

GREIL MARCUS

LIPSTICK TRACES

A SECRET

HISTORY

OF THE

TWENTIETH

CENTURY

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CIP

MN

Designed by Gwen Frankfeldt

To John Rockwell,
who got me started.

To the Firesign Theater and
Monty Python's Flying Circus,
who got me through it.

his next album in outer space, but it didn't come off as a parody. Rock 'n' roll became an ordinary social fact, like a commute or a highway construction project. It became a habit, a structure, an invisible oppression.

A mythical era even as it unfolded, the sixties were based in the belief that since everything was true, everything was possible. Among rock stars, that utopian ideology was by the 1970s reduced to a well-heeled solipsism. On the terms of the barefoot solipsism of extermination camp survival, even a fantasy of resistance—which by its nature almost had to be a fantasy of collectivity, of solidarity—was utopian; insisting on the sensitivity of the individual as the source of all value, rock stars made a utopia out of solipsism. Like movie stars, they had made so much money that they remained untouched by and uninterested in what was happening in the world, and their renderings of a life of ease or of small problems proved attractive to a very large audience. There was no need for change; “change” began to seem like an old-fashioned, sixties word. The chaos in society at large called for a music of permanence and reassurance; in the pop world, time stood still. For years that seemed like decades, you could turn on the radio with the assurance that you would hear James Taylor’s “Fire and Rain,” Led Zeppelin’s “Stairway to Heaven,” the Who’s “Behind Blue Eyes,” Rod Stewart’s “Maggie May.” It was all right; they were good songs.

SOME PEOPLE

Some people began to lose their taste for surprise; others had never known it. “People pay to see others believe in themselves,” Kim Gordon of the New York punk band Sonic Youth wrote in 1983. “On stage, in the midst of rock ‘n’ roll, many things happen and anything can happen, whether people come as voyeurs or come to submit to the moment.” Such words would not have been written in the mid-1970s, when people paid to see others believe that others believed in them. As the

concerts of the time ended, fans stood up, lit matches, held them high: they were praying.

It was 1974. Malcolm McLaren was briefly in the United States, managing the New York Dolls, then on their last legs. They had wandered into his shop, played him their records; he’d laughed. “I couldn’t believe how anybody could be so bad,” he said long after, citing the moment as the inspiration for the Sex Pistols. “The fact that they were so bad suddenly hit me with such force that I began to realize, ‘I’m laughing, I’m talking to these guys, I’m looking at them, and I’m laughing with them’; and I was suddenly impressed by the fact that I was no longer concerned with whether you could play well. Whether you were able to even know about rock ‘n’ roll to the extent that you were able to write songs properly wasn’t important any longer . . . The Dolls really impressed upon me that there was something else. There was something wonderful. I thought how brilliant they were to be this bad.”

No doubt a year later McLaren would be playing Dolls records for the Sex Pistols, just as two decades before Sam Phillips had played old blues records for his new rockabilly singers. A banner McLaren painted up and hoisted over the Dolls’ last stages captured the dead time they never escaped: “WHAT ARE THE POLITICS OF BOREDOM?”

IT WAS

It was, once removed, a situationist slogan. “Boredom is always counterrevolutionary,” the situationists had liked to say. McLaren’s question mark was his way of asking how much power might be secreted in the slogans he put such stock in; to find the answer, you had to use the slogans. “Boredom is always counterrevolutionary”—the line was typical of the situationist style, of its voice, a blindside paradox of dead rhetoric and ordinary language floated just this side of non sequitur, the declarative statement turning into a question as you heard it: what does this mean?

You already know, the situationists had answered: all you lack is the consciousness of what you know. Our project is nothing more than a seductive, subversive restatement of the obvious: "Our ideas are in everyone's mind." Our ideas about how the world works, about why it must be changed, are in everyone's mind as sensations almost no one is willing to translate into ideas, so we will do the translating. And that is all we have to do to change the world.

Boredom, to the situationists, was a supremely modern phenomenon, a modern form of control. In feudal times and for the first century of the Industrial Revolution, drudgery and privation produced numbing fatigue and horrible misery, no mystery, just a God-given fact: "In Adam's fall so sinned we all," and as for those few who knew neither fatigue nor misery, it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. As the situationists saw modernity, limited work and relative abundance, city planning and the welfare state, produced not happiness but depression and boredom. With God missing, people felt their condition not exactly as a fact, but simply as a fatalism devoid of meaning, which separated every man and woman from every other, which threw all people back upon themselves. I'm not happy—what's wrong with me?

Fatalism is acceptance: "Que sera, sera" is always counter-revolutionary. But as the situationists understood the modern world, boredom was less a question of work than of leisure. As they set out in the 1950s work seemed to be losing its hold on life; "automation" and "cybernetics" were wonderful new words. Leisure time was expanding—and in order to maintain their power, those who ruled, whether capitalist directors in the West or communist bureaucrats in the East, had to ensure that leisure was as boring as the new forms of work. More boring, if leisure was to replace work as the locus of everyday life, a thousand times more. What could be more productive of an atomized, hopeless fatalism than the feeling that one is deadened precisely where one ought to be having fun?

The eight men and women who gathered in the Italian town of Cosio d'Arroscia on 27 July 1957 to found the Situationist International pledged themselves to intervene in a future they believed to be on the verge of banishing both material necessity and individual autonomy. Modern technology had raised the specter of a world in which "work"—employment, wage labor, whatever tasks were performed because someone else said they had to be—might soon be no more than a fairy tale out of the Brothers Grimm. In a new world of unlimited leisure each individual might construct a life, just as in the old world a few privileged artists had constructed their representations of what life could be. It was an old dream, the dream of the young Karl Marx—every man his own artist!—but those who owned the present saw the future far more clearly than any of the sodden leftist sects claiming Marx's legacy. Those who ruled were reorganizing social life not merely to maintain their control, but to intensify it; modern technics was a two-edged sword, a means to the domination of the free field of abundance and leisure that revolutionaries had fantasized for five hundred years. Thus boredom. Misery led to resentment, which sooner or later found its rightful target, those who ruled. Boredom was a haze, a confusion, and finally the ultimate mode of control, self-control, alienation perfected: a bad conscience.

In modern society, leisure (What do I want to do today?) was replaced by entertainment (What is there to see today?). The potential fact of all possible freedoms was replaced by a fiction of false freedom: I have enough time and money to see whatever there is to see, whatever there is to see others do. Because this freedom was false, it was unsatisfying, it was boring. Because it was boring, it left whoever was unsatisfied to contemplate his or her inability to respond to what, after all, was a hit show. It's a good show, but I feel dead: my God, what's wrong with me? It was leisure culture that produced boredom—produced it, marketed it, took the profits, reinvested them. So the world was going to be changed, announced the

first number of *Internationale situationniste* in June 1958, "because we don't want to be bored . . . raging and ill-informed youth, well-off adolescent rebels lacking a point of view but far from lacking a cause—boredom is what they all have in common. The situationists will execute the judgment contemporary leisure is pronouncing against itself."

The situationists saw boredom as a social pathology; they looked for its negation among sociopaths. In the pages of their journal, lunatic criminals and rioters without manifestos sometimes seem like the only allies the writers are willing to embrace. The situationists meant to define a stance, not an ideology, because they saw all ideologies as alienations, transformations of subjectivity into objectivity, desire into a power that rendered the individual powerless: "There is no such thing as situationism," they said for years. The world was a structure of alienations and ideologies, of hierarchies and bureaucracies, each of which they saw as a version of the other; thus they celebrated a madman's slashing of a famous painting as a symbolic revolt against a bureaucratically administered alienation in which the ideology of the masterpiece reduced whoever looked at it to nothing. In the same way, they understood the responsible parade monitor who tried to keep people in check during a march against the Vietnam War as a bureaucratic ideologue enforcing a split between desire and comportment—and as much the enemy as General William Westmoreland, or for that matter Ho Chi Minh. Both the painting and the war were hit shows; whether a visit to the museum or a march in the street, both turned the spending of free time into the consumption of repression. The masterpiece convinced you that truth and beauty were someone else's gift from God, the protest in favor of the struggle of the Vietnamese that revolution was a fact of someone else's life. Neither could ever be yours, and so you left each show diminished, with less than you had brought to it. That, the situationists said again and again, was why the show had to be stopped, and could be: just as the tiny humiliations inflicted by the parade monitor were the essence of oppression, a fanatic's exem-

plary act could prove that liberty was within everyone's grasp.

The situationists announced themselves as revolutionaries, interested only in freedom, and freedom can mean the license to do anything, with consequences that are indistinguishable from murder, theft, looting, hooliganism, or littering—phenomena that, lacking anything better, the situationists were almost always ready to embrace as harbingers of revolution. But freedom can also mean the chance to discover what it is you truly want to do: to discover, as Edmund Wilson wrote in Paris in 1922, "for what drama one's setting is the setting." That too was what the situationists meant by leisure—and it was a lust not simply to discover but to create that drama that drove a twenty-five-year-old Parisian named Guy-Ernest Debord to gather artists and writers from France, Algeria, Italy, Denmark, Belgium, England, Scotland, Holland, and West Germany into the Situationist International in 1957. In 1975, with the defunct SI no more than a legend to a few one-time 1960s art students and student radicals, that drama was what McLaren was still seeking. What were the politics of boredom?

