



Claire Fontaine,
La Société du Spectacle
brickbat, 2006, brick,
Epson Durabrite
print on archive
paper, 100 × 50 ×
33mm. Courtesy
the artist and Reena
Spaulings Fine Art,
New York

Unrepresentable Enemies: On the Legacy of Guy Debord and the Situationist International

– Tom McDonough

On 1 November 1996, a short missive appeared in the letters section of the French newspaper of record, *Le Monde*. Signed by Alice Becker-Ho, Guy Debord's widow, and Patrick Mosconi, who had been charged with establishing his literary estate, it took up the question of the legacy of the founder of the Situationist International and read, in part:

*Debord's legacy poses no problem. Only Debord himself poses a problem. [...] There's nothing to build on, or rehabilitate, or embellish, or falsify. There is, finally, only Debord, his art and his time as he has revealed them, and that is obviously much more than all these people can support. [...] There are no heirs. Debord must inherit Debord.*¹

This statement of Debord's absolute singularity was, on the one hand, a central element of the estate's conflict with his publisher since the early 1990s, the venerable house of Gallimard. The 'legacy' in question concerned, quite specifically, the rights to his work, and only two months later Becker-Ho and Mosconi would announce their break with the publishers over offense taken at the fictional representation of Debord in a mystery novel they released.² On the other hand, however, the issue was broader than this

particular dispute. The vision of legacy detailed here was profoundly curtailed: Debord, having devoted himself by the late 1980s to the aestheticisation of his life – to conceiving of his life as an artwork – would have no inheritors, just as he had refused all inheritances, whether familial or cultural. This was the myth of Debord that became dominant in the years

Drawing on late Guy Debord and his reception in the 1980s, Tom McDonough traces the legacy of the Situationist International in the practices of the Tiqqun collective and Claire Fontaine.

following his suicide in late 1994, at least among a group of influential critics and historians: foremost among them Philippe Sollers, who wrote a series of important articles on Debord for the French literary press beginning in the late 1980s and even produced a television documentary on him in 2000 with Emmanuel Descombes, and Vincent Kaufmann, who in 2001 published a biography of Debord with the estate's blessing.³ Both concurred in seeing their subject as a great author-essayist, memoirist and moralist in a long line of classical French writers, and one who, in Kaufmann's words, 'conceived his books and films so that there is literally nothing to repeat. He has produced an oeuvre that wants to be irrefutable, an oeuvre whose deepest meaning is to refute and at the same time to challenge those who approach it'.⁴ Such a writer, it seems hardly necessary to repeat, leaves no legacy.

Yet there is another possible answer to this question of inheritance, one that is not ordered by patrilineal filiation and its refusal, one that is not about the claiming of Debord's mantle, but which takes his work as a point of departure for reading – and struggling – in the present. This answer necessitates a return to the late 1980s, to the conjunction of two events: first, the publication of Debord's *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* in

1 'Au courrier du "Monde": Autour de l'héritage de Guy Debord', *Le Monde*, 1 November 1996, p.8. Translation of this and the other French quotations the author's.

2 See, for example, 'Les ayants droit de Guy Debord rompent avec Gallimard', *Le Monde*, 9 January 1997, p.9. The novel in question was Bertrand Delcourt's *Locus Blocus* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1996), which featured the murder of the author of *The Society of the Spectacle*, here called Guy Bordeaux.

3 See Philippe Sollers and Emmanuel Descombes, 'Guy Debord, une étrange guerre' (2000), which was made for the France 3 series *Un siècle d'écrivains*; and Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry* (trans. Robert Bononno), Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.

4 V. Kaufmann, 'L'Irréfutable', *Le Monde*, 15 October 1999, 'Le Monde des livres', p.viii.

October 1988, a book that was generally regarded derisively as evidence of the senescence of its author and his model of critical thought; and second, the travelling exhibition ‘on the Passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time – The Situationist International, 1957–1972’ that debuted at the Centre Pompidou a few months later and was the first to display the history of the group to a large public, and which reconstructed the SI as a precursor to the appropriation practices of North American art of the 1980s. These are two moments that – at the time – appeared to have nothing to say to one another, that failed to see each other; more than twenty years later, however, we can recognise that their curious non-dialogue would open out onto the panorama of Situationist-inspired practices that have flourished over the past decade, from the writings of the so-called Imaginary Party to the artwork of Claire Fontaine.

A slim volume, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* analysed the evolution of contemporary society in the decades following the publication of Debord’s 1967 work of Situationist theory. It laid out the development of a new form of domination, the ‘integrated spectacle’, which he argued had replaced the two preceding regimes of spectacle-culture: the ‘diffuse’, belonging to so-called ‘free’ societies, and the ‘concentrated’, identified with totalitarian regimes. Now we are confronted with an altogether more sophisticated type of subjection: ‘For the final sense of the integrated spectacle is this – that it has integrated itself into reality to the same extent as it was describing it, and that it was reconstructing it as it was describing it. [...] The spectacle has spread itself to the point where it now permeates all reality.’⁵ Or, as philosopher Roger-Pol Droit put it in his review of the book, ‘the world has been falsified: the spectacle has taken the place of the real, entirely rebuilding it to its liking in the course of discoursing on it’.⁶ The integrated spectacle also entailed the apparent disappearance of the historical role of negation, or radical contestation; described in some circles as the end of ideology, Debord spoke of this loss as the abolition of ‘that disturbing conception, which was dominant for over two hundred years, in which a society was open to criticism or transformation, reform or revolution’, for his was an era that ‘has had enough of being blamed’, and that had attempted to persuade the generation born since the upheavals of the late 1960s to accept this sanitised form of society.⁷ This falsified world was also one of generalised secrecy: despite all the talk of transparency, it had become less and less clear who ran what, who was manipulating whom and for what purpose – some of the most trenchant pages of *Comments* address the symbiotic workings of state, economy and mafia – and those who claimed to be the best informed were generally the most deceived. ‘We live and die at the confluence of innumerable mysteries,’ Debord concluded.⁸

