

## **'La Culture est l' Inversion de la Vie'**

**Frances Stracey, *Constructed Situations: A New History of the Situationist International*, London: Pluto, 2014**

**By Antigoni Memou**

Frances Stracey's *Constructed Situations: A New History of the Situationist International* published by Pluto in 2014 is a radical re-examination of the Situationist International's revolutionary ideas and their translation into culture. In contrast to the overemphasis on the concept of the spectacle (and Guy Debord's seminal book *The Society of the Spectacle* published in 1967) in both the art historical and media studies literature, this new book reconstructs the Situationist International's (thereafter SI) lived moments of collective, anti-hierarchical, ephemeral and interventionist actions, known as 'constructed situations.' The outcome is not a linear historical narrative of the SI's practice, but a rich and stimulating account of their 'constructed situations', as processes that abolished any divisions between art, politics, theory and life. This effort to revive the interconnection of art and politics, which was central to the Situationist practice throughout the group's short life from 1957 to 1972, is absolutely fundamental, given that previous accounts of the SI have frequently imposed a forced dichotomy between their artistic activity and their theoretical outcomes. In other cases, the SI's history has been wrongly separated into a pre-1962 period, which is seen as a period of artistic production, and a phase after their split in 1962, when supposedly theory came to replace artistic activity. These misconceptions may partly derive from the enormous difficulty in re-imagining the utopian elements of the SI's avant-garde ambition to achieve a revolution through the collapse of art into life. What Stracey has admirably achieved in this account is to keep this amalgamation of art and politics alive throughout the book.

In order to achieve this, the author situates the SI within a genealogy of twentieth century avant-garde projects aiming at social revolution, from Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism to Lettrism and CoBrA. At the same time, she places them in dialogue with a long radical tradition, which brought together anti-hierarchical principles, the critique of leadership and the Party and was actualised in Left social experiments such as the Paris Commune and the workers' councils, as well as with the theoretical critique of the subsumption of all social relations under capitalism that extended Marx's notion of commodity fetishism and Lukács's writings on reification. The account also historicises the group's activities within the post-war consumer societies of the 1950s and 1960s, which is also crucial in providing a deep understanding of the reified social relations in late capitalism, renamed by the SI as the 'society of the spectacle.'

The first chapter examines the SI's 'strategies of self-archiving', focusing on the book *Mémoires*, a product of collaboration between Guy Debord and Asger Jorn. *Mémoires* collaged recollections of Situationist events and memorabilia with elements from a wide variety of sources, from newspapers and travel books to cartoons and maps, in a non-narrative, rather disruptive structure. Stracey argues that in *Mémoires* the Situationists offered an alternative archive of their actions, fearing the possibility of them being forgotten or, even worse, being recuperated by the future museum and art historical discourse. Stories which have been largely written out of the official history are included in order to reflect critically on the conventional mechanisms of remembering and forgetting in the writing of history, rendering *Mémoires* a counter-hegemonic historical model open to present and future readings.

The next two chapters focus on less known and understudied aspects of the group's actions, such as the experimental practice of 'Industrial Painting' and the SI's group exhibition *Destruktion af RSG-6*, held at

the Galeries EXI in Odense, Denmark in 1963. They are both examined as significant collective contributions to revolutionary avant-garde praxis. The chapter demonstrates how 'Industrial Painting', invented by the Italian Giuseppe Penone-Gallizio, broke with the conventions of painting by being produced mechanically and collectively, being shown outside the gallery space and being distributed as a free gift in an attempt to renounce the artwork's commodity status under capitalist spectacle. In a similar vein, it is argued that SI's first and last exhibition, *Destruction of RSG-6*, staged in a gallery space after the group's split in 1962, bears evidence of SI's undisputable commitment to an artistic avant-garde revolutionary project and their insistence on the urgency of the transformation of everyday life at the present time. Stracey's emphasis on the complex relationship between the Situationists and past avant-garde projects is essential here, as it substantiates the claim that what is at stake here is not a novel and imaginative model of avant-garde praxis, but a new conception of avant-garde temporality.

The emphasis on this dialectic relationship between the SI and past and present revolutionary projects underpins all the constructed situations studied in the book. Stracey draws here upon what the Situationists called a 'reversible coherence of the world', that is the possibility of past revolutionary realities reappearing in the present or the present being open to these past realities. (Stracey 2014: 57) This is the case with the SI's article about the Watts revolt, which took place in South Los Angeles in August 1965. This article argued that the Watts revolt should be considered as an anti-capitalist struggle comparable to earlier struggles such as the resistance against fascism in Spain in 1937 or to contemporary ones such as the anti-Vietnam demonstrations and anti-colonial struggles in Algeria. Stracey here offers productive ways of thinking about the SI's reading of the Wattists as lumpenproletariats and their struggle as a class war in a classless late capitalist society by reading their

article as a constructed situation 'that both intervenes in and critically transforms a contemporary event.' (Stracey 2014: 17)