DEBORD

Debord wrote "Theses on the Cultural Revolution" for the first number of *Internationale situationniste*: "Victory," he said, "will be for those who know how to create disorder without loving it." As empty of disorder as rock 'n' roll was in 1975, McLaren understood that it remained the only form of culture the young cared about, and at thirty in 1975, he clung to a sixties definition of young—youth was an attitude, not an age. For the young everything flowed from rock 'n' roll (fashion, slang, sexual styles, drug habits, poses), or was organized by it, or was validated by it. The young, who as legal phantoms had nothing and as people wanted everything, felt the contradiction between what life promised and what it delivered most keenly: youth revolt was a key to social revolt, and thus the first target of social revolt could be rock 'n' roll. Connections

FOR A DIGNIFIED AND EFFECTIVE DEMONSTRATION

Brought to you by the ALL-LONDON UNITED ALLIANCE OF SOCIALIST CAUCUSES to whom the following are signatories: G.L.C., London Labour Party, T.U.C., S.W.P., W.R.P., I.M.G., C.N.D., Ecology Party, Y.C.L., and B.F.



CORRECT



INCORRECT

We welcome everyone to today's demonstration, which we hope will be amongst the biggest London has seen for many years. We are confident that the vast majority of you will keep intact your dignity. A disciplined rally is essential if we are to avoid discrediting ourselves in the eyes of the public and losing the approval of the police. We want to give the media no reason to condemn our campaign by pointing to any over-imaginative acts. To this end, we call on everyone to obey the dictates of the stewards who will be found alongside the police. They will be acting in your interests. They are sensible people – please be sensible with them. Beware of troublemakers – some may be in the crowd with you. If you see any do not hesitate to summon stewards or the police, who, we must remember, are our brothers in work. Comrades! Even in a socialist society we shall still use Special-In-Order to combat hooligans and deviants. While it's true that nowadays the police are occasionally over-zealous in their protection of privilege, property, and the violence of the world market, the best way of dealing with this is by demanding public accountability through elected local government or some other representation of massive community. In the meantime we should recognize that they will only listen to our complaints if we conduct ourselves in the correct manner.

Anonymous situationist-inspired leaflet, London, early 1980s

RESPECT FOR THE DEAD

Our tactics are those to which the greatest number can conform with the least difficulty. They require no more than your presence and a minimum of participation. All that we ask is that you recreate the conditions of your work. Remember! It's numbers that count; the boredom you feel is also imposed by the demo on everyone else. Each demonstrator must be equivalent to and replaceable by any other. Just like our old friend, the commodity. Please bear in mind that love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage, OK?

We therefore ask you to comply with the following simple rules:

- Exactly one hundred to a line, each rank to be one yard clear of the line in front. No lounging phase.
- Wait for the initiative of the official loud-speakers before repeating the correct slogans, always recognisable by their format. For example: "X - IN! ... Y - OUT!" or "WHAT DO WE WANT? - SOMETHING! ... WHEN DO WE WANT IT? - WHENEVER YOU GET ROUND TO GIVING IT TO US!". Kindly check that all Extra-Parliamentary slogans recognize the ultimate sovereignty of Parliament. If you have any doubts, consult our easy-to-read list of DEMONSTRATION SLOGANS DO's & DON'Ts:

CHANT		DO NOT CHANT
Cheap Fares Now!	NOT	Helicopters on Demand!
Victory to Fares Fight!	NOT	Total Contestation!
No Return to the '30s!	NOT	No Adventure for the '80s!
Slogans are jolly good fun!	NOT	Bollocks to Demands of our Enemies!
Baaaaaaassaaaa!	NOT	Riot for Romance!

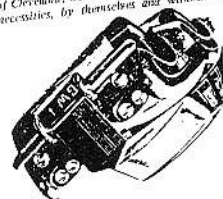
- The left-hand side of the rally has been designated a 'No Smoking' area. Demonstrators are respectfully asked to comply with this request.
- If you see any impatient extremists please inform us immediately. They are easily distinguishable by the following kinds of sectarian individualism:
 - Inventing unofficial slogans such as "Kenny is a Cap!", "Neither Left, Right, nor Centre!" or "Revolution is the Festival of the Depressed!" or some other aggressive utopian rubbish.
 - Departing from the prescribed site of the demo for the purpose of indulging in manual waltzes through shop windows and the willful destruction of saleable goods. Take care to note that Piccadilly, offering gold-drenched shops and fine vistas of the commodity, is a holiday of sheer temptation you should avoid.
 - Making unauthorised alterations to luxury cars.
 - Using banner poles in an extravagantly exuberant manner.
 - Smoking excessively long cigarettes or 'joints'.
 - Drinking bottled alcohol.
- coordinated ferocity**
 - Suggesting that demonstrators should band together in groups of fifty or more in order to spread disruption of traffic as widely as possible. For example, by the continuous use of zebra crossings, standing around chatting in the middle of the road or arranging obstacles to prevent the free flow of carbon monoxide, lead, cop cars, and tension-producing noises through our streets.
 - Any clever, exotic, or playful expression of individual or group initiative.

CLOCKWORK FUTILITY

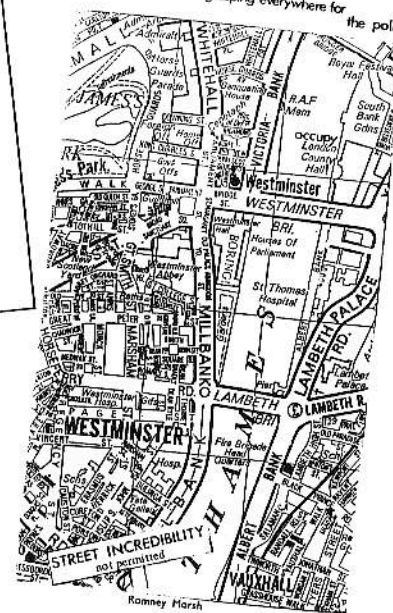
- During the rally you are urged to clap your favourite speakers. Please confine your enthusiasm to 15 secs per point made in the middle of a speech and a maximum of 30 secs at the end of one. Please do not interrupt with shouts of "BORING!".
 - Always remember to smile at the press cameras and adopt a suitably militant stance even when you feel pissed off with the whole business.
 - If you are uncertain whether a particular mode of behaviour is orderly or not, just do what everybody else is doing. Should any unconventional urges remain do not hesitate to discuss them with one of our stewards. They will be only too pleased to refer you to the appropriate specialist, whether G.P. or S.W.P.
 - At the end of the demo please do not dawdle. Failure to make your way home quickly could result in you missing the sight of yourself on TV.
- This leaflet is brought to you courtesy of the ALL-LONDON UNITED ALLIANCE OF SOCIALIST CAUCUSES.

The following have refused to sign this leaflet:
 The students of St Saviour's Primary School who refused to accept their discipline quietly and who wrecked their compulsory prison, causing one wibbling teacher to lament "These youngsters have hardly left their cradles, but they are threatening to take over the school".
 The rioters at Rydgossee Prison in Poland who fought Communist Party hacks. State Police, and Solidarity union officials, all allied in defence of the walls of the prison against the wrongpeople who were helping prisoners escape.
 The ASLEF traindrivers who avoid wage slavery as much as possible, preferring dancing and drinking to sacrificing themselves to a job which mainly involves transporting other slaves so that they may perpetuate the facility of it all.

The black and white forlorn youth of Clapham who used CB radios for the fun of organising efficient looting.
 The Deptford New Cross Marchers of a year ago who in anger and anarchy broke away from the march in order to re-distribute wealth in the Bond Street area.
 The Tootsie and Southall youths who shouted down Left Labour activists patronising enough to characterize the riots as 'understandable but inexcusable'.
 The truckdrivers of Cleveland, USA, who took over the local distribution of food, medicine, and other necessities, by themselves and without mediation, for over 3 weeks.



the road is an arm of the law...
 grasping everywhere for
 the pollution of money



could be made. If one could show that rock 'n' roll, by the mid-1970s ideologically empowered as the ruling exception to the humdrum conduct of social life, had become simply the shiniest cog in the established order, then a demystification of rock 'n' roll might lead to a demystification of social life.

To structure the situation in this way took real imagination, even genius—it doesn't matter whose it was. In the past, rock 'n' roll as a version of revolt had always been seen by its fans as a weapon or, more deeply, as an end in itself, self-justifying: a momentary version of the life everyone would live in the best of all possible worlds. Pete Townshend, in 1968:

Mother has just fallen down the stairs, dad's lost all his money at the dog track, the baby's got TB. In comes the kid with his transistor radio, grooving to Chuck Berry. He doesn't give a shit about mom falling down the stairs . . . It's a good thing that you've got a machine, a radio that puts out rock and roll songs and it makes you groove through the day. That's the game, of course: When you are listening to a rock and roll song the way you listen to "Jumpin' Jack Flash," or something similar, that's the way you should really spend your whole life.

So McLaren heard when a fellow student got up to sing "Great Balls of Fire"—in 1958, the act itself was a negation of social facts. But when rock 'n' roll had become just another social fact, this was self-defeating, even on the level of the next good song. By 1975, Townshend's *Candideisms* removed rock 'n' roll from the social realities that gave the music its kick. In 1958, even in 1968, a simple rock 'n' roll performance could open up questions of identity, justice, repression, will, and desire; now it was organized to draw such questions into itself and make them disappear.