His critics found precisely this emphasis on secrecy most irritating, and most damning; as Droit wrote: ‘By dint of seeing spies everywhere, has Debord – rather than disassembling the Kafkaesque machine that is grinding up humanity between its wheels – finally sunk into a John Le Carré-esque fog? It seems so.’⁹ The publication of *Comments* was in fact the occasion of a generalised attack on Debord and his spectacle-thesis, launched most ambitiously in the pages of *Critique* by literary scholar Laurent Jenny. Jenny likened the foundational dichotomy of Debord’s thought – the opposition between spectacular appearances and lived experience – to that which animated Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s eighteenth-century critique of theatre, which had insisted on the primacy of communal presence over the morally corrupting qualities of mediating representations. ‘To the hallucinatory presence of spectacle, it was thus a question of opposing an otherwise real presence of individuals to themselves’, in a return to authentic ‘being’ from the ‘seeming’ of spectacle that was little more than a revised form of the open-air festivals Rousseau had considered appropriate to the free citizens of a republic.¹⁰ Yet for Jenny even this hopelessly naïve conception was jettisoned in *Comments*, which replaced an understanding of spectacle as a historico-economic process linked to the logic of the commodity fetish with one that saw it as the result of a global plot or conspiracy. Whereas

5 Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (trans. Malcolm Imrie), London and New York: Verso, 1990, p.9.

6 Roger-Pol Droit, ‘Guy Debord, le dernier des Mohicans’, *Le Monde*, 22 July 1988, p.11.

7 G. Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, *op. cit.*, pp.21, 27. Emphasis Debord’s.

8 *Ibid.*, p.55.

9 R.-P. Droit, ‘Guy Debord, le dernier des Mohicans’, *op. cit.*, p.11.

10 Laurent Jenny, ‘The Unrepresentable Enemy’ (trans. Stephen Sartarelli), *Art & Text*, no.35, Summer 1990, p.111. Translation modified.

in 1967 Debord had conceived of power as operating through a regime of visibility, while ‘lived experience’ was forced into obscurity, ‘from this point on, it is the conspiracy itself that has become invisible. Where real life should have arrived in the imagelessness of a historical practice, a conspiratorial domination has taken its place. Tyranny’s ghost haunts all social appearance without ever appearing itself.’¹¹ The generalisation of the spectacle had been paralleled by the growth of Debord’s suspicion, to the point of paranoia. His US critics echoed and amplified this assessment. ‘By 1988,’ the editors of *Telos* wrote,

*Debord’s account degenerated to a never-never-land of conspiracies among spy agencies [...] This is much cruder than even the most simplistic reading of the culture industry thesis. It is Adorno gone mad in a situation in which there is no longer any access to concrete experience, capitalism reigns supreme and only a few marginal intellectuals can figure out what is going on.*¹²

The general consensus was that Debord ‘had somehow been converted to a “primitive” view of domination that saw intrigue and espionage everywhere’, that he was, as *Le Monde* called him, ‘the last of the Mohicans’, and, as such, doomed to extinction.¹³

The exhibition that I want to position as a pendant to Debord’s *Comments* opened in Paris in February 1989, before heading to London and the US.¹⁴ It was primarily the brainchild of the curator Mark Francis and the critic and scholar Peter Wollen, who assembled the show without Debord’s support. Debord had several years earlier withdrawn his films from circulation and was represented in the show only in the form of two artworks from decades earlier — a small collage of 1954 and an abstract ‘industrial painting’ by his Italian colleague Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio that Debord had overpainted in 1963 with the slogan ‘Abolition du travail aliéné’ (‘Abolition of Alienated Labour’). When the curators offered him a private tour, during a time that the Beaubourg was closed, he refused.¹⁵ Little wonder, perhaps: even the curators could acknowledge the evident

If Debord, in publishing his Comments, was seen as somehow coming too late, the Beaubourg Situationist International exhibition could be said to have come too soon.

paradox of presenting the SI as an artistic movement, given that the group had, over the course the early 1960s, abandoned a strictly artistic milieu in favour of direct intervention within the socio-political sphere. The impulse to frame it as a predominantly aesthetic phenomenon reached its greatest absurdity perhaps in the display of the run of *Internationale*

situationniste, the group’s journal, under glass — the commodification as much as the preservation of this critical theory. However, ‘in an art world that has only the language of the simulacrum on its lips, where Jean Baudrillard is so much cited (especially in the United States), we wanted to return to the sources’, to Situationist reflections on the society of the spectacle, a curator involved with the show wrote.¹⁶ Indeed the vogue for Baudrillard, particularly in Anglo-American art circles, constituted the determinant factor in the apparent timeliness of this show. Baudrillard, who had studied with and taught alongside Henri Lefebvre, and whose earliest writings had borne such a clear imprint of the Situationists’ heterodox Marxism, had become by the latter half of the 1980s one of the great apologists for postmodern culture. The ambiguities of his work permitted multiple readings, from the critical to the complicit, which found a ready echo in the New York-

11 *Ibid.*, p.112. Translation modified.

12 Paul Piccone in Russell Berman, David Pan and P. Piccone, ‘The Society of the Spectacle 20 Years Later: A Discussion’, *Telos*, no.86, Winter 1990–91, pp.85–86.

13 Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith), Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999, p.121. Jappe notes that ‘there is no denying, however, that the years since the book’s publication have confirmed its claims in myriad ways’.