The next chapter looks at the Situationists' book *Enragés et Situationnistes dans le Mouvement des Occupation*. Written in the aftermath of the events of 1968 in France, this famous account consists of tracts, posters, comic strips and political song-sheets collated, altered and republished (or *détourned*) by the Situationists. This act of *détournement* also included photographs of slogans graffitied on the walls of Paris during the events of 1968, taken from newspapers without accrediting the photographer or the source, or from censored sites. The author argues against the fixation of meaning of both photography and graffiti and accounts for the Situationists' continuous manipulation and reframing of these *détourned* images as a constructed situation. Drawing upon Vaneigem's interesting thesis in *The Revolution of Everyday Life* that revolutionary anti-writing and a creative, radical subject are interconnected, Stracey argues that a radical subject aiming at society's total transformation might emerge out of this constructed situation. What, nevertheless, remains less convincing is the suggested analogy, or, at times, equation of the Situationist subject with the radical subject that emerged in the streets of Paris in 1968 within Stracey's account. The reduction of the language of numerous small publications, tracts, ephemeral newspapers and magazines from all the great number of workers' and students' groups and organisations that participated in the events of 1968 to the revolutionary language of the Situationist subject seems to resonate with a distorted idea that the Situationists were the initiators and the main core group of the movement. Such an idea was very much promoted by Debord, who claimed responsibility for the origins and the overall direction of the May 1968 revolt after the end of the events. (Ross 2002: 193-4) There is a danger here of effectively subsuming a diverse, anti-

hierarchical and mass movement that brought different social groups into the thought and praxis of a single group, that is the SI.

The last chapter, which sheds light on the female members' contribution to the construction of situations, is one of the most fascinating parts of the book. In contrast to dominant accounts of the SI, which fully ignored the role of female members, Stracey examines the understudied contribution of Michèle Bernstein and Jacqueline de Jong to the creative and theoretical development of the group. The chapter also studies the *détournement* of seductive photographs of women initially destined to be published alongside advertisements of products published in mass circulated women's magazines such as *Elle* and *Marie Claire*, porn magazines such as *Playboy* or popular commercial press. These images were re-inserted in the issues of the collective *journal international situationniste* accompanied by texts written by anonymous writers. The author takes a critical stance towards the dominant readings of the use of these images, according to which the Situationists reiterate the objectification and spectacularisation of women they were supposed to criticise at the first instance. The historical contextualization of the relocation and alteration of these images within the post-war era is crucial here in re-assessing the outcomes of this act of *détournement*. It is clear that what is attempted here is not a re-reading of the SI as a feminist group, but a convincing argument for the lack of single-issue politics such as 'gender' in favor of an all-encompassing critique of the capitalist spectacle, which would obviously concern women too.

What is so distinct about *Constructed Situations: A New History of the Situationist International* is that it can be characterised by what the SI called 'reversible coherence of the world', that is an acknowledgement of its own temporality and an openness to past, present and the future time.

Therefore, Stracey's account does not only situate the SI in dialogue with past and contemporary (to them) revolutionary moments, radical avant garde projects and a rich theoretical radical tradition –from Marx and Lukács to Pannekoek and Castoriadis- but it also opens it up to present and future revolutionary potentialities. In the concluding chapter of the book, Stracey examines the relevance of the SI's to the ongoing anti-capitalist struggles today and asks which lessons of their unique amalgamation of art and politics are still to be learnt. She highlights the linkages of the SI's constructed situations with electronic forms of resistance, the anti-capitalist movement that emerged in the 1990s and the 'Ne Travaillez Jamais' ('Never Work') ethos that can be traced in Autonomia's analysis of 'immaterial labour', Michael Hardt's and Antonio Negri's 'bio-power' and 'bio-political production', among others. These are not, by any means, the only pertinent examples, as the author suggests. It is, therefore, the incompleteness of this chapter that opens up to new projects not only on the continuous relevance of the SI to new revolutionary avant-garde projects, but also on new forms of resistance and practices of opposition to the total colonisation and spectacularisation of our everyday lives. Stracey's book is much more than a radical history of the SI's experiments at destroying capitalism. It is also a call to rethink what a cultural revolutionary project may mean today. In today's neoliberal capitalism, this task seems (once again) more urgent than ever. For as Stracey brilliantly put it: 'as long as the ultimate task of the avant-garde remained incomplete, as long as the class war has not been won, the time of the avant-garde remains current, remains now.' (Stracey 2014: 55)

## **References**

Ross, Kristin, (2002) *May '68 and Its Afterlives*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Stracey F. (2014), *Constructed Situations: A New History of the Situationist International*, London: Pluto.

