

## CONSTRUCTED SITUATIONS



# CONSTRUCTED SITUATIONS

A New History of the Situationist International

Frances Stracey



# For Peanut

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# INTRODUCTION

## *Lessons in Failure*

[I]t is first of all necessary to recognize, without holding onto any consoling illusions, the full extent of the defeat of the entire revolutionary project ...<sup>1</sup>

To understand the formation of the Situationist International in July 1957, and its project to construct a new revolutionary praxis of life, requires recognizing failure as its point of departure. In fact, two failures were at stake. One was the inability of preceding avant-garde movements to achieve a revolution of life through art, and, moreover, the decay of avant-gardism in the post-Second World War period into decorative and theatrical forms of radicalism. The other was the exhaustion of the revolutionary communist movement, symbolized latterly by the Soviet suppression of emancipatory uprisings, such as in Hungary in 1956. The Situationist International (hereafter SI) formed itself as an agent for combating these failures and for renewing these revolutionary projects. The new forms of action it pursued in politics and art, including the very relationship of politics to art, need to be understood in terms of this agency.

Grasping the formation of the SI also requires recognizing how their response to these failures was conditioned by new social and economic formations. In 1957 the European Common Market was launched. (The initial six signatories were Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands and West Germany.) In this post-war climate of international economic bonding the foundations for new international cultural and political associations were also being forged, particularly in relation to the return of repressed or forgotten avant-garde movements. These had variously suffered repression by the 'socialist realist' style promoted by Soviet Zhdanovism in the mid 1930s, which pervaded the cultural logic of official communist parties, such as the Parti Communiste Français (PCF), or had been exiled as 'degenerate' during the Nazi occupation of Europe, or stifled by the false divisions between 'abstraction or social realism' that permeated the cultural and political rhetoric of the Cold War period more generally. The SI was the outcome of a search for a new, united and international avant-garde, the proposal of which was announced at a 1956 art congress held in Alba, Italy, organized by Asger Jorn and Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio under the auspices of their International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus.<sup>2</sup> According to a written account of the event entitled 'The Alba Platform', representatives of various pre-, inter- and post-war avant-gardes from eight countries (including Algeria, Belgium, Denmark, France, UK, Italy, Holland and Czechoslovakia) met to lay the foundations for a united front against the emerging



consumer society and its processes of social banalization. What emerged was a common critical approach to urbanism, a 'unitary urbanism', which Gil Wolman, the Lettrist International delegate, announced as follows:

creation can now be nothing less than a synthesis aiming at an integral construction of an atmosphere, of a style of life.... A unitary urbanism – the synthesis that we call for, incorporating arts and technology – must be created in accordance with new values of life, values which it is henceforth necessary to distinguish and disseminate ...<sup>3</sup>

This revolution in urban cultural and technical values was seen as coinciding with the resurgence of revolutionary political struggles in the late 1950s in Poland and Hungary, the major workers' strikes in Spain, and the anti-colonial struggles in Indochina, Korea and later in Algiers and the Congo.

The seeds were hence sown for the formation of the SI the following year, July 1957, in Cosio d'Arrosia, a small Ligurian town in Italy where Piero Simondo's family owned a hotel. At this stage the SI consisted of members from the three following movements: the Lettrist International; the Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus; and the London Psycho-Geographical Association (whose sole member was Ralph Rumney). A key text emerging from this founding conference was the 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action', signed by Debord.<sup>4</sup> It proposed a search for revolutionary forms that would be collective, creative events, in which life would be lived differently from its banalization, and it examines the failures and ensuing lessons of previous avant-gardes that aimed to change the world, not just its art, such as Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism, CoBrA (see note 3), Lettrism and the theatre of Brecht. (A notable omission from this critical history of the avant-garde is an analysis of Soviet Constructivism or German Productivism, although I think elements of both re-appear in certain of the SI's tactical gestures.)<sup>5</sup> The SI concluded that it was an abandonment of the avant-garde ambition of total social revolution that had condemned contemporary artists to 'doing art as one does business.'<sup>6</sup> It was the SI's commitment to a total transformation of life that informed their rejection of all artists and movements that only offered new artistic forms and media, without an equal commitment to a revolutionary politics aimed at overturning capitalism. This accounts for their dismissal of contemporary 'neo-dadaists', such as those involved in Happenings, Fluxus, Nouveau Realisme, Tashisme, Pop art and even members of the SI movement itself, such as the mainly German Gruppe Spur, who were expelled in 1961 due to their insistence that the SI had no power other than its power in the realm of culture. The SI were 'artists' only insofar as 'we are no longer artists: we come to realize art', by incorporating the 'survival of art into the art of life.'<sup>7</sup>