14 The exhibition travelled to the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (1989) and Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston (1990). The years 1989 and 1990 were key in the contemporary reception of the SI for other reasons as well: they mark the publication of Greil Marcus’s *Lipstick Traces* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) and Roberto Ohrt’s *Phantom Avantgarde* (Hamburg: Nautilus, 1990).

15 See Christophe Bourseiller, *Vie et mort de Guy Debord*, Paris: Plon, 1999, pp.395–96.

16 Paul-Hervé Parsy, who oversaw the Paris iteration of the show, quoted in Edward Ball, ‘Welcome Brigands’, *Village Voice*, 2 May 1989, p.106.



based ‘simulationist’ mode of artistic practice.¹⁷ Hence the effort, particularly evident in the Boston version of the exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art, to link the historical SI material to recent production, particularly that associated with the ‘Pictures Generation’, from Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger, to Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman, to Louise Lawler and Allan McCollum.

As Elisabeth Sussman wrote in her catalogue text:

*All of these gestures rely upon a reading of the world of representation in mass culture that recognises the form of control that resides in the world of images and upon an aesthetic strategy that operates by wresting an image or a form of language from its original context and subverting it by methods of re-presentation in a different context.*¹⁸

Strategies of appropriation were in this manner collapsed into the critical practice of *détournement*, by grafting concepts developed by Benjamin Buchloh, Craig Owens and Hal Foster earlier in the decade onto a rather questionable historical genealogy. Whatever superficial similarities exist between the two practices, their alignment risks a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of *détournement*’s critique, based as it was in a conviction that all recognised cultural forms had been hollowed out by the reifying forces of capital and were now available for a dialectical refunctioning through which subversive meanings might be articulated. Critic Giorgio Maragliano noted at the time of the exhibition that the reappearance of *détournement* within the institutional space of art translated into its ‘progressive neutralisation’:

*The stripping of meaning from individual elements of allegorical montages, given that the result is intended to be neither transitory nor ephemeral, becomes merely the faculty of producing equivalences between diverse things, and thus a duplication or reproduction of the generalised equivalence between all forms of merchandise.*¹⁹

17 One of the best accounts of Baudrillard’s reception in the US, and in artistic milieus in particular, is found in François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (trans. Jeff Fort), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

18 Elisabeth Sussman, ‘Introduction’, in E. Sussman (ed.), *on the Passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time: The Situationist International, 1957–1972*, Boston and Cambridge, MA: Institute of Contemporary Art and The MIT Press, 1989, p.13.

19 Giorgio Maragliano, ‘The Invisible Insurrection’ (trans. Henry Martin), *Flash Art*, no.147, Summer 1989, p.89.



Above and left:
Installation views,
'on the Passage
of a few people
through a rather
brief moment
in time —
The Situationist
International,
1957—1972',
Institute of
Contemporary Art,
Boston, 1989.
Courtesy ICA,
Boston

The logic of the commodity, which operates within its own protocols of devaluation and fragmentation, reasserts its prerogatives over a practice that had intended to be its negation. To speak of recuperation seems banal; it would be rather more accurate to say that the historic wager of *détournement* was deferred. If Debord, in publishing his *Comments*, was seen as somehow coming too late, as being an obscure voice from a past long forgotten (*Le Monde's* review was tellingly accompanied by a photograph of the author that was thirty years old), the Beaubourg exhibition could be said to have come too soon, anticipating a legacy that did not yet exist. Both were received at the moment of a triumphant postmodernism, whether in the arts or in the sense of an era that understood itself to be post-historical; as such, they were both destined to misrecognition.

Read by critics steeped in the doctrines of a postmodern end of ideology and end of history, Debord's *Comments* was received as a tract mourning the impossibility of radical social critique and transformation, but this neglected the author's own framing of the text. In its opening pages he described the purpose of this account of the strengthening of the reign of the commodity economy in the twenty years since his first diagnosis: 'it is undoubtedly indispensable to have understood the spectacle's unity and articulation as an active force in order to examine the directions in which this force has since been able to travel. These questions are of great interest, for it is under such conditions that *the next stage of social conflict* will necessarily be played out.'²⁰ There were some readers, however, capable of pursuing such questions. Giorgio Agamben, writing an afterword to the Italian translation of *Comments* in 1990, reframed the problem of 'Debord's inheritance today' precisely in the critical analysis of capitalist expropriation in relation to language. If the lineage of Marxist thought had devoted itself largely to an examination of capitalist expropriation of productive activity, the spectacle thesis outlined the expansion of this domain of subjection to 'the alienation of language itself, of the linguistic and communicative nature of human beings'.²¹ A nascent capitalist economy had expropriated the physical commons in a process of enclosure over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, forcing agricultural workers off the land and producing a reserve army of labour for the first factories; in the second half of the twentieth century this dynamic was complemented by an expropriation of what could be called the linguistic commons,

20 G. Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, *op. cit.*, p.4. Emphasis the author's. See also his remarks regarding the 'return of history', p.73.

21 Giorgio Agamben, 'Marginal Notes on *Commentaries* [sic] on the *Society of the Spectacle*', *Means without End* (trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino), Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p.82.

TIQQUN

Organe conscient du Parti Imaginaire

Exercices de Métaphysique Critique

Tiqqun

conscientement ou pas, vous ne remplissez pas votre devoir fondamental de femme...» (réclame pour un parfum, dans les années 20, aux États-Unis, citée in *Consciencieuses sous influence*)
«Oh ce culte, cette obéissance, cette servitude de la jeune fille devant l'image de la lycéenne et l'image de la moderne! [...] Oh cet esclavage du style poussé jusqu'à l'autodestruction, oh cette docilité de la jeune fille!» (Gombrowicz, *Ferdynand*)

La Jeune-Fille conçoit sa propre existence comme un problème de gestion qui attend d'elle sa résolution.