Who could say that "Fire and Rain," "Stairway to Heaven," "Behind Blue Eyes," and "Maggie May" were not affirmations of freedom as they were made, and oppressions as they were used? Only those who refused to believe that the affirmation where freedom is grasped is rooted in a negation where freedom is glimpsed—and those people did not include McLaren and the Sex Pistols. Thus they damned rock 'n' roll as a rot-

ting corpse: a monster of moneyed reaction, a mechanism for false consciousness, a system of self-exploitation, a theater of glamorized oppression, a bore. Rock 'n' roll, Johnny Rotten would say, was only the first of many things the Sex Pistols came to destroy. And yet because the Sex Pistols had no other weapons, because they were fans in spite of themselves, they played rock 'n' roll, stripping it down to essentials of speed, noise, fury, and manic glee no one had touched before.

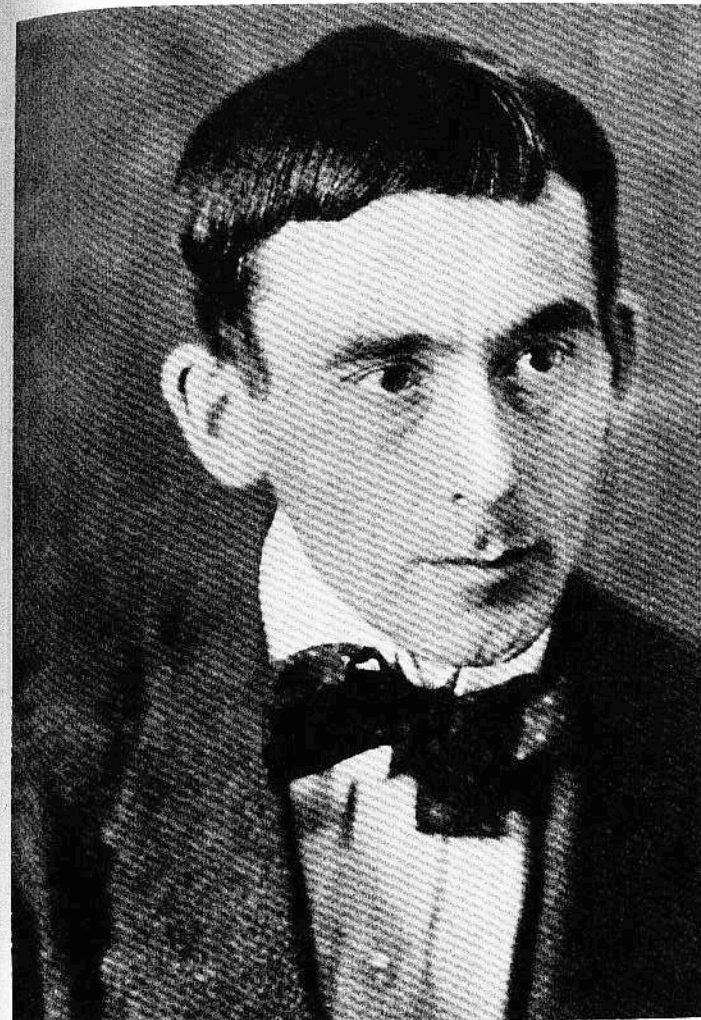
They used rock 'n' roll as a weapon against itself. With all instruments but guitar, bass, drums, and voice written off as effete, as elitist accoutrements of a professionalist cult of technique, it was a music best suited to anger and frustration, focusing chaos, dramatizing the last days as everyday life, ramming all emotions into the narrow gap between a blank stare and a sardonic grin. The guitarist laid down a line of fire to cover the singer, the rhythm section put both in a pressure drop, and as a response to what was suddenly perceived as the totalitarian freeze of the modern world the music could seem like a version of it. It was also something new under the sun: a new sound.

IT'S THE OLDEST

It's the oldest hype in the book—and the page that can't be footnoted. After thirty years of rock 'n' roll there are plenty of footnotes: collectors' albums that allow a listener to go back in time, enter the studio that no longer exists, and hear the new sound as it was discovered, flubbed, or even denied. It is a displacing experience.

In Chicago in 1957, trying to cut "Little Village," bluesman Sonny Boy Williamson and his white producer get into an argument over just what, exactly, constitutes a village—an argument resolved only when Williamson shouts, "Little *village*, motherfucker! You name it after yo' mammy if you like!" As a footnote, this explains why Williamson proceeds to take up much of the song with a discussion of what distinguishes a vil-

Emmy Hennings,
Munich, 1913



Hugo Ball,
Zurich, 1916



Richard Huelsenbeck,
Berlin, 1920



Ivan Chtcheglov, about 1954, from Guy Debord's film *In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni*, 1978



From left, Michèle Bernstein, Asger Jorn, unidentified woman, Guy Debord, from Debord's film *Sur le passage de quelques personnes à travers une assez courte unité de temps*, 1959



Punk, London, late 1970s

promised in 1963. "The free explosion must escape us and any other control forever." And then *Mémoires* could be happily forgotten, as if it had never been. As a memoir that was also a prophecy, the book would have situated itself in advance as an artifact that, once realized, would remain as unknown as it would have proven itself fecund: the secret history of a time to come.

IT WAS

It was, it turned out, a sort of map to a territory that had ceased to exist, an account of adventures that had taken place there. "There was, then, on the left bank of the river—one cannot dip one's foot twice in the same river, or touch a perishable substance twice in the same state—a neighborhood where the negative held court." So Debord said to his camera in 1978, when the time to come had passed. "There," he wrote a year later, "in 1952, in Paris, four or five unworthy people decided to search for the supercession of art." He did not explain what this meant, or rather he explained in a distant way, putting quotes around another phrase one could have found floating in *Mémoires*: "The supercession of art is the 'Northwest Passage' of the geography of real life, so often sought for more than a century, a search beginning especially in self-destroying modern poetry."

Debord was not, a quarter-century after the four or five had begun their search for transcendence, talking about poetry, not as one usually understands the word; he was talking about "social revolution," a complete transformation of life as people actually lived it, every day. He was talking about what he had glimpsed in the insurrection of May '68—a happenstance, he was now arguing, a month of noise, whose prefiguration could be seen in the interrupted narratives and fragmented representations of *Mémoires*, all transposed back into the vanished daily life of the four or five, the provisional micro-society. Recapturing the language of that self-destroying modern poetry,

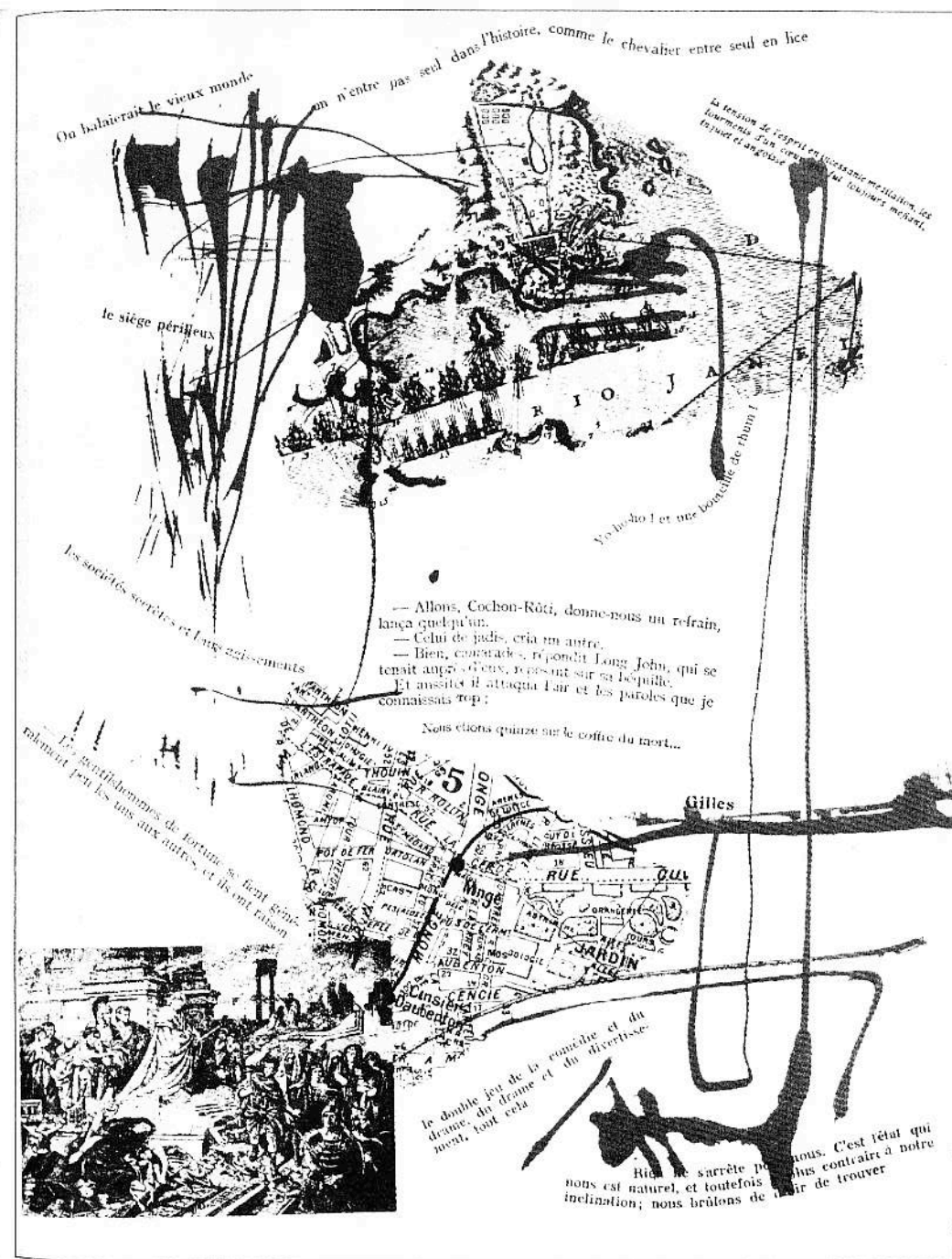
not to write it but to live it out and set it loose in the world—that, Debord was saying, was what the LI had been about. "Finishing off art; declaring in the heart of a cathedral that God was dead; plotting to blow up the Eiffel Tower—such were the scandals occasionally offered up by those whose way of life was the real scandal." "The domain we mean to replace and fulfill is poetry," the SI said in 1958; the revolution the SI wanted was going to "realize" poetry, and "realizing poetry means nothing less than simultaneously and inseparably creating events and their languages." This was the future, and also the past, the whole world: "the moment of true poetry brings all the unsettled debts of history back into play."

