

SITUATION ALERT!

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on the Passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time: THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL, 1957-1972. An exhibition organized by Mark Francis and Peter Wollen, with Paul-Hervé Parsy, in consultation with Thomas Y. Levin, Greil Marcus, and Elizabeth Sussman. Catalogue of the same title published by The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Massachusetts, 1989.

In Boston and New York this year, the Western returned to the big film screens of the big museums, the Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. So, too, this year the cowboy philosophers returned from cult obscurity to give the Beaubourg its spring Western hit. *on the Passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time: THE SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL, 1957-1972* is the name of an exhibition of situationist 'art' which opened at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, travelled to the Institute of Contemporary Art in London in summer and will arrive at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston October 20, 1989 (through January 7, 1980).

The big question surrounding this exhibit has been whether the exigencies of the site of exhibition, the Museum, will tame the myth of the cowboy philosophers as outlaws. Or, put simply, why put in a museum what was designed to be against everything it stands for? The curators of *on the Passage* are aware, however, of the irony and difficulty of institutionalizing the drift politics of the Situationists—whose critique of Art involved actively dismantling the boundaries between art and everyday life. In a society (of the spectacle) where everyday life may be already fully aesthe-

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tized, such a political project fundamentally involves an understanding of *that* boundary as also commodified. Interestingly, Mark Francis, in his introduction to the exhibition, "It's All Over: The Material (and Anti-Material) Evidence," tells us that "in the archives of the Silkeborg Museum in Denmark can be found a handwritten note entitled 'Plan générale de la Bibliothèque situationniste de Silkeborg.' The plan, initialled by "G.D.," Guy Debord, and the listed items which were given by Debord to the museum, represent, Francis suggests, an invitation to put the Situationists in a museum, albeit with Debord's ghostly curatorial advice. Perhaps G.D. is either more cynical or more arrogant than imagined.... Certainly, he might be amused by the fact that attendance figures for the Paris showing were the highest for one exhibition in several years and during the last week of the show security guards struck, locking the public out and themselves in. The desire for the "Abolition of Alienated Labor" (the title of a "painting" by Guisepppe Pinot Gallizio and worked over by Debord) continues even in the most ironic of sites, Debord's biggest situation.¹

Since the curators decided to "conceive each site—in different museums and in different countries—as a new installation,"² how the ICA, Boston, will present the material is unknown at this time. We do know that the exhibit includes various 'art' works (books, paintings, drawings, models, maps) produced principally between 1957-1962 and the non-art works produced after 1962 when the Situationists "actively refused the concept of art as a...exhibitible enterprise," and attempts to contextualize the Situationists in terms of both political and art history. Significantly, the exhibition also "maps the influence of Situationist ideas on later groups and figures" including Malcolm McLaren and the Sex Pistols, and Art and Language. The relationship between Situationism and punk is the subject of another major enterprise, Greil Marcus' most recent and exciting book, *Lipstick Traces. A Secret History of the Twentieth Century*. In Andrew Herman's (forthcoming) review essay of the book, he listens, with Marcus, for what Herman calls "the noise of cultural dissonance."

As a consulting curator, Greil Marcus also appears in the exhibition's Boston catalogue with an essay on Debord's *Mémoires*, a fragmentary, collage cut-up, which, prepared in 1957 and published in 1959, articulates a voice looking for a future, even as "the story it told was about the past...the story of the first two years of the Lettrist International, Debord's tiny pre-Situationist group, active in paris from 1952-1957" ("Guy Debord's *Mémoires* : A Situationist Primer"). Marcus also selected and introduces "A Selection of Situationist Writing: Imaginary Maps of the Real World," translations into English of previously untranslated and unavailable writings.

Irregardless of how successful the various institutions will be or have been in translating the Situationists into an enclosed exhibition, the Boston catalogue, which Elizabeth Sussman of the ICA Boston has edited, is a major and important work in itself. With seven essays, a selection of newly translated and previously unavailable writings, an elaborate chronology of Situ-

ationist activities and writings, a 'dictionary' of definitions, various illustrations (including kindred and contemporary appropriators, such as Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman), and the checklist of the exhibition, the catalogue will be a significant resource for a wide range of cultural critics. As Sussman states in her introduction, "the texts by the authors of this catalogue provide readings of Situationist ideas, their development and their articulation in various practices (both artistic and political) across the fifteen year span of the official life of the movement." Reading beyond just the official life of the movement, the catalogue also attempts to "present for scrutiny a body of work, by the choice of its authors mostly without provenance, that proposes a crucial context for many aspects of the refigured practice of late-twentieth-century culture."

The scope of the catalogue prevents extended review here and since my intention is really to preview—to notify our readers of the opportunity to view the exhibit while it is in North America and to keep an eye out for the forthcoming catalogue, a listing of the catalogue essays will have to suffice. In addition to Sussman's "Introduction," Marcus' essay on the *Mémoires*, the "Selections of Situationist Writing: Imaginary Maps of the Real World," and Mark Francis' introduction, the catalogue also includes extended essays by Peter Wollen, "Bitter Victory: The Art and Politics of the Situationist International," and Thomas Levin, "Dismantling the Spectacle: The Cinema of Guy Debord." Levin's essay is particularly welcome since Debord's films (six 35mm black and white sound films and plans for others) are no longer available for viewing, although scenarios have been previously published. Levin tells the story of why the films which, until recently could be seen, "are now invisible." After the "mysterious and still unsolved murder" of Debord's "patron and friend Gerard Lebovici" who "not only supported Debord's work by financing what was effectively a Situationist Press, Editions Champ Libre" but also "bought a cinema...that projected Debord's complete cinematographic production....Debord suddenly withdrew his films in a gesture of protest and mourning.... Today all efforts to view the films in Paris prove futile: the distributor acknowledges that he has the prints but requires Debord's permission to screen them and this permission...is not to be had." Shorter essays by Troels Anderson, "Asger Jorn and the Situationist International" and Mirella Bordini, "An Enormous and Unknown Chemical Reaction: The Experimental Laboratory in Alba" (on the Jorn Pinot-Gallizio connection) are also informative.

Twenty years after May 1968, the cultural politics of the Situationists are in need of both attention and revision. It is perhaps fitting that in Boston as we wait and watch for the upcoming exhibit and catalogue, a coalition of "a few people" on diverse passages are organizing their own version of cultural dissonance to coincide with the arrival of *on the Passage*. The graffiti has already hit the streets and its gendered and full of color: "Watch for Operation Risk You. coming to a situation near you." If you make it

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to Boston...well...you could be in quite a situation!!

Book Review Editor

Notes

1. See Edward Ball, "Welcome Brigands," *Village Voice*, May 2, 1989.
2. All quotes are from the Exhibition catalogue which, as of August, was still in press. Although I have been able to preview the galleys, it has not been possible to provide exact page references.