The 'Report on the Construction of Situations' announced that one of the principal tasks of a new avant-garde should be to transpose into their sphere of activity 'organizational methods created by revolutionary politics', so that their actions were 'inconceivable without some connection with political critique.'<sup>8</sup> At this early stage the SI

were certain about avoiding what they saw as the hierarchical fate of most revolutionary political parties (be they Leninist, Stalinist, Trotskyist or Maoist), which tended to set up a divide between leaders or 'order-givers', and followers or 'order-takers'. In the case of the Soviet Communist Party, the SI diagnosed a bureaucratic state class representing a perverted dictatorship over the proletariat, as opposed to a dictatorship of, by and for it. But they saw no solution to this in Maoism.<sup>9</sup> The SI wanted to initiate a new style of political relationship to 'partisans', to the extent that they absolutely refused 'disciples'. They were only interested in the participation of equals, and in 'setting autonomous people loose in the world'.<sup>10</sup> To avoid 'the specialized activity of heads of groups and parties who derive from the organized passivity of their militants the oppressive force of their future power', the SI initially imagined the possibility of a unification or infiltration with parallel militant groups.<sup>11</sup>

But the SI was not conceived as a reduction of art into politics. As early as 1960, Debord co-wrote a pamphlet *Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program* with Daniel Blanchard, a member of Socialisme ou Barbarie.<sup>12</sup> This text reaffirms the impossibility of sustaining a revolutionary artistic movement without a revolutionary political movement, and vice versa.<sup>13</sup> Almost every history of the SI splits it into an early artistic phase up until around 1962, followed by a so-called political phase. As I hope to show, this is misleading.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the SI's first and last group art show, *Destruction of RSG-6*, was in 1963. Furthermore, their mission statement of 'new forms of action in politics or art' continued to operate in their, always illustrated, journal *internationale situationniste* (1958–69), and through posters, books, graffiti, comics and street protests. This unity of artistic and political forms of action within the SI's activities is the focus of the chapters of this book.

This early collaboration between Debord and Blanchard, the SI and Socialisme ou Barbarie, did not lead to a unification or cross-membership alliance between the groups. The same fate met the SI's other brief correspondences with various anarchist groups: including Guy Bodson of the Fédération Anarchiste; L'Union des Groupes Anarchiste-Communistes; and exchanges with the journal *Informations et Correspondances Ouvrières*. The exception was in May 1968, when the SI was joined by the Enragés group, and together they founded the Conseil Pour le Maintien des Occupations.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, despite these searches for collaborators, throughout the SI's lifetime (1957–1972) it was notorious for its continuous expulsions. This may seem out of kilter with their supposed anti-hierarchical ambitions, and more in keeping with the political excesses and exclusions of a Stalinist Party. The difference, however, resides in the organizational constitution of these political bodies and their uses of exclusion. The SI stated that they should not be understood as a model of revolutionary organization as such, with dogmas, leaders and disciples, but rather as a specific organization, made up of a loose association of autonomous individuals committed to a shared revolutionary perspective and precise tasks.<sup>16</sup> Another organizational prerequisite for the SI was its international scope, and it included members from Europe, America and Africa. The record of the SI's membership involves 19 resignations, 2 'scissionists' and 45 exclusions.

