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avant-garde & modernism studies

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Reading the Illegible
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1. Radical Formalism

One Thousand Poppies

Amid poetry's slumbers, avant-garde form has returned, nightly, to the dream of politics. I want to begin by awakening us into—and not out of—that dream. But we should be lucid in our dreaming, because discussions of literary politics frequently stumble on the very sort of grammatical confusions that Ludwig Wittgenstein warns against. This confusion is exacerbated by the common restriction of "politics" to so narrow a reference that it reduces to the question "for whom did you vote?" Such circumscription diminishes the meaningfulness of politics accordingly, and it conveniently avoids the more rigorous, continual, and self-scrutinizing duties of a genuine and fully political life. A "politics" in its broader sense would include all relations of power, however local or miniscule, and the ethics of their distribution. The "political," in this sense, thus extends not just to the personal, as the watchword of a generation of feminist theorists reminds us, but to the most minute particulars of everyday life. From a certain perspective, the scale of those particulars may indeed appear small (after all, it's only a poem), but they are never petty; not only are they coextensive with every other organization of power, however global, but they are also—in and of themselves—just as plenipotent. "In short, everything is political, but every politics is simultaneously a macropolitics and a micropolitics." To pass over the politics of such details as mere trivia threatens to leave the very imbalances of power one might want to redress both largely unexamined and all the more deeply—and insidiously—entrenched. Worse yet,
the disdain for details in the righteous pursuit of “grander” issues risks implicating one, by means, in the very politics that one’s ends would seek to oppose. At the very least, such negligence forfeits the unswerving vigilance that political issues most require. “Good or bad, politics and its judgements are always molar, but it is the molecular and its assessment that makes it or breaks it.”

The politics of literature, accordingly, is no less fraught. In the narrow sense of “politics,” poems are quite simply not efficacious. At best, they may present models from which readers can extrapolate modes of thought or behavior which can then be translated into other contexts and systems. To the degree that poems affect a reader’s understanding of language, they have the potential to alter all of those extraliterary relationships that also involve language; but they do not directly influence electoral politics, or feed the hungry, or soften blows. If you want to organize a labor union, say, you don’t write a poem: you go out and organize. George Oppen is exemplary. Moreover, political examinations of literature frequently enact an ultimately reactionary two-step: first raising the question in the narrow sense, and then finding literature lacking, all questions of literary politics are dismissed, leaving a status quo in which the meaningful and appropriate aspects of literary politics continue to go unexamined. The danger of taking poetry to be politically efficacious in the narrow sense is not so much a naiveté about what poetry cannot do, but an inattention to what it actually can do.

The very importance of political issues, in fact, demands a more sophisticated reading practice. Both Jed Rasula and Bruce Andrews have suggested the requirements for such readings, and given the similarities between their arguments and my own, the outlines of their positions are worth rehearsing briefly here. Following Rasula’s terminology (and at the risk of sounding like Henry James) one might differentiate between the politics through, the politics in, and the politics of the poem. The politics through the poem would, accordingly, be politics in the narrow sense: essentially false leads, though perhaps occasionally and collaterally achieved by certain rallying songs or the poetic ornaments accompanying speeches. The politics in the poem would indicate Pound’s discussion of Mussolini, say, or Adrienne Rich’s feminist thematics. In chapter 4, I will address the dangers of focusing on the politics in the poem and the inadequacy of stopping political analysis at that level without considering the politics of the poem: what is signified by its form, enacted by its structures, implicit in its philosophy of language, how it positions its reader, and a range of questions relating to the poem as a material object — how it was produced, distributed, exchanged. Or in Bruce Andrews’s terms: "writing as politics, not writing about politics."

So what follows, I want to emphasize, is at once far more modest than most discussions of the politics of art — making no claims to treat affairs of state, teasing out no thematic subtleties from narratives about social relations — and also far more scrupulous. To extend one’s reading to the politics of the poem is a prerequisite for a more significantly and fully political or ethical reading, and to that end I want to insist throughout this book on a radical formalism. I adapt the term from Andrews’s definition of a “radical praxis,” which “involves the rigors of formal celebration, a playful inflexibility, a certain illegibility within the legible: an infinitizing, a wide-open exuberance, a perpetual motion machine, a transgression.” A sufficiently radical formalism pursues the closest of close readings in the service of political questions, rather than to their exclusion. At the same time, it refuses to consider the poem as a realm separate from politics, even as it focuses on “the poem itself.” It is a matter, quite simply, of being true to form. As a “pataphysical investigation of minute particulars, radical formalisms hew to the concrete. Where “concrete” is what the street is made of.