Avant que de désigner un rapport à l'autre, un rapport social ou une forme d'intégration symbolique, la Jeune-Fille désigne un rapport à soi, c'est-à-dire au temps.

Contre toute apparence, la Jeune-Fille ne se soocie pas d'elle-même. Elle n'est pas, à proprement parler, égocentrique, ni même égocentrique, et ce pour cette raison centrale que son moi est aussi bien un autre. Ce à quoi elle consacre tous les soins d'une piété intrinsèque lui est en fait une réalité extérieure : son «corps». L'application de la forme-capital à toute chose, et de façon plus singulière au corps, signifie que la médiation par la totalité sociale aliénée s'est introduite dans un rapport jusque-là régi par l'imédiateté.

Dans la Jeune-Fille, la tension entre convention et nature est apparemment résolue dans l'andamissement du sens de chacun de ces termes, à telle enseigne que l'un n'y paraît jamais faire violence à l'autre.

La Jeune-Fille est comme le capitalisme, les domestiques et les protozoaires : elle suit s'adapter, et s'en flaire.

À rebours de ce qui a cours dans les sociétés traditionnelles, qui reconnaissent l'existence des choses abjectes et les exposent en tant que telles, la Jeune-Fille nie leur existence et les distimule.

La Jeune-Fille s'aime, «dévote», mais ne méprise point. Il lui faudrait pour cela commencer par se mépriser elle-même.

L'apparence de la Jeune-Fille, est la Jeune-Fille elle-même; entre les deux, il n'y a pas de reste.

Comme sous les esclaves, la Jeune-Fille se croit beaucoup plus surveillée qu'elle ne l'est en réalité.

La Jeune-Fille est une abstraction vivante, qui ne saurait donc avoir de sexe. C'est seulement du point de vue du Bisopouvoir et du Spectacle que l'on peut établir un lien entre sa «féminité» et le sexe féminin.

L'absence à soi de la Jeune-Fille n'est démentie par aucun des «soins» qu'elle paraît se porter.

La Jeune-Fille n'est chez elle que dans les rapports de pure extériorité.

LA JEUNE-FILLE N'EST JAMAIS ASSEZ PLASTIQUE À SON GOUT.

La Jeune-Fille n'aime pas les rides; les rides ne sont pas conformes; les rides sont l'échec de la vie; la vie n'est pas conforme. La Jeune-Fille redoute les rides comme au reste toute expression véritable.

La Jeune-Fille est **exceptionnellement** vulgaire.

La Jeune-Fille n'a rien de spécial, c'est en cela que consiste sa «beauté».

En guise de conscience de soi, la Jeune-Fille n'a qu'un vague sentiment de la vie.

Dans leur divorce, l'amour et le cul de la Jeune-Fille sont devenus deux abstractions vides.

POUR LA JEUNE-FILLE, LA VIE N'EST ENCORE FONCTION D'HABIT.

La Jeune-Fille vit séquestrée dans sa propre «beauté».

La Jeune-Fille n'aime pas, elle s'aime aimant.

La Jeune-Fille ne va pas jusqu'à exiger que les conventions fugitives auxquelles elle se soumet aient un sens.

La Jeune-Fille comprend toute relation sur le modèle du contrat, et plus précisément d'un contrat révocable à chaque instant au gré des intérêts des contractants. C'est un marchandage portant sur la valeur différentielle de chacun sur le marché de la séduction et où il faut bien, pour finir, que l'un empêche les bénéfices.

La Jeune-Fille se produit *quotidiennement* en tant que telle, par la reproduction maniaque de l'*ethos* dominant.

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Proses réalisées pour un numéro de la Jeune-Fille

Une multinationale des cosmétiques lançait récemment à grand renfort de réclame une crème anti-ride répondant au nom d'*Ethique*. Par là, elle signifiait dans un même mouvement qu'il n'est rien de si *éthique* que de s'enduire de merde au réveil pour se conformer à l'imprécatif catégorique de jeunesse, et qu'il ne saurait y avoir d'autre *ethos* que celui de la Jeune-Fille.

La Jeune-Fille prend soin de son corps, comme d'un précieux outil de production.

La *beauté* est le mode de dévoilement propre à la Jeune-Fille dans le Spectacle. C'est pourquoi elle est aussi un *produit générique*, qui porte en lui toute l'abstraction de ce qui se trouve dans l'obligation de s'adresser à un certain segment du marché sexuel au sein duquel *tout se ressemble*.

Le capitalisme a véritablement créé des richesses, car il en a *trouvé* là où l'on n'en voyait pas. C'est ainsi qu'il a, par exemple, *créé* la beauté, la santé ou la jeunesse *en tant que richesses*, c'est-à-dire en tant que qualités qui vous possèdent.

La Jeune-Fille n'est jamais satisfaite de sa soumission à la métaphysique marchande, de la docilité de tout son être, et visiblement de son corps, aux normes du Spectacle. C'est pourquoi elle éprouve le besoin de *flexibiliser*.

La Jeune-Fille confirme la portée physiologique de la sémiotique marchande.

La beauté de la Jeune-Fille est produite. Elle ne réjouit pas elle-même à le dire : «la beauté ne tombe pas du ciel», c'est-à-dire qu'elle est le fruit d'un travail.

La Jeune-Fille se lave; elle veut être pure, pure du monde.

La Jeune-Fille a peiné à devenir une chose qui sent, plutôt qu'un homme qui souffre.

La Jeune-Fille poursuit la perfection plastique sous toutes ses formes, notamment la sienne.

L'ÉPOVE'ISKI, TON COMMERCE EST FINI !