"The situationists want to *forget* about the past," they said as they began, but they never did; the past was a treasure chest, now the lock, now the treasure. Michèle Bernstein was a member of the LI and the SI almost from the beginning to almost the end; in 1983 she sat in her airy living room in England and explained. "Everyone is the son of many fathers," she said. "There was the father we hated, which was surrealism. And there was the father we loved, which was dada. We were the children of both." They were "enfants perdus," Debord often said, lost children, and so they claimed any fathers in whose faces they could recognize their own: the surrealists, the dadaists, the failed revolutionaries of the first third of the twentieth century, the Communards, the young Karl Marx, Saint-Just, medieval heretics—and all, as Debord and the others began talking in the 1950s, were moribund, forgotten, memories and rumors, manqué, maudit. All were, at best, legends—to the LI and the SI, part of a legend of freedom.

Moved forward through the 1950s and 1960s by Debord's groups, given new names and a new shape, this was finally a legend almost too old to understand, let alone explain: a legend, Debord would helplessly, pathetically say in 1979, of "an Athens, a Florence, from which no one will be excluded, reaching to all the corners of the earth"—once again, as never before. Back, back, to a new Athens, a new Florence—and there, as Richard Huelsenbeck prophesied backward in Berlin in

1920, crowds would gather around every dialogue, dramas would be enacted in every street, and we would find ourselves in Homeric times. There, then, as Edmund Wilson prophesied forward in Paris in 1922, we would discover for what drama our setting was the setting. Poetry would be realized: Lautréamont's call, made in 1870, for a poetry "made by all." We would feel the will to speak; discover what it was we wanted to say; say it; be understood; win a response. All at once we would create events and their languages, and live in permanence within that paradise. "We have to multiply poetic subjects and objects," Debord wrote in 1957, in the founding paper of the SI, "and we have to organize games of these poetic objects among these poetic subjects. This is our entire program, which is essentially transitory. Our situations will be ephemeral, without a future: passageways."

At its limit, those words are the legend of freedom: the promise that one's words and acts will float free forever. Those words are themselves poetry; they can stay right where they are, in perfect balance, or they can lead anywhere, a motionless cause. In pursuit of a motionless cause—an idea of transformation so abstract it could hold its shape until the world was ready to be changed by it—the LI and the SI tried to act out a legend of freedom, and at the most that is all they are now. Always, no matter how incisive their ruthless critiques of whatever existed, there was that element of abstraction: an element that gave those critiques (whether applied by the LI to Guatemala in 1954 or by the SI to Watts in 1965 or France in May 1968) a bewitching, negative power, the hint of an event and a language to come, which still keeps the story the groups tried to tell alive. As I tell the story, it all begins, and must be judged against, what once happened in a nightclub and was returned to another—just as what happened in those nightclubs must be judged against what for certain moments was taken out of nightclubs, written on walls, shouted, played out in buildings and streets that were suddenly seen as never before. From one perspective the line is easy to draw, just a line—for example, the LI's 1953 graffiti "NEVER WORK," which



reappeared as May '68 graffiti, and was rewritten in 1977 for the Sex Pistols' "Seventeen": "We don't work / I just feed / That's all I need." But that connection—a one-line LI manifesto, as featured in one-time situationist Christopher Gray's *Leaving the 20th Century: The Incomplete Work of the Situationist International* and passed down by Gray's friends Malcolm McLaren and Jamie Reid to Johnny Rotten—is tradition as arithmetic. To find its story one has to disrupt the continuities of a tradition, even the discontinuities of a smoky, subterranean tradition, with a certain simultaneity. For example: if in pursuit of a negation of their society's idea of happiness the Sex Pistols found themselves drawn again and again to the verge of dada glossolalia, into the realm of self-destroying modern poetry, *Mémoires* reached the same spot on purpose; though the convergence was no accident, neither was it exactly the result of a transference. Henri Lefebvre's words are worth recalling: "To the degree that modernity has a meaning, it is this: it carries within itself, from the beginning, a radical negation—Dada, this event which took place in a Zurich cafe." Lefebvre was making an argument, not posing a riddle; this negation, he was saying, had persisted, not as an art tradition canalized into an invulnerable future, but as an unsettled debt of history, extending into an unresolved past. It didn't matter that as Lefebvre spoke in 1975 the Sex Pistols were forming, or that neither could ever acknowledge the other, as Lefebvre and Debord once acknowledged each other as comrades in an attempt to make a revolution out of everyday life: the Sex Pistols, taking the stage as an instinctive cultural impulse, with unknown roots in *Mémoires*, a studied cultural thesis, brought the debt back into play. As they brought it back into play, they increased it—and then, as soon as they consented to disappear from history, the debt according to its terms made them, too, a legend of freedom.

That bad paper is the only currency in this tale: lost children seek their fathers, and fathers seek their lost children, but nobody really looks like anybody else. So all, fixed on the wrong faces, pass each other by: this is the drift of secret his-

tory, a history that remains secret even to those who make it, especially to those who make it. In the Sex Pistols' hands, and in the hands of those who turned up in their wake, all this appeared as a blind groping toward a new story, driven by the instinctive dada suspicion that ordinary language could not tell it. In Debord's book, which presented itself as a groping, yet so carefully arranged that a lightly constructed page could have the same effect as a violent pause in a piece of music, it was a conscious attempt to use dada language to tell the story that language had passed down to him: a story, and a language, that contained the most abstract and ephemeral legend of freedom he knew.

It was a legend, Debord might have thought as he cut and pasted in 1957, that was part of a past, and part of a future, he had helped make. He had lived it; whatever dada had been, now, from page to page in *Mémoires*, it was something else. Once, the legend had it, it was an experiment in self-destroying modern poetry. Now it was the struggle of a small band, moved by the notion that the language of self-destroying modern poetry was a key to social revolution, to raise fragments of experience ("The evening, Barbara" "our talk is full of booze" "Lights, shadows, figures," one could pick out as *Mémoires* began) to the level of the book's epigraph. "Let the dead bury the dead, and mourn them," Debord quoted Marx, Marx writing in 1843 to his friend Arnold Ruge, just as Marx began by quoting Matthew, who was quoting Jesus, Marx then following with words Debord now made his own: "Our kind will be the first to blaze a trail into a new life."



Guy-Ernest Debord, *Ion*, April 1952

ary references against intended footage of riots, colonialist military maneuvers, Left Bank hanging-out, and a fair number of shots of Debord himself. There were a few isouienne blank spots and a lot of letter poetry. Stripped of its lettrist conventions, it was a twenty-year-old's funeral oration on lost youth; the tone was misty and received. ("I have destroyed the cinema," Debord said, quaintly returning to the simplest surrealist act, "because it was easier than shooting passersby.") Various surrealist icons and suicides were trotted out and put through their paces. "You know," said the narrator as the script ended, handing reviewers a tagline, "none of this matters." Within the lettrist milieu, or twentieth-century bohemia as such, it was really nothing new.

Debord's claim that his film—*Hurlements en faveur de Sade* (Howls for de Sade)—represented a superseding of cinéma discrèpant paid off when the film was finally made and finally screened. It contained no images at all.

IT WAS

It was first unspooled at the Musée de l'Homme, on 30 June 1952; the plug was pulled after twenty minutes. Several members of the lettrist group quit in protest over Isou's endorsement of the atrocity. A second screening, three months later, made it to the end thanks mostly to a guard of radical lettrists. In London, where *Hurlements* was first presented in 1957, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, the program carried a warning: "OUTRAGE? The film . . . caused riots when shown in Paris. The Institute is screening this film in the belief that members should be given a chance to make up their own minds about it, though the Institute wishes to be understood that it cannot be held responsible for the indignation of members who attend." The ICA couldn't have sold more tickets with a sex film starring Princess Margaret.

The art historian Guy Atkins describes a 1960 ICA screening:

When the lights went up there was an immediate babble of protest. People stood around and some made angry speeches. One man threatened to resign from the ICA unless the money for his ticket was refunded. Another complained that he and his wife had come all the way from Wimbeldon and had paid for a babysitter, because neither of them wanted to miss the film. These protests were so odd that it was as if Guy Debord himself were present, in his role of Mephistopheles, hypnotizing these ordinary English people into making fools of themselves.