At any one time, however, the SI averaged 10 to 20 members. In total, the SI comprised 63 men, 7 women and one transsexual, from 16 different countries.<sup>17</sup>

The SI's critique of the organized left had specific organizational precedents, especially the pre-Leninist Soviets and forms of generalized self-management associated with workers' councils.<sup>18</sup> The agent for the SI's revolution remained the proletariat, although, as the SI explained, their gestures of refusal and signs of revolutionary creativity were parts of a project to redefine 'the new contours of the proletariat, the irreducible will to freedom.'<sup>19</sup> Although, following Marx, the SI affirmed that the 'proletariat is revolutionary or it is nothing', what the SI thought needed to be transformed was no longer merely the economic base, but the whole of life itself: 'the proletariat wants to possess all its life, to possess it *as life*, as the totality of its possible realization.'<sup>20</sup> At stake was the realization of oneself, not via a special domain of art or politics, or reorganized labour, but through a revolution of the whole life of society.

In order to fundamentally understand how the SI grasped their situation and how they sought to respond to it, we need to examine precisely what they meant by the 'society of the spectacle' and the 'construction of situations.' I will turn to this task now, in the following excurses, in which I hope to dig beneath the familiarity and thoughtlessness that typically accompany these notions. This will enable me finally to explain why and how I have chosen to view the history of the SI through the lens of its 'constructed situations.' Understanding what constitutes a constructed situation is vital to understanding the SI. The fact that it constitutes part of their very name is testimony to this. And yet, remarkably, most literature on the SI tends to overlook or neglect this key concept or strategy. Typically, it is not scrutinized because it is taken for granted, as if it is self-explanatory. My contention is that it is not, and that a considerable amount of reconstructive work is required in order to grasp what it means, its significance and its diverse realizations within the SI's activities. But this task of reconstruction must begin by scrutinizing the SI's diagnosis of the society of the spectacle, since this was the specific target at which constructed situations were aimed.

### *Excursus I: The society of the spectacle*

The SI's revolutionary forms of action in politics and art were to be derived from 'a coherent critique of the society as it was developing *now*.'<sup>21</sup> This 'now' and its coherent critique found its most complete articulation in 1967, ten years after the formation of the SI, when Debord published his *Das Kapital* for a new generation, *The Society of the Spectacle*.<sup>22</sup> This book aimed to comprehensively, if a little obtusely, map out a new moment of capitalist development and expansion, namely capital's colonization or subsumption of, not just labour or economic activity, but the whole of life. Whereas Lukács had sought to generalize Marx's account of commodity fetishism as characteristic of the 'reification' of all social relations under capital, the SI understood this reification to have taken on a new 'imagist' form, in which social relations are reduced to their image

or spectacle. Paraphrasing Marx, the opening paragraph of *The Society of the Spectacle* begins: ‘the whole life of those societies in which the modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that was directly lived has become mere representation.’<sup>23</sup>

Debord’s substitution of the word ‘spectacles’ for Marx’s ‘commodities’ signals a search for a new diagnostic terminology, befitting the SI’s historical moment, namely, the developed world’s burgeoning post-war consumer societies of the late 1950s and 1960s. This was characterized by a shift in labour from factories to the newly developing ‘tertiary sector’ of the economy, so-called service and leisure industries, which were increasingly dependent on the use of mass media communications to sell the accumulation of new products and leisure activities that were generated to meet the demands of the new consumers of a booming economy. Here the issue was no longer scarcity, but abundance.<sup>24</sup> It was this so-called leisure industry climate that enabled Debord to declare that the proletarian class struggle could now be called a ‘battle for leisure’: a fight over the uses and abuses of leisure-time as ‘an already dominant feature in capitalist society.’<sup>25</sup>

