reality and embodied personhood, applying the therapeutic/reconfigurative potentials of sensation toward a shift in human nature that Arakawa and Gins would see as necessarily prior to any possibility for fundamental social change. Bold and relentless where Jorn was tentative and ultimately redirected, Arakawa and Gins are seeking to mobilize an environmental counter-aesthetics of “ugliness”<sup>25</sup> and shock, not for a mere provisional “aliveness”, but utopianly for a boundless and literal life without end. While from the SI’s cultural and historical perspective, as from that of most current cultural activism, the project would be hard to recognize as anything but retrograde and off the terrain of contestatory social action, Reversible Destiny in fact occupies the higher ground of a deeper interventionism, informed by a more essential materialism, more radical along a completely different scale of radicalism, and amounting to the only real innovation in artistic effort since at least the SI.

#### Notes

1. Asger Jorn, *Pour la forme: Ébauche d'une méthodologie des Arts*. Paris: Éditions Allia, 2001.
2. Guy Debord, Gil J. Wolman, “Methods of Detournement”, in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. trans. Ken Knabb. Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981: p.8. Originally: “Détournement, mode d'emploi”, in *Les Lèvres Nues* #8, May 1956.
3. A young surrealist, Christian Dotremont, who had spent some strange days on the outskirts of Dunkirk, playing pool against himself in an empty tavern, alone under the bombardment of the English army, on entering a few years later the hall of the surrealist exposition in Paris could see André Breton seeking to stupefy visitors to the exhibition by playing a game of billiards by himself. It was the end of surrealism.
4. The French word means equally: “experience”.
5. COBRA for Copenhagen, Bruxelles, Amsterdam, where its three founders Asger Jorn, Christian Dotremont and Constant (Nieuwenhuis) respectively, resided.
6. Henry Van de Velde, Pages de Doctrine, *cahiers d'architecture et d'urbanisme*. Bruxelles, 1942.
7. Another of the essays in Jorn’s *Pour la forme*.
8. Page numbers supplied by Jorn, referring to *Pages de Doctrine*.
9. *Pour la forme*: 7.
10. *Potlatch 1954/1957: Bulletin d'information du groupe français de l'Internationale lettriste*. Paris: Éditions Allia, 1996. (my translations)
11. Isou showed up in Paris in 1945 with the manuscript of *Introduction à une nouvelle poésie et à une nou-*

- vell musique*, and used nagging and public disruptions to get Gallimard to finally publish it in 1947.
12. Alain Satié, *Le lettrisme, la création ininterrompue*, Paris: Jean-Paul Rocher, 2003: 14. Also see Isidore Isou, *La Créatique ou la Novatique* (1941 -1976), Editions Al Dante et Léo Scheer, avec le concours de Nodal Consultants, 2003.
  13. Debord, “Pourquoi le lettrisme?”, *Potlatch* #22, Sep. 9, 1955: 97.
  14. Guy Debord, “Encore un effort si vous voulez être situationnistes”, *Potlatch* #29, Nov. 5, 1957: 29.
  15. Ivan Chtcheglov, “Formulary for a New Urbanism”, *Situationist International Anthology*, p.2.
  16. *IS 6*, p. 39/237 “Renseignements Situationnistes”.
  17. Collective, “All the King’s Men”, *Situationist International Anthology*: 116.
  18. Guy Debord, Asger Jorn, “Mémoires”, Paris: Internationale Situationniste, 1953. Reprinted by Éditions Allia, 1994. For an invaluable exegesis and commentary, see Boris Donné, *Pour Mémoires*, Paris: Éditions Allia, 2004.
  19. Their latest stunt took place as recently as this past June at the Calgary Gas and Oil Expo. For the story, see: <http://www.canada.com/nationalpost/financialpost/story.html?id=20ee8637-9bd1-4ed3-b0d8-4e14ea4d035b&k=41943>
  20. Critical Art Ensemble, *The Electronic Disturbance*, New York: Autonomedia, 1994.
  21. For the most thorough examinations of the situationists’ revolutionary theory to date, see Pascal Dumontier, *Les situationnistes et mai ,68 : théories et pratique de la révolution (1966-1972)*, Paris: Gérard Lebovici (coll. Champs libres), 1990, and Biene Baumeister and Zwi Negator, *Situationistische Revolutionstheorie*, Stuttgart: Schmetterling Verlag, 2005.
  22. As an example we can take the detoured erotic postcards the SI sent to Spain in 1964 to inspire worker uprisings against the Franco regime; in one a naked young woman swoons “AAAAHHH!!! L’INTERNATIONALE SITUATIONNISTE!!!”, in another “The emancipation of the workers will be their own doing.”
  23. See, e.g. *The Flesh Machine* (1998) and *The Cult of the New Eve* (2000) at <http://www.critical-art.net/>. The media portion of the *Flesh Machine* project involves a spoof biotech firm called BioCOM, under the slogan: “Building a better organic platform.” One poster for the firm reads: “Creating superior labor one worker at a time”.
  24. For more on this see my review of Gins’ and Arakawa’s latest book, *Making Dying Illegal*, in this volume. Also to be taken seriously here is Jean-Jacques LeCercle’s comment, in the introduction to that book, likening the authors to the Marx and Engels of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
  25. Ugliness here in the sense of counter to taste and expectations of sensory reward and comfort.