Atkins went on:

The noise from the lecture room was so loud that it reached the next audience, queuing on the stairs for the second house. Those who had just seen the film came out of the auditorium and tried to persuade their friends on the stairs to go home, instead of wasting their time and money. But the atmosphere was so charged with excitement that this well-intentioned advice had the opposite effect. The newcomers were all the more anxious to see the film, since nobody imagined that the show would be a complete blank!

Afterwards one realized that Debord's use of emptiness and silence had played on the nerves of the spectators, finally causing them to let out "howls in favor of de Sade."

The slightest familiarity with the history of the avant-garde makes it obvious that nothing is easier than the provocation of a riot by a putative art statement. (When *Hurlements* ran at the Musée de l'Homme, there was some real violence and destruction.) All you have to do is lead an audience to expect one thing and give it something else—or, as Alfred Jarry proved in Paris in 1896, opening the first performance of *Ubu Roi* with the only formally disguised obscenity "Merdre" (Shittr, more or less), that you violate a taboo everyone can recognize as such. By 1952 audiences no less than artists had long since learned the game—and Debord began from that premise.

The format of his full-length movie was a black screen when the soundtrack was silent, a white screen when there was dialogue between the five speakers: Wolman, Debord, Berna, one Barbara Rosenthal, and Isou, all of whom read their lines in monotone. The film presented fragments of the lettrist milieu

and surrounded them with the detritus of the dominant world the lettrists meant to replace; its real subject matter was Debord's first attempt to claim a set of metaphors through which he might identify a new terrain and place himself upon it. He chased his themes in a disconnected fashion—but what little there was to hear (twenty minutes of sound out of eighty minutes of celluloid) was hardly the random verbiage described by those few who have written about the film. In its way, *Hurlements* was as shaped as anything from Hollywood.

It begins with a few minutes of white screen/dialogue:

Berna: Article 115. When a person has ceased to appear at his residence or domicile, and when after four years no information has been received concerning said person, interested parties may lodge an appeal with the local court in order to make such absence known.

Wolman: Love is only valid in a pre-revolutionary period.

Debord: You're lying—no one loves you! Art begins, grows, and fades because dissatisfied men transcend the world of official expression and the displays of its poverty.

Rosenthal: Say, did you sleep with Françoise?

Isou declaims on the death of the cinema; Berna jokes about the Youth Front attack on the Auteuil orphanage. There is a key line from Wolman that Isou must have missed ("And their revolts were turning into acts of conformity"); blind quotes from John Ford's *Rio Grande* and from Saint-Just ("Happiness is a new idea in Europe"). Topping Isou's implied self-insertion into the cinematic pantheon, there is a rundown of film-history highlights, from 1902, the year of Georges Méliès *A Trip to the Moon*, through 1931, noted as the year of both Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights* and the "birth of Guy-Ernest Debord," then a leap over two decades of posited dead time to Isou's *Treatise*, Wolman's *L'Anticoncept*, and *Hurlements* itself. And there is the line around which the rest of Debord's life would turn—"The art of the future will be the overthrow of situations, or nothing"—followed by an anticlimax from Berna—"In the cafes of Saint-Germain-des-Prés!"

The soundtrack stopped and the screen turned black. After

two minutes the screen turned white and the dialogue resumed. The sequencing continued, the alternating passages varying in length, the dialogue becoming more disassociated. New motifs appeared: sexual frenzy, the suicide of a twelve-year-old radio actress, the suicide of surrealist hero Jacques Vaché, the suicide of dada hero Arthur Cravan, the presumed suicide of Jack the Ripper, a summation of the theme ("The perfection of suicide is in equivocation"), and a nice homage to the assault on Notre-Dame ("More than one cathedral was built in memory of Serge Berna").

There was a buried reference to the low-life heroes of *Les Enfants du paradis*—those who, by the end of the picture, have become celebrated actors, celebrated courtesans, or celebrated criminals. It was as well a celebration of the five speakers in *Hurlements*: "They'll be famous someday—you'll see!" There were overblown tributes to the terrible sensitivity of youth, cut with passages of real lyricism, borrowed from Joyce; then a fine pun that deflated every easy embrace of suicide: "We were ready to make every bridge jump—but the bridges got their own back." Cued by the opening reading from "Article 115," there was more from the French Civil Code: regulations on insanity and on a builder's responsibility to his client, the latter perhaps to bring in the number of the statute: 1793, the year the revolution, with Saint-Just leading the prosecution, sent Louis XVI to the guillotine. The intermittent dialogue was a groping toward a critique of the ruling morality—Isou's no less than that of society at large—and it presented itself as a groping.

Because *Hurlements* is a conceptual piece, one might treat it conceptually. For that matter I have no alternative. Debord published versions of his final scenario in 1955, 1964, and 1978; today the film itself is impossible to see. I can only work from my own reaction to seeing *Hurlements* on the page.

One can imagine an audience, at first utterly thrown by blankness, but attuned to Left Bank scandale pour la scandale, quickly becoming accustomed—art-socialized—to the new rules perpetrated by the film. Imagining yourself part of the audi-

ence, you can imagine soon looking forward to the shifts from black screen/silence to white screen/dialogue, or even vice versa. You can imagine relaxing, accepting this supposedly unacceptable anti-show, this absolute "decomposition of the cinema," this "displacement of the values of creation toward the spectator" (Debord, in his "Prolegomena"). But as you grasp the form of the negation, grasp that form as such is a negation of negation, an affirmation that creation is possible, the world begins to reform—to comfortably reform.

An hour into the thing, you'd expect at least another tidbit of conversation, another aphorism, another quote to please those in the know and mystify any stray tourists; maybe, you might think, at the end there will even be a picture. If the purpose of lettrism, as Debord and Wolman summed it up in 1955, was to cause a "fatal inflation in the arts," then this was truly ultra-lettrism: here a single image, of what it would not matter, would carry more force than all the mushroom-cloud shots closing avant-garde films all over the world in 1952. A penny would truly be a fortune; the dada bank would make the audience rich beyond its dreams. In this setting, the final self-portrait Debord wrote into the *Ion* version of *Hurlements* would be the second coming of Christ.

So you can picture an audience giving into the event, recognizing the film's prescriptions and abiding by its orders—certainly, as I read the final script after a year of reading various accounts of this movie-without-images, that was my imagined response. I caught on; it all began to seem reasonable. That was the reaction Debord wanted—and so, after more than fifty minutes of shifting white screen into black, talk into silence, he pulled the string. "We are living like lost children, our adventures incomplete," Debord said on the soundtrack. *Enfants perdus*: the audience would have known that he was referring to the lettrists and to the Auteuil orphans; that he was using French military slang for soldiers sent on almost suicidal reconnaissance missions; that he was parodying then-current sociological jargon for postwar French youth. And the audience would have known that Debord was most of all call-

ing up the "enfants perdus" of Marcel Carné's 1942 film *Les Visiteurs du soir* (The Night Visitors), Gilles and Dominique, young emissaries of the devil sent to destroy love on earth, destroyers seduced by earthly love; the audience would have known that in *Les Visiteurs du soir* the devil is meant to represent Hitler, and that there was no way Debord did not know it. The film would have reached a moment of obviousness, confusion, suspension: "Nous vivons en enfants perdus nos aventures incomplètes." There followed fully twenty-four minutes of silence, during which the screen remained black. Then, on those rare occasions when audiences or house managers allowed the work to reach its conclusion, the film ran out.

NOW EVEN

Now even allowing that it might have been lack of money or mere laziness that led Debord to scrap the images and much of the soundtrack of his *Ion* scenario, one can perhaps conjure up Debord's state of mind as he finally contrived his movie. After convincing an audience that it could accept an acceptable version of nothing, he would insist on the real thing.

John Cage's silent *4' 33"*, introduced the same year as *Hurléments*, was a concept—and the audience was given a performer to watch, a man sitting at a piano he did not play. Debord's film was both less (on the terms of decomposition, every additional minute was a geometric reduction) and more (seventy-five minutes more). Of course it was also a joke, like *The Best of Marcel Marceau*, an lp released in 1971 on the MGM/Gone-If label by Mike Curb (in 1978 elected lieutenant governor of California, and, for a time, seriously discussed as a Republican candidate for the presidency), which featured two sides of "Silence: 19 min., applause: 1 min." To experience *Hurléments* might have been boring beyond description: a provocation staged in the most sterile environment, not even worth fighting over. You could pull the plug or you could

leave. To read Debord's final script so many years later—to read it as an argument, as a manifesto, as a before-the-fact event taking place in the mind of its creator—can be a pure shock, a pure thrill.

The manifesto had its obvious clauses. The blank screen suggested that art was a trick; that any real movie one might pay money to see was full of nothing; that the lettrists were invisible to the dominant society, living in its shadows, working in the dark—that no matter how incomprehensible the lettrists' words and unwords might be to anyone else, the blackness accompanying their silence meant that they alone had a claim on their time. But the center of *Hurléments*, and the key to its aesthetics, was its assembly of references and metaphors: *Les Enfants du paradis*, Saint-Just, the Notre-Dame scandal, *Les Visiteurs du soir*, "enfants perdus," and the odd exclamation that the art of the future would have nothing to do with the decomposition of the cinema or anything else—that art, and the future, would be a question of "situations."