La Jeune-Fille ne se contente pas de croire que la sexualité existe, elle jure qu'elle l'a rencontré. À dieux nouveaux, superstitions nouvelles.

De la masculinisation aux crèmes anti-rides en passant par la liposuction, c'est partout chez la Jeune-Fille le même acharnement à faire abstraction de son corps, et à faire de son corps une abstraction.

Quelqu'étrange que soit son narcissisme, la Jeune-Fille ne s'aime pas soi, ce qu'elle aime, c'est son image, c'est-à-dire quelque chose qui ne lui est pas seulement étranger et extérieur, mais qui au plein sens du terme, la possède. La Jeune-Fille vit sous la tyrannie de ce maître image.

La Jeune-Fille est d'abord un point de vue sur le passage du temps, mais un point de vue qui s'est incarné.



III. La Jeune-Fille comme rapport social

La Jeune-Fille n'est que la concrétion insubstantielle des normes sociales abstraites en vigueur issue d'une assimilation mimétique de toutes les conventions dominantes. Le Spectacle lui vient lieu de toute réalité, de même qu'elle en figure la matérialisation la plus prégnante.

La Jeune-Fille est le rapport social dominant, la forme centrale du *désir du désir*, dans le Spectacle.

ET ENTRE-TEMPS, L'AMOUR S'EST ABIMÉ DANS LE PLUS INFECT DES JEUX DE RÔLES SPECTACULAIRES.

La Jeune-Fille ne se donne jamais elle-même; elle ne donne que ce qu'elle a, c'est-à-dire l'ensemble des qualités qu'on lui prête. C'est pourquoi aussi il n'est pas possible d'aimer la Jeune-Fille, mais seulement de la consumer.

**Et ils sont réalistes
jusque dans l'amour.**

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as an emergent post-Fordist economy demanded that communicative rationality itself be remade as a productive force.

In a properly dialectical move, Agamben then insists on the emancipatory promise contained within this moment of alienation, for within the spectacle we see the inverse image of the linguistic potentiality of humanity, just as we see the inverse image of our productive capacity within the commodity. 'For this reason (precisely because what is being expropriated is the possibility itself of a common good), the spectacle's violence is so destructive; but, for the same reason, the spectacle still contains something like a positive possibility — and it is our task to use this possibility against it.'²² Agamben's analysis, however, with its implicit injunction to expropriate the expropriators of language, does not envision this project being undertaken in the name of some reconstructed 'total man', as did the humanist Marxisms of the post-War years, from that of Lefebvre to — at least occasionally — the SI itself. This is not, in other words, seen as a retreat to some pre-spectacular, pre-modern condition; it is, rather, a move through and beyond spectacle, conducted by subjects who have been hollowed out by the commodity economy. In fact, the term 'subject' does not seem particularly relevant here, and Agamben speaks instead of 'singularities that are no longer characterised either by any social identity or by any real condition of belonging: singularities that are truly *whatever* singularities'.²³ These are the protagonists that, in their subjective and social interchangeability, figure the coming politics of the next stage of social conflict.

Against those who would make Debord an exemplary subject — one who renounced the world in order to cultivate his self as an artwork — this was an account that located his legacy in a politics of 'whatever singularities'. Eleven years after Agamben outlined Debord's contribution to this coming politics, the Parisian collective that published two issues of a journal named *Tiqqun* echoed and amplified the concept in a pseudo-poetic text titled 'How Is It to Be Done?':

*The experience
of my desubjectivation. I become
a whatever singularity. Some play opens up between
my presence and the whole apparatus of qualities
that are ordinarily attached to me. [...] All that isolates me as a subject,
as a body endowed
with a public configuration of attributes, I feel it founder.*²⁴

A peculiar set of paradoxes is at work here: what defines the individual as a subject, what specifies him or her as a particular self, has become under the conditions of contemporary reification precisely what makes all individuals equivalent. Subjectivity has also been made to conform to the logic of the commodity and, in the end, to that universal equivalent, money. Today, *everyone* is summoned to have an identity, to possess the 'attributes' spoken of above — to behave 'as a man, as an /employee, as an unemployed person, as a mother'. The contributors to *Tiqqun* proposed that this principle be subverted, that one be unfaithful to one's identity by opening up a gap between oneself and one's attributes. Desubjectivation, not the reclaiming of a 'true' identity or subjectivity, is the paradoxical path toward the ruin of equivalence. This was the basis of the politics of the collective's Imaginary Party — an anti-party without leaders or members — and their acclamation of anonymity and invisibility:

*We have seen spread — at the same time as a hatred of things — a taste for
anonymity and a certain defiance toward visibility. [...] That its enemy has
neither face nor name for anything that could serve in place of an identity
is precisely what inspires paranoia among those in power.*²⁵

22 *Ibid.*, pp.82–83.

23 *Ibid.*, p.87. Emphasis Agamben's.

24 *Tiqqun*, 'How Is It to Be Done?', *Introduction to Civil War* (trans. Alexander R. Galloway and Jason E. Smith), Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2010, p.204.

25 *Tiqqun*, *Théorie du Bloom*, Paris: Éditions la Fabrique, 2000, p.93.

28 See Eric Pelletier and Anne Vidalie, 'Julien Coupat, l'homme invisible', *L'Express*, 29 January 2009, p.29.

29 *Tiqqun*, *Premiers matériaux pour une théorie de la Jeune-Fille*, Paris: Éditions mille et une nuits, 2001, p.103.