At stake here was the emergence of a new type of image-based exchange mechanism. For Marx, the commodity is defined as the form a product takes when production is organized through exchange. Debord develops this further by claiming that under modern conditions of ‘spectacular’ (*spectacle*) production the process of exchange has undergone a transformation. This process now demands the use of intermediary ‘image-objects’, in the form of packaging and advertising that not only promote the goods for sale but also market an attendant fantasy, typically an aspirant ‘lifestyle’, in order to facilitate the required consumption of commodities. In this climate, the spectacle – defined variously by Debord as the indispensable packaging of things produced, as the general gloss on the rationality of the system, and as the advanced economic sector responsible for the manufacture of a growing mass of image-objects – becomes the ‘chief product’ of contemporary society.<sup>26</sup> Spectacles are the new lubricants for the mechanism of commodity and social exchange.

The spectacle presents a new form of exchange value, displacing its manifestation in money. Following Marx, the spectacle is understood as a new form of abstract general equivalence between all products. But, whereas for Marx the money-form enabled the exchange of diverse goods whose use is not otherwise compatible, via a quantitative reduction of qualitative differences according to the abstract logic of money; for the SI, the image-form of the spectacle represents the totality of the social world. Hence, the spectacle is ‘the general equivalent of whatever society as a whole can be and do.’<sup>27</sup> The society of the spectacle thus corresponds to the historical moment in which commodification completes its colonization of everyday life, leaving nothing else to see: ‘commodities are now all that there is to see; the world we see is the world of the commodity.’<sup>28</sup>

What needs to be avoided, however, in any definition of the spectacle is the all too familiar reduction in the majority of literature on the SI, whereby the term ‘spectacle’ becomes just another name for images, or mass media images.<sup>29</sup> Mass media images are merely its most ‘stultifying superficial manifestation.’<sup>30</sup> Whether in its specific guises of

'news propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment', the spectacle's monopolization of the realm of appearances is not superficial or epiphenomenal.<sup>31</sup> On the contrary, it has a deep structuring function, responsible not only for the production and consumption of image-objects, but also of new subjects of capital or image-subjects, interpellated by this new spectaclist economy. As Debord succinctly explains: 'The spectacle is *not* a collection of images; rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images' (my emphasis).<sup>32</sup> It is precisely the formation (or deformation) of social life under the conditions of that spectacle that is the main focus of the SI's critical or revolutionary project. As clarified in the opening paragraph of *The Society of the Spectacle*, it is no longer Marx's 'whole wealth' of society that is now under scrutiny, but the 'whole life' of society, that is, the totality of lived social experience under the alienating conditions of the spectacle.

However, the spectacle, like Marx's commodity, behaves in mysterious ways. Drawing explicitly on Lukács's concept of generalized fetishism as reification – namely, the process by which products of human labour appear as an independent and uncontrolled reality apart from the people who created them – the spectacle too appears to circulate as an autonomous or supernatural phenomenon, as if it was not dependent on concrete, material, social conditions of production and distribution. This, of course, is the illusion or fetishism of the spectacle. However, I would prefer to describe this process somewhat differently, as a form of dissimulation that conceals what exists in the guise of a 'counterfeit semblance', given that the spectacle is simultaneously, 'a faithful mirror held up to the production of things and a distorting objectification of the producers'.<sup>33</sup> It is this false or illusory life that dissembles or disavows the concrete social conditions that reproduce the spectacle, as well as leading us astray from searching out alternative, non-reified forms of living. The spectacle is a counterfeit picture of life according to the distorting logic of its mirror. What it mystifyingly presents as eternal and inevitable, a life of passive consumption, is in fact nothing other than a particular historical situation, 'one particular economic and social formation', and so transformable.<sup>34</sup> Hence, to maintain such a counterfeit life requires constant false justifications. Even if these justifications occur at the superficial level of the mass media, such invasions into everyday life do not function as part of a neutral apparatus. As Debord emphasizes, there is nothing neutral about the dynamics of the spectacle's techniques of control, communication and dissemination.<sup>35</sup> As the symbolic ruling class, the spectacle perpetuates its image, 'the self portrait of power in the age of power's totalitarian rule over conditions of existence'.<sup>36</sup> Rather than being viewed merely as the product of a technology for the mass dissemination of images, or a simple distortion of the world, the spectacle is better understood as a *Weltanschauung*, 'a world view transformed into an objective force'.<sup>37</sup>