"I was there—up in the balcony with Guy, with the bags of flour," Michèle Bernstein said in 1983, thirty-one years after the first complete screening of Debord's film: the 13 October 1952 show at the Latin Quarter Film Club. "Below us were all the people we knew—and Isidore Isou, and Marc, O, who'd broken with Isou, and who we'd broken with. Before the film Serge Berna came on stage and delivered a wonderful speech on the cinema—pretending to be a professor. The flour was of course to drop on the people below. And in those days I had a voice—a voice that could break glass. I don't know where it went—if it's smoking or drinking. It wasn't a scream: just a sound I could make. I was to 'howl' when people began to make noise, when they began to complain—I was to make a greater noise. And I did.

"I can't remember if Guy and I even stayed to the finish—you know the last twenty minutes are silence, nothing. But I do know that Serge Berna tried to keep people from leaving. 'Don't go!' he said. 'At the end there's something really dirty!'"

was the idea. On the symbolist terrain of the LI, Saint-Just's time-to-come, his promise of happiness, collapsed into Bossuet's promise of sorrow, his time-to-pass; the wish for novelty fought against the certainty that nothing was new under the sun. As a clash of metaphors it was almost an event, repeated every day. The LI believed the old world had to be changed because its time had stopped, but within the matrix of the group that meant to live in a new world, time moved too fast—and that contradiction was the LI's purchase on the world. For the sake of a future explosion, the members of the LI subjected themselves to the pressure of implosion. It was salutary, they thought, separating the true from the false, people no less than ideas. "Il s'agit de se perdre," Debord wrote in *I.L.* no. 2: "what's at stake is disappearance"—or, "self-destruction." "Our concern was not a literary school, a renewal of expression, a modernism," Debord and Wolman wrote in "Why Lettrism?," *Potlatch* no. 22, 9 September 1955. "At issue is a way of life, one which will continue to pass through many explorations, many provisional formulations, and which itself belongs only to the provisional . . . we are waiting for many people and events to come. We have the advantage of no longer expecting anything from known activities, known individuals, and known institutions."

It's not easy to go into exile within a world one means to change. If something more than madness or suicide is the real goal, isolation, especially the isolation of a group, has to be searched for. To find it, the LI didn't set up a commune in the countryside, or hole up in someone's parents' apartment, like the student Maoists in Godard's 1967 film *La Chinoise*, which should have been called "What I Did on My Summer Vacation." Instead, pursuing the *dérive*, the "technique of displacement without goals," the band drifted through the streets among everybody else. "The spectacle is permanent," Debord wrote in *I.L.* no. 2; Haussmann's Paris was a city founded in spectacle, so Debord and the rest took it as an image they could distort, that they could subject to a *détournement* in acts. Walking through the city in twos or threes or solo, look-

ing for its "microclimates," its unmarked zones of feeling, they tried to hear their own voices beckoning from doorways still a block away, to catch the echo of a dead end in their mouths.

AS EVERYDAY

As everyday life it was a mystical quest: "We are bored in the city, there is no longer any temple of the sun." That was Chtcheglov's language: "And you, forgotten, your memories ravaged by all the sorrow of the map of the world, stranded in the Red Caves of Pali-Kao, without music and without geography, no longer setting out for the hacienda where the roots call up the child and the wine is drunk down to fables from an old almanac. Now that game is lost. You'll never see the hacienda. The hacienda must be built." This was the language the LI used after Chtcheglov's exclusion: "we like to think that those who sought the Grail weren't dupes," they wrote in "36 rue des Morillons," *Potlatch* no. 8, 10 August 1954. "Their *DÉRIVE* is worthy of us . . . The religious makeup falls away. These knights of a mythic western were out for pleasure: a brilliant talent for losing themselves in play; a voyage into amazement; a love of speed; a terrain of relativity." This was the language Debord used in *In girum*, almost a quarter-century later: "It was a drift to great days, where nothing resembled the old—and which never stopped. Surprising meetings, stunning obstacles, grand betrayals, perilous enchantments."

As bathos it was just drunks trying to walk and think at the same time. As a use of time it was the shifting of the city back into the primeval forest, then into a haunted house more modern than anything modern architects ever dreamed of, a game of freedom in which the goal was not to score but to remain on the field, to consciously position oneself between past and future. "You can never know which streets to take and which to avoid," says the narrator in Paul Auster's 1987 novel *In the Country of Last Things*—she is speaking from the future, when the city has collapsed into an anarchy of killer



"It's unheard of, an adventure like this in the midst of the 20th century . . ."

—detail from Guy-Ernest Debord, *Mémoires*, 1959

gangs and flagellant sects, but the state of mind she is forced to bring to her city is the state of mind the LI chose to bring to its own. "Bit by bit," she says, "the city robs you of certainty. There can never be any fixed point, and you can survive only if nothing is necessary to you. Without warning, you must be able to change, to drop what you are doing, to reverse. In the end, there is nothing that is not the case. As a consequence, you must learn how to read the signs . . . The essential thing is not to become inured. For habits are deadly. Even if it is for the hundredth time, you must encounter each thing as if you have never known it before. This is next to impossible, I realize, but it is an absolute rule." And that too is Chtcheglov's kind of language, because on the *dérive* he took the lead. In the detoured characterizations of *In girum* Debord may be Zorro, Lacenaire, or even General Custer at Little Big Horn; Chtcheglov, except for a moment when Debord makes him into King Ludwig II, the mad castle builder of Bavaria, is always Prince Valiant.

"The *dérive* (with its flow of acts, gestures, strolls, encounters)," Chtcheglov wrote to Debord and Bernstein in 1963, "was to the *totality* exactly what psychoanalysis (in the best sense) is to language. Let yourself go with the flow of words, says the analyst. He listens, until the moment when he rejects or modifies (one could say *detourns*) a word, an expression, or a definition . . . But just as analysis [as a treatment complete in itself] is almost always *contra-indicated*, so the continuous *dérive*"—the everyday life of the Fourierist Disneyland that Chtcheglov had proposed ten years before—"is dangerous to the extent that the individual, having gone too far (not without bases, but . . .) without defenses, is threatened with explosion, dissolution, disassociation, disintegration. And so the relapse into what is termed 'ordinary life,' which is to say, in reality, 'petrified life' . . . In 1953-1954, we drifted for three or four months at a time: that's the extreme limit, the critical point. It's a miracle it didn't kill us. We had a constitution—a bad constitution—of iron."

In 1963 Chtcheglov was writing from an insane asylum; he was full of doubt. But in 1953 there was no doubt at all. "You don't fault a theme park for not being a cathedral" is common sense, whether applied to an adventure movie or to a nineteen-year-old member of a provisional micro-society; to expose that fault, to drop the old world into its maw, was the goal Chtcheglov had set for the LI—the search for the theme park where he and everyone else would live in their own cathedrals. He was sure the *dérive* was the way to find that new city, just as Debord was sure the *dérive* was the way to generate the conviction that the old city had to be destroyed, or the way to discover who was worthy of the task and who wasn't—as Debord loved to hear Lacenaire say in *Les Enfants du paradis*, "It takes all kinds to make a world—or unmake it." Debord hung his metaphors in the air; Chtcheglov was the first to live them out. "The powers that be," Debord said in *In girum*, "are still unable to measure what the swift passage of this man has cost them."

Making his movie in 1978, Debord bypassed the obvious confirmation: news footage of thousands of '68ers barricading streets Chtcheglov had once walked alone. Instead there was another comic strip: Prince Valiant is lost, fleeing thunder and rain, looking for shelter. "He finds a tavern frequented by travelers from distant, mysterious lands . . . and while outside the storm rages, here stories are told of fabulous places, of marvelous cities surrounded by great walls . . . meanwhile, a haggard-looking man approaches the tavern, bearing new drugs. (Next week: ROME FALLS.)"

On the *dérive* the members of the LI met, separated, spread out, came together, and tried to write down what they found, to map what they were calling the "psychogeography" of where they had been. They looked for new streets, which meant the oldest streets, as if the streets they thought they knew were judging their unreadiness to understand the secrets the streets contained. The *dérive* was a way of positing boredom: streets one had walked again and again. *Détournement*—which finally

meant applying the reversible connecting factor to any posited subject or object—was a way of fighting off boredom, and of criticizing it. On the *dérive*, objective acceptance (“I love that street because it’s beautiful”) could turn into subjective refusal (“That street is ugly because I hate it”), which could turn into a glimpse of utopia (“That street is beautiful because I love it”).

The LI wanted to create a city of possibilities in the heart of the city of the spectacle. First, though, the group had to create a city of negations: to escape the city’s social elements of work and art, of production and ideology, to function as their anti-matter. The new city would be a psychogeographical amusement park; before that, it would be an affective black hole. “The spectacle says nothing more than ‘That which is good appears, that which appears is good,’” Debord wrote in *The Society of the Spectacle*. In the LI’s city there would be nothing that was not the case. Someday, the LI was sure, the one-eyed light of the spectacle would be sucked into the black hole as if it had never been.

ISOU

Isou would have smiled over Mension’s “general strike”—after all, it was no more than a particularly mindless version of Youth Front, “Our Program” reduced to the “units of gratuitousness” Isou had identified as the only goods that youth possessed. It was old news—but there was a difference. Isou thought gratuitousness was worthless because it could not be integrated into the “circuit of exchange.” Mension was insisting that no less than the stories the LI told around its table—the legends of preverbal sound poetry, the invasion of Notre-Dame, the blank movie, the raid on Charlie Chaplin—gratuitousness was a key to the black hole.