The Tiquun collective was formed in 1999 by around a half-dozen students and recent graduates, largely under the impetus of Julien Coupat, born in 1974 in Bordeaux into a well-off family of doctors. Other members included Fulvia Carnevale, an Italian literary scholar and specialist in the work of Michel Foucault; and the writer and philosopher Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, who participated in the group only briefly before falling out with Coupat. In 1999 Coupat was reaching the climax of his rapid political evolution from successful business and finance student at École supérieure des sciences économiques et commerciales (ESSEC), one of France's top business schools — Coupat graduated in 1996 — to studying in 1997 with sociologist Luc Boltanski at Paris's École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), where he immersed himself in philosophy and political militancy, to the founding of Tiquun two years later. It was at the EHESS that he likely discovered the writings of Debord, which were becoming an increasingly important touchstone at the school in those years, thanks largely to the rise of alter-globalisation protests against neoliberal economy policies that were soon to explode on the streets of Seattle. Coupat wrote a thesis for his Diplôme des études approfondies (DEA, or M.Phil. equivalent) on *The Society of the Spectacle*, 'Perspective and Critique of Situationist Thought', in which he charted a tension inhering in critiques of the capitalist regime between abandonment and reform; it was an insight important enough to be quoted in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, written jointly by Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, a book that was seen to mark a significant moment in the renewal of the Left.²⁶ But by 1999, when *The New Spirit* was published to accolades in France, Coupat had moved past the analysis of critical movements to the formation of Tiquun — a group that would not escape the tensions he had outlined in his thesis.

Already in 1998 he had participated in the occupation of the Conseil Constitutionnel by the jobless movement, during which Sébastien Schiffré, another member of the Tiquun collective, publicly tore up a copy of the 1958 French constitution on which he had written: 'The dictatorship of capital is abolished. The proletariat declares anarchy and communism.' He received an eight-month suspended prison sentence.²⁷ That same year, during the thirtieth anniversary of the occupation of the Sorbonne during May '68, Coupat balanced on the statue of Auguste Comte that stands on the busy Place de la Sorbonne and castigated tourists and onlookers: 'You, the shivering, the kneeling, the cave-dwellers, the cowards, the fearful slaves...'. In July 1999, during an International Summit of Critical Metaphysicians that Coupat had convened at a country house owned by his family in southwestern France, he led a group onto a crowded beach to deploy a banner reading 'You are going to die. And your pathetic holiday cannot change a thing.'²⁸ All are actions that assume their place in a long line of Situationist provocation. Simultaneously, Debord's spectacle-thesis was deployed as one of the key terms in the critical analyses published in the two issues of *Tiquun*, most notably in the 'theory of the Young-Girl' published in its first issue, in 1999 (the second was published two years later). The 'Young-Girl' is by no means intended as a gender-specific term — it does not refer only to women, but is rather a cipher for the construction of a fungible post-Fordist subject within a commodified and image-based late capitalist social order. It is the embodiment of spectacle, the commodity made flesh: 'The Young-Girl embodies the way in which capitalism has reinvested all the needs from which it has freed humanity in a relentless adjustment of the human world to the abstract norms of the Spectacle, and in an enhancement of these norms.'²⁹ Or, as the group explicates the concept, the Young-Girl 'answers the need for a total commodification of life in all its aspects, the need to ensure nothing remains outside the commodity form in what is still called, somewhat euphemistically, "human relations".'³⁰ If durable goods (most paradigmatically, automobiles) were the star commodities of Fordist production, today we produce selfhood — the sense of 'possessing' autonomous agency, youthful beauty, personality. The 'Young-Girl' epitomises this condition of self-fetishisation, of the reification of subjectivity itself, within the West's current regime of immaterial labour.

Claire Fontaine,
Passe-Partout
(Berlin-Mitte),
<http://www.lysator.lu.se/mit-guide/mit-guide.html>, <http://www.hackerethic.org>,
<http://www.lockpicks.com>, <http://www.lockpicking101.com>,
<http://www.gregmiller.net/locks/makelockpicks.html>,
2008, hacksaw blades, bicycle spokes, razor blade, key rings, allen keys, chain and paper-clips, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Neu, Berlin

26 Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (trans. Gregory Elliott), London and New York: Verso, 2006, pp.40 and 52–53 n.81; see also p.478 n.82 for a summary of Debord's spectacle-thesis that provides a good sense of the passages in *The Society of the Spectacle* that most influenced Coupat.

27 See Jean-Michel Decugis, Christophe Labbé and Armel Mehani, 'Ultragauche — Le rapport des RG qui désigne Julien Coupat', *Le Point*, 11 December 2008, p.43.

30 *Ibid.*, p.89.



The Situationist concept of spectacle was not the only heterodox Marxist notion upon which the Tiqqun collective drew; one also finds references to the ideas of the Italian autonomists of the 1970s, of Antonio Negri on Empire (although Negri was also the subject of vituperative critique in the pages of the journal), of Deleuze and Guattari, and, most strongly, of the late Foucault on biopower. Tiqqun's description of modern society as a 'tangle of norms and mechanisms [*dispositifs*]' by which 'the scattered tatters of the global biopolitical fabric' are held together gives some sense of the impact of Foucault's reflection on the state and its interference in everyday life.³¹ And, of course, Agamben himself and his varied analyses of the mechanisms that subjugate and subjectify the individual were central to the collective's project during its relatively brief but intense moment of activity between 1998 and 2001. All these lines of influence were refashioned in the uncompromising language that had characterised Situationist discourse. The journal *Tiqqun* itself bore comparison to *Internationale situationniste*, which ran from 1958 to 1969; the two shared a model of collective editorship and illustrated their dense essays with uncaptioned images drawn from the widest range of sources, from advertisements to film stills to works of art. What seems to have been reactivated here is precisely the project of late Debord — that is, the condemnation of the falsification of the life-world as the norms imposed by spectacle-culture reshape even the deepest recesses of the subject; the play of a subversive anonymity and desubjectivation against the generalised secrecy of the contemporary state; and an insistence that, despite the dark diagnosis provided in various texts, the contestation of this society entails 'an outcome that no one can definitely exclude'.³²