The spectacle is a radical alienation of life. To him who is subjected to it: 'the more he contemplates, the less he lives; the more readily he recognizes his own needs in the images of need proposed by the dominant system, the less he understands his own existence and his own desire'.<sup>38</sup> Insofar as the image of life displaces real life, people see themselves in a 'reality' that is false. The spectacle is the completion of alienation, the

‘perfection of separation’, the ‘perfected denial of man.’<sup>39</sup> Therefore, any critique capable of apprehending the spectacle must expose it as ‘a visible negation of life – and as a negation of life that has *invented a visual form for itself*.’<sup>40</sup>

The task that the SI set itself was to create new forms of action to combat the society of the spectacle. This required a mode of criticism appropriate to its object, ‘spectacle analysis’, or what could perhaps be termed a form of ‘spectacle-clasm’. Since it was not possible to find an external point free from the totality of the spectacle economy, the SI developed an immanent mode of critique. That is, the spectacle, as the historical situation within which the SI lived and operated, could not simply be stepped outside of, and so its critique entailed speaking its ‘language’ to some extent, but in ways that re-functioned its meanings and uses. The value of re-using and re-functioning already circulating spectacles is that new products or image-objects do not need to be invented with which to challenge the habits of everyday life. Instead, habituated spectacles could be led astray.

But if the spectacle was not just an image or collection of images, but a social relationship between people that is mediated by images, then challenging the spectacle must involve an alternative form of social relationship. This is why the SI’s relation to the images they used and produced needs to be understood in terms of the social relations they represent and the political struggles surrounding these relations. Indeed, this is why art and politics are inseparable for the SI’s project. If we lose sight of the radical transformation of life at stake in the SI’s images, we lose sight of what they were trying to do. Keeping this in sight is what I have tried to do in this book.

However, this objective seems to be trapped. If, as Debord diagnoses, ‘all of lived experience has become mere representation’, then how can a life beyond this representation be recovered?<sup>41</sup> The SI’s answer of ‘immanent critique’ only makes sense if we go back to Debord’s opening sentence of *The Society of the Spectacle*. In fact, he does not use the verb ‘to become’ (*devenir*) or ‘to be’ (*être*), but instead the self-reflexive verb ‘*s’écarter*’: ‘Tout ce qui était directement vécu s’est éloigné dans une représentation.’<sup>42</sup> To date, literature on the SI typically (mis)translates this as: ‘all that was directly lived has become mere representation.’ The latter implies that life has become an image, a final destination with no recovery. But the reflexive verb *s’écarter* does not mean ‘to become’, as would *devenir* or *être*. Rather, it has the sense of ‘to go away from’, ‘to absent oneself from’, ‘to withdraw’, ‘to digress’, ‘to deviate’, ‘to differ’, ‘to be estranged or alienated’, ‘to be diverted’. A new meaning emerges: ‘all that was directly lived is diverted in a representation.’ To be diverted by a representation implies the possibility of a re- diversion, that is, life as lived is not lost, gone forever, but estranged, merely on a detour or digression via the spectacle’s process of representation, from which it can be re-diverted or reverted. One may not be able to extricate and untangle lived experience from the realm of semblance, but you can challenge the ways in which it is made to appear. For example, the SI’s tactic of *détournement*, meaning to hijack and re-function an already existing element, works by de-familiarizing the spectacle’s already estranged images in order to bring about unexpected re-appearances. It does this by damaging and polluting given spectacles so as to trigger or re-mediate a different social imaginary based on non-alienated relationships.

The SI developed a variety of anti-spectacular tactics such as *détournement*, *dérive*, unitary urbanism, psycho-geography, examples of which will be explicated and shown in different chapters of this book.