Isou thought units of gratuitousness had at least a pseudo-exchange value: they could be exchanged socially. Youth was drowning itself in violence and resignation because it was

“super-exploited by the seniority system”; that was why Isou called youth into the streets to change the world—to fight, as Debord would say in *In girum*, “for a place in a total revolution, or—they are sometimes the same—a better place on the wage scale.” In the arithmetic of Isou’s “nuclear economy,” the sum total of the units of gratuitousness youth expended in compensation for its “nonexistence” precisely equaled what youth had to renounce in order to exist—to win any place, fixed or wished, in the social order. But in “general strike” the LI was posing a question Isou had ignored: what if one refused to renounce one’s units of gratuitousness—acts that were not cowardly because they could not be justified—no matter what place in the social order they might be exchanged for? What if one experienced gratuitousness as freedom? What if one broke the circuit of exchange?

The LI, Debord said, lived “on the margins of the economy” and claimed “a role of pure consumption”; Isou said that without production there is no commodity one might consume. No commodity, the LI answered: time. It had stopped; the LI’s concern was to make it pass. Running above “general strike” in *I.L.* no. 2 was “manifesto,” signed by seven men and four women (Sarah, Berna, P.-J. Berlé, Brau, Dahou, Debord, Linda, Françoise Lejare, Mension, Papai, and Wolman), the grandest cohort the LI would ever muster, only three of whom would make it to the next year:

lettrist provocation always serves to pass the time. revolutionary thought lies nowhere else. we pursue our little racket in the restricted Beyond of literature. for lack of anything better, it is naturally to manifest ourselves that we write manifestos. a free-spirited way of life is a very beautiful thing. but our desires were fleeting and deceptive. it’s said that youth is systematic. the weeks reproduce themselves in a straight line. our meetings are by chance and our chancy contacts are lost behind the fragile defense of words. the world turns as if nothing has happened. in sum, the human condition no longer gives us pleasure.

Like Mension, the group went to the edge of nihilism, tried to turn away, and found the way blocked:

Si vous vous croyez
DU GENIE
ou si vous estimez posséder seulement
UNE INTELLIGENCE BRILLANTE
adressez-vous à l'Internationale lettriste
... édité par l'I.L. 32, rue de la montagne-genevoise, Paris 15

LI sticker, December 1955

... all those who sustain anything merely contribute to police work, we know that all extant ideas and forms of behavior are insufficient, present-day society is thus divided between lettrists and informers, ... there are no nihilists, only impotents, almost everything is forbidden us, the détournement of minors

—and here the word means “subversion,” “leading astray,” “corruption,” “seduction”—

and the use of drugs are pursued in the same way as all our more general efforts to transcend the void, many of our comrades are in jail for theft, we protest the punishment inflicted on those who have realized that it is absolutely unnecessary to work, we refuse to talk about it, human relationships must be grounded in passion, if not terror.

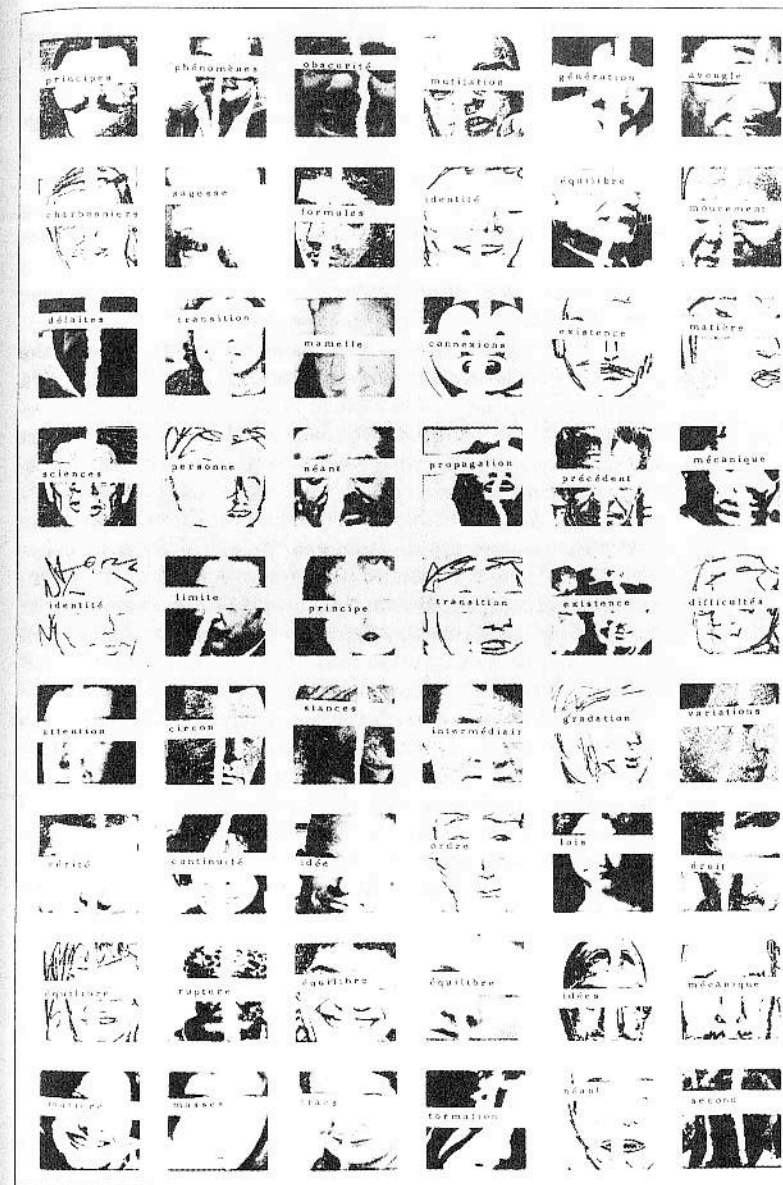
TWENTY-SIX

Twenty-six years later, in 1979, Wolman published a thick tabloid he called *Duhring Duhring*. On each of the sixty-four pages are fifty-four tightly cropped faces, more than three thousand in all: commonplace images of sitting politicians, dead statesmen, movie stars, subjects of famous paintings and sculptures, saints, comic-strip characters, revolutionaries, authors, every variety of celebrity. Each face is scored vertically with a blank strip, and then across the eyes with a word (“socialism,” “classes,” “owners,” “workers,” in one series; “embryo,” “territory,” “contempt,” “narrative,” in another). Many of the faces reappear throughout the production, picking up new words, and vice versa; the elements float across the newsprint.

The endless, seemingly random juxtapositions take in any story a daily might run. After a few pages, the reader is back in the middle of one of Debord’s definitions from *The Society of the Spectacle*, the spectacle as the existing order’s uninterrupted discourse about itself, even if that discourse is here reduced to babble, and its mouthpieces, the empowered and their stand-ins, the recuperators and the recuperated, left nearly unrecognizable, their identities scratched out by their social

PERPIGNAN, June 30
(France-Soir): At 4:30 this morning an auto accident near the village of Saises took the life of the Reverend Father Emmanuel Suarez, head of the Dominicans, and of Father Martinez Cantarino, the general secretary of the order...

—“The Best News of the Week,”
Potlatch no. 3, 9 July 1954



Page from (Gil) Joseph Wolman, *Duhring Duhring*, 1979

TOKYO, JULY 14:

The employees of a silk merchant are currently engaged in a strike that has almost turned into a "war" between the employers and the population of the town of Fujinomyia, sixty-four kilometers from Tokyo.

The young employees of the "Omni Silk Spinning Company" factory, who live in dormitories under a strict set of rules and regulations, are protesting that the company does everything in its power to prevent them from marrying or having a normal love life, "because of the possibility of a decrease in production."

They complain that they are required to obtain permission from seven different officials in order to leave the factory or its environs, that they are forbidden to use lipstick or face powder, and that they must be in their beds by nine o'clock every night.

Mr. Kakuji Natsukawa, the director of the firm, is a Buddhist, and the young women protest that every morning they are forced to march in file on the grounds of the factory while singing Buddhist hymns.

The hymns are followed by other songs, such as "Today I Will Not Make Inconsiderate Requests," and "Today I Will Not Complain." (Combat, July 15)

—"The Best News of the Week,"
Potlatch no. 5, 20 July 1954

roles. It is a shaggy-dog story: if one puts down Wolman's all-purpose gazette and picks up any other, words and faces leap out of their official contexts, current events and settled history now a scrabble of Brezhnev invasion Uncle Scroogerights-Napoleon struggle, all referents dissolved into a meaningless whole. The only irony—the tail that wags the dog—is that if this is a picture of public speech, and public speech is babble, that babble nevertheless rules the world.

There is a motto on the first page: "we were against the power of words—against power." But *Duhring Duhring* is a permanent dada newspaper, which is to say immediately present, so I told Wolman I didn't understand the use of the past tense: "we were." "Because 'we' were the LI," he said. "Because that time was real time."

For a moment, in Wolman's flat in 1985, time went backward: "He was twenty-seven," read Wolman's *Potlatch* obituary. He and Debord founded the group; for years, they outlasted everybody else. But in January 1957, four months after representing the LI at the First World Congress of Free Artists in Alba, Italy, where the first plans for a new, truly international organization were made, Wolman too was excluded.

In Alba, Wolman set forth the perspectives of the LI to such would-be planners of imaginary towns as Constant Nieuwenhuys of Holland, Asger Jorn of Denmark, Guiseppe Pinot-Gallizio and Ettore Sottsass Jr. of Italy, and Pravoslav Rada of Czechoslovakia, most of them painters with agents and galleries: "The course of negation and destruction that in an ever-accelerating manner is overtaking all traditional forms of artistic creation is irreversible." Art was breaking up over a contradiction that was less aesthetic than social: "the result of new possibilities of action that can be seen all over the world."