The Tiqqun collective broke up in 2001 for reasons usually described as personal, although given the emphasis within the group on the affective dimension of critical practice, the separation of this realm from the political is ambiguous at best. Perhaps the hardening of opposition to the regime of capitalist globalisation and the consolidation of what has been called 'military neoliberalism' in the wake of the Genoa protests and the attacks of September 11 — both key events of Tiqqun's last year — also played a role in making the project of the journal untenable. The subsequent history of its members could be described as bearing out the two poles of Situationist critique outlined in Coupat's 1997 thesis: on one hand, a strategy of retreat that we can associate with Coupat himself in his experiment in rural living, and on the other, one that operates from within the boundaries of an institutional art world with the artist collective Claire Fontaine. In 2004 Coupat and some colleagues moved to a farm in the small village of Tarnac in central France, assuming a physical as well as critical distance from consumer society. On the farm they raised goats, grew vegetables and — according to questionable claims by the French intelligence service — wrote *The Coming Insurrection*, an anarchist manifesto signed by the Invisible Committee and published in 2007.³³ Coupat also continued to participate in various demonstrations in France and abroad, primarily alongside alter-globalisation militants. But the Tarnac episode has its own integrity that returns us to the politics of 'whatever singularities': to abandon the metropolis and, in rural isolation, to seize 'the conditions and the means, / even interstitial, / to experience yourself as such'.³⁴ In the wake of May '68, some former Situationists had opted for a similar trajectory, most notable René Riesel, who raised sheep and in the 1990s became an outspoken voice opposing genetically modified crops alongside José Bové within the Farmers' Confederation. Coupat and his colleagues, however, seem to have used their rural base as more of a meeting point for similarly minded militants from France and abroad, as well as investing a good deal of time in village life, running the local grocery and the like. This life was interrupted in 2008 when Coupat and nineteen other members of the Tarnac group were indicted under trumped up terrorism charges by the French state. Coupat was accused of sabotaging high-speed railway catenary cables, a charge based at least in part on a single line from *The Coming Insurrection* — whose authorship he has strenuously denied.³⁵

31 Tiqqun, 'Introduction to Civil War', *Introduction to Civil War*, *op. cit.*, p.110.

32 The phrase is from G. Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, *op. cit.*, p.73.

33 Already in the last issue of *Tiqqun* there was talk of the Invisible Committee: 'It refers to a specific faction of the Imaginary Party, its revolutionary-experimental wing.' Tiqqun, 'Introduction to Civil War', *op. cit.*, p.193. On the disputed authorship of *The Coming Insurrection*, see A.L., 'Un Coupat peut en cacher un autre', *Nouvel Observateur*, 22 September 2009, p.15.

34 Tiqqun, 'How Is It to Be Done?', *op. cit.*, p.207.

35 The best overview of this case may be found in Alberto Toscano, 'The War Against Preterrorism: The "Tarnac Nine" and *The Coming Insurrection*', *Radical Philosophy*, no.154, March—April 2009, pp.8—17.

Around the same time Coupat was establishing himself in Tarnac, Fulvia Carnevale was joining with Glaswegian artist James Thornhill to form the ‘readymade artist’ Claire Fontaine. The term ‘readymade’ has typically been applied to an operation performed upon an object, whereby it is removed from the realm of use and placed within the institution of art as an object now endowed with exhibition value. The paradigm of the readymade extends from Marcel Duchamp and Dadaism through the neo-avant-gardes of Pop art and, of course, Situationist *détournement*, but, as Carnevale and Thornhill have written, ‘what interests us here is *what happened in the domain of the production of artists*’.³⁶ So when, in *The True Artist* (2004), Claire Fontaine writes the slogan ‘The true artist produces the most prestigious commodity’ by scorching the gallery ceiling with the smoke from a lighter – a technique well-known to bathroom vandals – this is not simply a deflationary gesture reversing Bruce Nauman’s neon of 1967, *The True Artist Helps the World by Revealing Mystic Truths*. It is also an insistence that today the commodity produced by the artist is precisely him- or herself. Applying the logic of the Duchampian readymade to the métier of the artist itself, in a post-Warholian gesture, entails an acknowledgement that the very subjectivity of this figure has been subsumed within the operations of the commodity-form and is thus eligible for the same kind of manipulations as the readymade: ‘We are all just as absurd and displaced as a vulgar object, deprived of its use and decreed an art object: *whatever singularities*, supposed to be artistic.’³⁷ Claire Fontaine – a name taken from a popular line of French notebooks – is not so much a practice of *détournement* of individual objects, but of the position of the artist as a whole. As such it has precedents within neo-Situationist milieus, in particular the collective pseudonym Luther Blissett, adopted in the mid-1990s by a number of artists and activists throughout Western Europe who perpetrated a range of pranks and media hoaxes as well as authoring a booklet titled *Guy Debord Is Really Dead* (1995). Claire Fontaine – along with projects like *Annlee* (1999–2002) coordinated by Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno – clearly developed this readymade model, with its anonymous and cooperative elements; purging it of its lingering adolescent mischief, Carnevale and Thornhill have remade the masculine Luther Blissett into Claire Fontaine, a feminine whatever singularity – or ‘Young-Girl’, perhaps – set loose in the institutions of art.