These tactics, however, were singular operations or perspectives that formed part of the SI's overarching strategy to revolutionize the totality of the society of the spectacle through 'constructed situations' (*situations construites*).<sup>43</sup> Hence, the most familiar legacies of the SI, their overall critique of the society of the spectacle and their tactics of *détournement*, *dérive*, etc., need to be understood in terms of a strategy that has tended to be overshadowed. Bringing this to light is one of the main impulses of this book.

## *Excursus II: Constructed situations*

The origins of the notion of constructed situations may be traced back to its first appearance in Debord's 1952 film, *Hurlement en Faveur de Sade*, created while he was still a member of the Lettrist International.<sup>44</sup> Near the beginning of the film, which is without images, 'voice 2' utters: 'the art of the future will be the overturning of situations or nothing'. And later, following one minute of silence during which the screen remains dark, 'voice 1' states: 'a science of situations is to be created, which will borrow elements from psychology, statistics, urbanism and ethics. These elements have to run together to an absolutely new conclusion: the conscious creation of situations.'<sup>45</sup> Even though many elements of the idea are already present here, it remains little more than a projection.

It is six years later that it takes on its rigorous formulation in the first issue of the newly formed SI's journal, *internationale situationniste*, June 1958. Under the section 'Definitions', the word 'situationist' is given to mean: 'that which relates to the theory or to the practical activity of a construction of situations; those engaged in constructing situations; members of the Situationist International.'<sup>46</sup> The last part of this definition is self-sufficient and explanatory. The first two parts, however, rely on the mediating concept of a '*situation construite*', which has its own definition as: 'a moment of life, concretely and deliberately constructed by a collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a game of events.'<sup>47</sup>

This definition was in fact appropriated from the SI's 1957 preliminary mission statement by Debord, 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action'. In the final section, under the heading 'Towards a Situationist International', the central model of a 'constructed situation' is provisionally formulated as: 'the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passionate quality'; and as 'collective ambiances, ensembles of impressions determining the quality of the moment.'<sup>48</sup> These were component parts of the SI's still developing methodology, aimed at revolutionizing the 'material environment of life' and the 'compartments which it gives rise to and which radically transform it.'<sup>49</sup> To this end, the SI developed a range of interventionist tactics or action-events, referred to as 'operatives' or 'perspectives'

that were parts of, but not in and of themselves, constructed situations. These included 'unitary urbanism' stemming from acoustic, spatial, architectural, gestural, poetic and cinematic actions realized at the level of the urban environment. This led in turn to the practice of 'psycho-geography', defined as the study of the specific effects and affects of the altered or détourned urban geographies or environments, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individual participants. This in turn fed into the practice of the *dérive* or 'drift' conceived as a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of modern, urban society, specifically a technique of transient passage through rapidly changing ambiances, 'as a means of study of psycho-geography and of situationist psychology'.<sup>50</sup> Common to all these tactics was the transient, momentary temporality of constructed situations that the SI defined as ephemeral, without a future, mere 'passageways'.<sup>51</sup>

Further elaborations were presented in the essay preceding the 'Definitions' section of *internationale situationniste*, no.1, cautiously titled, 'Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation'.<sup>52</sup> Beginning with an extract from the 1957 'Report on the Construction of Situations', we are reminded that the construction of situations begins on the ruins of the modern spectacle. Destruction was conceived of as a precursory event enabling the necessary ground clearing required for the revolutionary reconstruction of a non-spectacular society. And it was through such creative-destructive experiments in urban living and culture that the spectacle's principle of 'non-intervention' or passive consumption was to be broken or actively refused.<sup>53</sup> The constructed situation was thus envisaged as a 'lived', embodied, dynamic event, the outcome of which (its success or failure) was not knowable in advance of its particular manifestations. Constructed situations were therefore a gamble. Such risk and uncertainty is perhaps indicated by the multifarious tactics deployed, which seem to defy any careful calculations as to expected outcomes. These included the use of graffiti in urban environments to create a 'transitory décor'; the use of rioting to engender new ways of experiencing the world; and the subjection of these new experiences to Situationist-oriented psychoanalysis that, in contrast to various Freudian currents, would entice the participants to discover precise desires in order to realize them.<sup>54</sup> Any techniques or technologies might be tactically deployed. And constructed situations should be anti-hierarchical, non- or trans-disciplinary, amateurish or non-specialized, itinerant, ephemeral and, most importantly, collectively prepared and developed. This was reflected in the use of anonymous texts which, initially at least, helped prevent a cult of individual celebrities, and so ideally to present 'the whole of the SI as a *collective star*'.<sup>55</sup> Finally, the most common or unitary aspect was the SI's deployment of these tactics as part of a coherent programme targeted at revolutionizing the totality of life under the conditions of spectacle.

