

Book Reviews: *With and Against: The Situationist International in the Age of Automation* by Dominique Routhier

With and Against: The Situationist International in the Age of Automation by Dominique Routhier. London and New York: Verso, 2023, 258 pp, £17.99, ISBN 9781804292556.

With and Against extensively and originally foregrounds the lengths that Situationist International (SI) movement went in its effort to avoid the recuperation of revolutionary conditions by the state and capitalist forces in the camps of art, politics and everyday life. Co-optation of any degree and complicity were notably out of the question for the situationists, which is why they always strived to actively detach from fellow artistic, intellectual and political efforts that signaled any form of compromise. At the same time, however, the SI's response, frequently in the form of various practices of *détournement*, always kept them firmly grounded in the everyday struggles of their times. Thus, irrespective of the indifferent and withdrawn posture they would assume, in the end they found themselves at the very centre of the event or discussion they initially refused to participate in. In this context, by way of examining a set of 'ephemeral traces', including a flyer, an urban vision, an experimental book, as well as a poster, the text uniquely charts the evolution of the situationists' response to the 'cybernetic hypothesis' in the post-war nascent age of automation (p. 243). More specifically, how the situationists sought to fight the dangers of recuperation and rethink strategies of resistance with and against the progress of technology. The book moves from the days of the SI's predecessor, the Letterist International, to the eventual foundation of the situationist movement in 1957, up until their infamous participation in events that lead up to May '68. The former Letterist days and beginnings of the movement are representative of an ambivalent period, in which an initial skeptical response to the merging of art and cybernetics is morphed into a 'secret fascination' (p. 79). The ambiguity is sustained around the publication of the experimental book, *Fin de Copenhague*, the same year the SI was founded. The author points to an eventual turn in the 1960s where the situationist response to cybernetic technology becomes decisively critical and political in nature.

The 'history of contestation' (p.32) outlined in the book thusly points to the dual nature of a typical situationist response, which is that of simultaneously detaching and actively resisting. Guy Debord's own lifestyle is notably emblematic of this duality. In *Panegyric*, a text that blends autobiography, cultural critique, and political analysis, Debord distinctly takes pride in describing his indifference towards norms and societal expectations: "Never to have given more than very slight attention to questions of money, and absolutely none to the ambition of holding some brilliant post in society..." (Debord, 2004:12-13). As attested by his involvement in the SI, however, Debord's indifferent attitude does not stem from simple apathy or passivity, but is rather an active choice to withdraw and create novel situations. The *Ordre de Boycott* incident in 1956, which is the subject of the first chapter, similarly highlights an attitude of refusal and withdrawal in the form of an antagonistic paper tract directed at the *Cité Radieuse* avant-grade art festival. Taking their cue from earlier avant-garde practices, namely by the recuperated Dada and surrealist movements, the burgeoning situationists were opposing what they perceived as an institutionalised artistic attempt that seldom differed from the cybernetic forward *modus operandi* of the French reconstruction

economy. However, the tide was to change rather quickly. In the second chapter, the author points to a ‘secret fascination’ with scientific progress’, signaling a more open, if only brief, stance that the movement adopted towards the possibilities afforded by technology (p.77). Notwithstanding the heightened sensitivity shown towards the issue of recuperation, the SI did proclaim ‘a race between free artists and the police to experiment with and develop the use of the new technologies of conditioning’ (p. 83-84). Moreover, the theory of ‘unitary urbanism’, described as ‘the synthesis we call for, incorporating arts and technologies’, was set in motion to explicitly and specifically counter Le Corbusier ideas regarding modern space and living (p. 85). However, short-lived urban visionary projects such as *New Babylon* by Constant Nieuwenhuys —co-opted in part by the present day Saudi kingdom with the proposed construction of the sprawling linear city of Neom — perhaps is a reminder that deep down the situationists were never fully at ease with not withdrawing to some degree and accelerate ahead on the same terrain of the ‘enemy’ instead.

The signature ‘with and against’ strategy unearthed throughout the book comes back to the fold in the context of the publication of Asger Jorn and Debord’s experimental ‘anti-book’, *Fin de Copenhague* in 1957 (p. 130). A prime example of a minor *détournement* in its own right, the book represents a more conflicting position vis-à-vis technology. Situating it somewhere between El Lissitzky’s rethinking of the book medium and Walter Benjamin’s rethinking of art, the author points to a ‘deeply anomalous’ attempt at breaking free from the neo-avantgardist moment from within (p. 132). Yet beyond art, *Fin de Copenhague* also represents a deeper critique of automation, especially in the specific context of work and its future. It is safe to argue that the situationists did not see a clear way forward when it came to the subject of the automation of work. Furthermore, they were rather discontent with fellow left-wing proposals to socialize the means of production. Jorn ([1958] 2006) came closest to articulating a theoretical solution to the socialist impasse in his 1958 essay, “The Situationists and Automation”, which implied complementing technological development with the harnessing of new forms of creative existence, or in Foucault’s Nietzschean terms, ‘art as a way of life.’ ‘The point is to produce ourselves rather than things that enslave us’, Debord ([1958] 2006) concurs in another essay from the first issue of the SI’s journal (p. 53). However, as Debord (1978) would have it some twenty years later: ‘Theories are made only to die in the war of time’. Strategising never stops for the situationists, which explains the displacement of their critique from the avant-garde to radical politics in the turbulent 1960s.

In the build-up to May ’68, the SI assumed a more critical stance towards the progression of cybernetics. In this respect, Routhier’s final chapter offers one of the most in-depth accounts of the planning and execution of the University of Strasbourg incident in 1966, which involved in a scathing attack on prominent cybernetician Abraham Moles. Moreover, the multimodal analysis of the 1968 student poster on the walls of the University of Nanterre continues to shed light on how the overlooked question of cybernetics was at the very core of the SI’s preoccupations with the domination and control of counter-revolutionary forces in and around May. A persistent tacit theme throughout the book is the destituent nature of the SI’s struggles against power. Conceivably, due to the omnipresent importance given to the problem of recuperation, the situationists disdained power and remained extremely cautious of the prospect of setting a new one in its stead. ‘The victory will go to those who are capable of creating disorder without loving it’, Debord ([1958] 2006) exclaimed early on (p. 54). One wonders if the situationists foresaw the writing on the wall with regards to the accelerated progress of technology and the extensive role it came to play in sustaining

and dispersing techniques of power. Certainly, when looking back on the evolution of the spectacle, Debord (1990) acknowledged ‘the new system of domination’ flourished through the technological means that it popularised (p. 27). Still, his post-situationist approach to cinematic production, notably challenging from a viewer perspective, can be read as a persistent way to sabotage the technology of mediating images. This unparalleled persistence in coming up with strategic weapons for further struggles is what ultimately *With and Against* unravels so beautifully, which at this timely juncture is nothing short of a reminder that the fight against unbridled progress must go on.

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