A global upheaval in economics and science was imminent. In the East as in the West, the means of production remained in the hands of ruling classes, but the question of production was almost settled. Soon the only limits on production would be those of social control, and those limits would not hold. What was at stake were the means of transformation. Wolman

was saying that work was going to wither away in the face of technology, that abundance would be measured not in commodities but in time, that leisure was the real revolutionary question. Leisure would soon be the axis of civilization: a realm of potential happiness so complete that it would test the power of all the mechanisms of alienation to dominate it. A war would be fought over the meaning of life. If leisure was conquered, civilization would turn into a prison disguised as a pleasure dome. But if leisure was not conquered, it would serve as a base for a practice of freedom so explosive that no known social order could ever satisfy it.

In other words, as a social possibility the modernist dream of unlimited mastery over the domain of necessity was already the only real aesthetic fact. Utopia, someone's utopia, was near. Traditional art existed to map utopia, to represent moments of possibility or totality that in the domain of necessity came and went as phantoms—"For art comes to you proposing to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake," said Walter Pater in 1873—but now the field of utopia was anyone's everyday life, and moments could be made into history. That was why (as one could have read in *Potlatch* no. 5, a few inches down from the item on the Fujinomyia lipstick war) poetry had to be "seen in faces," and why it was necessary "to create new faces," why poetry had to be found "in the form of cities," and why the LI promised to "construire de bouleversantes," to construct by overturning: "The new beauty will be a beauty of SITUATION, *provisional* and lived." People would live in their own cathedrals, or they would live in their own prisons; self-contained by a page or a frame, the prison was now all any poem or painting could invoke. Traditional art could only recuperate possibility, separating it from totality. To communicate this fact, the page had to be blank, the canvas had to be blank, the screen had to be blank: proof that art could only be walked and talked.

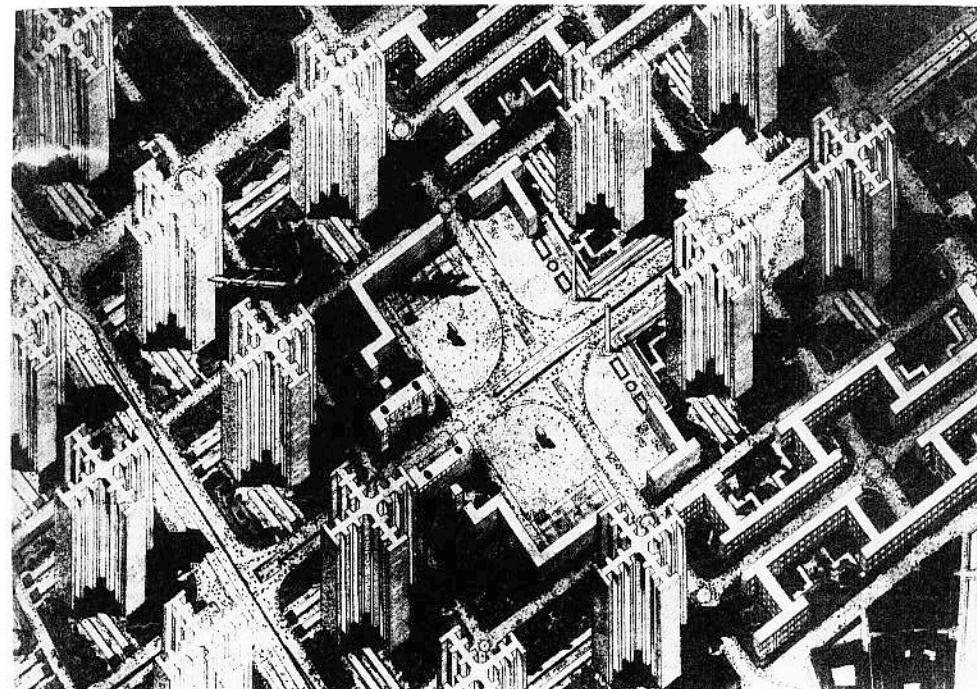
Such a proof matched its field. Everyday life was also blank. It was a government of stadiums and television programs,

habit and routine, received gestures orchestrating a hegemonic conversation in which no one's words were one's own. If art held itself back from the empty space of everyday life, it would disappear into its own emptiness—but if art disappeared, the impulse to create one's own utopia would go with it, and time would stop for good. The conclusion was plain: art could save the world, but only if artists allowed the world to save art.

One version of utopia, of the mastery of space and time, was already present, Wolman said: the basic modernist nightmare, fruit of all the plans drawn up in the 1920s for a new city that would have made Haussmann's Paris look like it was built by the Communards. On the terms of the spectacle, utopia was Le Corbusier's "Radiant City," the prison without walls—the "Christian and capitalist way of life" suspended in "definitive harmony," Wolman said, the city of guilt and work presented as an "unchangeable fact." Against this blinding light, Wolman used a line by Jorn to affirm the shadow city the LI had discovered on the *dérive*: "new, chaotic jungles, sparking experiences without purpose, devoid of meaning." This city would be made not for the circulation of commodities but for the passing of time. It would be a playground for acts that were not cowardly because they could not be justified, a shifting of settings and conflicts that would kill off the characters in a tragedy in twenty-four hours—and who could resist it? It sounded like fun, wrecking the world, putting it back together the next day. "We will not work to prolong the mechanical civilizations that ultimately lead to boring leisure," Chtcheglov had written. "We propose to invent new, changeable decors."

Haunted by key images from ancient times, our minds have remained far behind the sophistication of our machinery. Attempts to fuse modern science into new myths have gone nowhere. As a result, abstraction has invaded all the arts—contemporary architecture most of all. Pure plasticity, telling no story and making no movement, soothes the eye, and freezes it . . .

Past societies offered people an absolute truth and incontestable mythic symbols. The appearance of the idea of *relativity* in the modern mind allows one to glimpse the EXPERIMENTAL aspect of the



Le Corbusier, drawing for the Voisin Plan, 1925

next civilization, although that word doesn't quite serve: say, more fluid, more "fun." On the bases of this mobile civilization, architecture will be, at least in the beginning, a means of experimenting with a thousand ways of modifying life, with a view towards a synthesis today found only in legends.

This, Wolman was saying, was real leisure—leisure not as a compensation for work, not as a version of it, but as its annihilation—and this was why leisure was the real revolutionary question. To make this city of play, artists would have to reject the passive abstraction of all objectified, separate art, and leave their objects behind: "creation," Wolman told his audience, "can now be nothing less than" the "complete construction of an atmosphere."

Perhaps, in their own abstraction, Wolman's words floated in the air, to be carried off by whatever the weather was in Alba in September 1956—but if the LI's utopia was abstract, its anti-utopia was not. As Wolman spoke, bits and pieces of the Radiant City, the new buildings the LI had called vertical ghettos and apartment-house morgues, were being raised all over the world: from Le Corbusier's own "l'Unité d'habitation" in Marseilles, France, to the Godzilla homage of the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St. Louis, Missouri. Because this work served "the worst forces of repression," Wolman said, "it is going to completely disappear," and so soon the Situationist International was formed to make it happen, even if all the group had to offer were cleanly printed words against reinforced concrete, odd theories that might someday be realized as graffiti, and Wolman was left behind.

After his exclusion from the LI, Wolman earned his living as an artist, making objects and selling them, but he stuck to the LI's aesthetic—it was his as much as anyone's. He tried to construct by overturning what was already there; he practiced only *détournement*, the idea that in a world that had yet to be changed only a distortion of the images everyone took for granted could equal the weight of the blank page. Wolman went back to the papers; in 1963, on his way to *Duhring* *Duhring*, he discovered scotch art. He took Scotch tape, laid it

down over headlines, lifted the tape, removed the words, and smeared them back into pages that might have been composed under water. He made his own papers, many organized around a specific date, be it his own wedding day, André Breton's death day, a May '68 day, the best news of the week, but in his hands the liquid streamers said that the events they spoke for were more controlling than anyone suspected, and less real: the worst news of the week. Time swirled, too fast for anyone to keep up with it; it stood still, denying the possibility that any new story might be told. The news was that there was no escape from history, even if history was only a noise.

Wolman did it for years. He said that words were meaningless and that they ruled the world: the spectacle was permanent. And yet Wolman's work communicated anything but surrender. It was a proof that what appeared to be was not, that the empowered facts of every day's headlines were part of an old-world art project no less arbitrary than anyone's poem. And it was this perspective that in 1979 led Wolman to fashion the line, "we were against the power of words—against power." More than twenty years after his exclusion from the LI, he was still working out the group's slogans.

"Why was he excluded?" I asked Michèle Bernstein, in 1957 one of those who voted Wolman out. "There are always two reasons for anything," she said. "There is always the good reason, and there is always the real reason. But even if I remembered the real reason, I wouldn't tell you."

BORN

Born in Paris in 1932, Bernstein grew up in Normandy; the war began when she was seven. Her parents had divorced long before, but her father was Jewish—though her mother remarried and gave Michèle the name of her gentile stepfather, that meant nothing to the Nazis. "Don't ever let anyone at school know you're a Jew," Bernstein's mother told her. The little girl's response sums up the woman she became: "Guess what!"