As suggested in a work such as *The True Artist*, this practice is deeply engaged with a contemporary history of appropriation – or rather, it is a practice built on the ruins of this history. Claire Fontaine begins, we might say, precisely with what the critic Maragliano, reflecting on the allegorical procedures of the early 1980s, termed

*the old romantic error of imagining that the alienation of representation is something more than the representation of alienation, that critical merchandise is a criticism of merchandise, that a simple chiasmus is enough to bring us to an awareness of the poverty of ideology.*³⁸

Something of this suspension is materialised in Claire Fontaine’s series of *Brickbats*, industrially manufactured bricks with colour photocopies of the covers of famous texts of critical theory fastened around them with rubber bands, such as *La Société du Spectacle brickbat* (2006). One might describe them as ‘allegorical weapons’ – resembling nothing so much as the kind of rocks to which one might attach a ransom note to be thrown through a window, or perhaps recalling the *pavés* of May ’68 to be hurled at the cops. But then again, they are artistic commodities fashioned from other, more common commodities: the brick and mass-market paperback theory, both of which have been removed from use by the artists’ gesture – one can neither build with the brick nor read the book. And another layer of reference must be added: when seen as a group, the brickbats are often stacked in a way that distinctly recalls Carl Andre’s *Equivalents* of the mid-1960s, playing off his deskilling of sculptural practice toward a seriality that mimes that of the commodity itself. Suspended between exchange or exhibition value and use value, between theory and practice, the brickbats accept the impasse of *détournement* as a challenge. The evident irony of the *Brickbat*’s placement within the rarified confines of

36 Claire Fontaine, ‘Ready-made Artist and Human Strike’, p.4. Italics the author’s. Available at http://www.clairefontaine.ws/pdf/readymade_eng.pdf (last accessed on 11 July 2011).

37 *Ibid.*, pp.7–8. Emphasis Claire Fontaine’s.

38 G. Maragliano, ‘The Invisible Insurrection’, *op. cit.*, p.90.



Claire Fontaine,
The True Artist
(spiral version),
2004, smoke on
ceiling, 150 × 150cm.
Courtesy the artist,
Air de Paris and
Chantal Crousel,
Paris

the art gallery or museum is entirely purposeful: for Claire Fontaine, political impotence is taken as the necessary starting point for any reflection on the place of contemporary culture.

'Appropriated' elements are, then, ubiquitous in Claire Fontaine's work, ranging from cheap, everyday commodities to copies of well-known artworks. Signature elements of artists of the recent past are taken up and redeployed: Andy Warhol's iconic *Marilyns* and *Maos* or Bruce Nauman's neon signs most obviously; Christopher Wool's stencilled lettering or Jeff Koons's vacuum cleaners more subtly. This is what Carnevale and Thornhill call their strategy of 'expropriation', as distinct from appropriation; as they explain, this 'refers to the idea that we live dispossessed of the world and of the meaning of things and that we can borrow signs and objects in order to compose something that makes sense, which brings us back to something we experience'.³⁹ Expropriation, however, is a term derived not from aesthetic discourse but from the Marxist critique of political economy, where it names exactly that inexorable process of dispossession whereby capitalism extracts and concentrates wealth, whether monetary, intellectual or cultural, in ever fewer hands. But at the same time, this process contains the seeds of its own dissolution, for this wholesale absorption of cultural production is predicated on an ever more socialised — and at least implicitly collectivised — labour.⁴⁰ This works at a number of levels in contemporary art, for example, at perhaps its most concrete, the widespread process of 'fabrication', the outsourcing of artistic labour that subtends so many of the spectacular pieces visible on the contemporary biennial circuit. Claire Fontaine have made a number of neon signs addressing this dynamic, each beginning with the phrase 'This neon sign was made by ...', and then stating the name of the fabricator and its production cost. It is important not to mistake this gesture for 'institutional critique'; what is at stake here is less an insistence on the transparency and fairness of process — as in, say, certain strains of Conceptual art — than the revelation of the contradiction inherent in the simultaneity of socialised production and privatised profit-taking.

On a broader level, however, expropriation can be seen as the underlying logic of that long line of artistic production that has questioned the exalted status of the author, from Duchamp to Warhol to the 'appropriationists'. If their work, with its recourse to the readymade and to mechanical reproduction, entailed a critical dismantling of privileged terms within cultural discourse such as 'originality', it was also a symptom of the larger capitalist dynamic of deterritorialisation. Claire Fontaine has operated consistently within this dialectic, within the *tabula rasa* where once stood the artist; this figure's 'death' does not point toward the birth of the reader or spectator, but rather toward the horizon of a socialised production of culture, a collective culture that already exists in inverse form. Debord expressed something similar when he wrote, citing Lautréamont, that art must be made by all.⁴¹ Claire Fontaine's work operates in the wake of the collapse of that promise of the last century's avant-gardes, preserving its memory while acknowledging that, in the aesthetic realm as elsewhere, private property has not been undone: the *Passes-partout* of 2007 and later — sets of picks specifically designed to open the locks of the artists' galleries, collectors' homes, etc. — are emblematic in this regard.

The sum of these practices, from the pages of *Tiqqun* to the activities of Coupat and the work of Claire Fontaine, cannot be said to constitute the final 'legacy' of Debord, of course. At some level Alice Becker-Ho and Patrick Mosconi's letter of 1996 is right: there is no direct line of inheritance from his life and his work. But to the extent that they have all worked to turn the spectacle against itself, to expropriate the expropriators of our linguistic and physical commons, they offer a summary of what his thought has to offer our current moment of social struggle.

39 Claire Fontaine, quoted in Chen Tamir, 'Political Action Figures: The Role of the Artist Can Also Be a Readymade', *C Magazine*, no.101, Spring 2009, p.29.

40 See Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1* (trans. Ben Fowkes), London: Penguin Books, 1990, pp.928–29.

41 G. Debord and Gil Wolman, 'A User's Guide to Détournement', in Ken Knabb (ed. and trans.), *Situationist International Anthology*, Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2007, p.16.