Care was taken to distinguish such revolutions in everyday living from the deconstructed theatrics of Brecht and Pirandello, whose main interest was a revolution in the art of theatre, whereas the SI sought the end of art (and the arts) as a separate domain. At this stage, the constructed situation was an experimental 'game of revolution' where what was at stake was a transformation of the social totality – from capitalist



spectacle to non-authoritarian communism.<sup>56</sup> Only the collective takeover of the world would enable active, autonomous and politically engaged agents to emerge, in contrast to the spectacle's 'spectres haunting the things anarchically presented to them by others.'<sup>57</sup> Constructed situations were envisaged as incendiary devices heralding an unpredictable eruption of an alternative, non-capitalist and poetic life.

### *Distinctions*

Historical precedents for the idea of a 'constructed situation' are obscure in the SI's writings. They have to be teased out from a medley of SI texts and cultural experiments. The most frequent allusion is to Marx, often via Hegel; specifically to his idea that history is made, albeit under conditions that are not chosen. In other words, history is constructed from its situatedness. As early as 1956, Debord and Wolman discuss in a pre-Situationist text called 'Methods of *Détournement*' the ultimate goal of constructed situations, which they anticipate being the collective *détournement* of situations, that is, appropriating and transforming the conditions of a state of affairs in a deliberate act.<sup>58</sup> Constructed situations are, as the members of the SI announce in 1961, a means to liberate 'inexhaustible energies trapped in a petrified daily life', which, with the advent of unitary urbanism, was sought through the replacement of 'present city planning (that geology of lies) ... by a technique for defending the permanently threatened conditions of freedom', enabling individuals to 'begin freely constructing their own history'.<sup>59</sup> In its guise as a form of 'praxis' – that is, as the actualization of a situation, rather than a theoretical application – the SI are also explicitly indebted to Marx. As Debord noted: 'I believe that the importance of dialectical materialism, its decisive (but still barely exploited) progress in the history of ideas, is above all the *supremacy of practice*, the notion of *praxis* that *contains and supersedes* theoretical reflection, and which itself is always inseparable from a praxis'.<sup>60</sup>

However, this debt to Marx was qualified. For example, where Marx imagined the transformation of capitalism through the seizure of the means of production by the working-class proletariat, the SI conjured up a new, more inclusive proletariat, namely all those so-called 'order-takers', including Marx's despised 'lumpenproletariat', drop-outs, refusniks, even certain technocrats. Rather than a rational reorganization of labour, the SI's motley crew would qualitatively *détourn* the whole of urban life into a space of collective play or poetry. As Debord confirmed in a letter to Patrick Straram, the SI were all for a new poetics, but not just in art, rather in life itself.<sup>61</sup>

### *Lefebvre's moments*

A more direct, yet consistently overlooked influence on the SI's model of a situation is Henri Lefebvre's 'theory of moments', presented in his autobiographical book *Le Somme et le Reste*, which was published in 1959, after he had left the French Communist Party.<sup>62</sup> Lefebvre was 56 years old when he met Debord in 1957, via Lefebvre's girlfriend,