In order to elaborate a more nuanced account of these claims, I want to turn the focus of this chapter to the Internationale Situationniste (IS). The Situationists not only strove to develop a theory and praxis of micropolitical activity that would extend to all aspects of everyday life (including the poetic), but they also explicitly conceived of that activity in linguistic and literary terms. Moreover, they realized that even the most radically utopian experiments would have to be conducted — like the most radically experimental poetry — within certain unavoidable parameters and preexisting structures. Their resulting theory of détournement provides a clear explanation of the ideological force behind the appropriation and strategic “misuse” of source texts common to the work I discuss throughout this book. In fact, the Situationists provide a historical and conceptual analogue for the revolutionary impulses that have generally been less well articulated in the political discourse around the Anglo-American art and poetry discussed in other chapters. If the Situationists did not, in the end, conclusively answer the questions they raised about the viability of political poetry, their incitements make palpably visible the absence of such aspirations in other arenas, and they also ground the various impulses that did make attempts to reach some answer, beginning from the same questions as the Situationists but taking other, less salient, lines of flight. In fact, the Situationist account
may too astringently rationalize the distinctively unconstrainable aspect of poetic illegibility, but it will nonetheless better show that given the dream of politics, a poetry that did not aspire to some degree of illegibility would be a nightmare. One caution, however: what follows will itself be a diversion of Situationist thought. More a bricolage than any attempt to present either an exhaustive or a partisan history, this chapter will extract certain valuable moments from the long, variable, and problematic trajectory of Situationist theory, and it is perhaps most true to their spirit at those very points where the Situationists would themselves have been most ready to denounce and reject it. "Les hallucinations sont innombrables. C’est bien ce que j’ai toujours eu: plus de foi en l’histoire, l’oubli des principes. Je m’en tairai: poètes et visionnaires serient jaloux [The hallucinations are endless. It is precisely what I have always had: no more faith in history, neglect of principles. I’ll say no more about it: poets and visionaries would be jealous]."7

Gangland and Philosophy

The art of living presupposes . . . that life as a whole—everyday life—should become a work of art.
—Henri Lefebvre

Beauty will be convulsive, or it will not be.
—André Breton

“We must multiply poetic subject and objects,” proclaimed Guy Debord’s 1957 “Report on the Construction of Situations,” and thus, amid the left-existentialist milieu of midcentury Europe, with the most improbable inevitability, several artistic and political traditions converged in the Internationale Situationniste. From one direction, it took a place in the history of anarchism and heretical Marxism. In the tradition of the revolutions of Kiel (1918), Turin (1920), Kronstadt (1921), and Catalonia (1936), the IS combined individual self-management with collective violence in the face of authority, rejecting both capitalist and Marxist models in favor of radically antiauthoritarian and autonomous soviets. Moreover, this model of the soviet, with its continually dissolving and reconstituting self-management, was to be applied to everyday life in the form of “constructed situations”: ad hoc, specific, creative, and consensus-based reactions to the demands of an environment by small, transient, spontaneously formed collectives of individuals. Or, in Situationist argot: “Un moment de la vie, concrètement et délibérément construit par l’organisation collective d’une ambiance unitaire et d’un jeu d’événements. [A moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambience and a game of events].” The trajectory of Situationist thought, in short, followed from the political philosophies of Proudhon, Bakunin, and Luxemburg—inflected by the arguments of Georg Lukács, the group around Socialisme ou barbarie, and (most significantly) Henri Lefebvre— but with corrections made for the idiosyncratic influence of writers like Fourier, de Sade, Saint-Just, and Bataille. At the same time, it was also heir to the legacy of a number of writers who all predicated their poetry on social critique: Lautreamont (Isidore Ducasse), Alfred Jarry, Arthur Rimbaud, Arthur Craven, and the surrealists who had also followed their lead.9

Indeed, from another direction, the IS marks a cycle of the half-life of futurism as it decayed through dada and then surrealism. In 1956, a congress at Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio’s Alba Laboratory gathered fragments of surrealism’s centrifugal dissolution; among others, it brought together members from Asger Jorn’s Scandinavian CoBrA group (Copenhagen-Brussels-Amsterdam) and its incarnation as the Mouvement International pour une Bauhaus Imaginiste, or MIBI (including Constant Niewenhuyss and Jorgen Nash), the German Gruppe Spur, the Movimento Nucleare (Enrico Baj), Ralph Rumney’s “London Psychogeographical Committee,” and Gil Wolman, who represented the Internationale Lettriste. This latter group, which included the urban theorist Ivan Chtcheglov, had recently splintered from Jean-Isidore Isou’s lettristes. When a founding conference was held in 1957 at Cosio d’Arroscia, officially merging all of these organizations into the Internationale Situationniste, the lettrists—including Guy-Ernest Debord and Michèle Bernstein—played a key role, and the two would remain central figures in the IS, along with other notable participants, including Attila Kotányi, Jacqueline de Jong, Jeppesen Martin, René Riesel, and their chronicler René-Donatien Viênèt.10 Before its official dissolution in 1972, around seventy members passed through the IS, although the core was kept to a handful at any given time through strict ostracism and regular resignations. Purges were immediate (Baj was excluded upon arriving at Alba and several founding members from the MIBI were dismissed with a few months of the Cosio d’Arroscia conference), and exclusions followed regularly over the years, as Debord mimicked the practice of Isou and Breton at the height of their sectarian zeal. In fact, as with the records of dada, surrealism, and lettrism, the petty and recurrent polic-

"Les hallucinations sont innombrables. C’est bien ce que j’ai toujours eu: plus de foi en l’histoire, l’oubli des principes. Je m’en tairai: poètes et visionnaires serient jaloux [The hallucinations are endless. It is precisely what I have always had: no more faith in history, neglect of principles. I’ll say no more about it: poets and visionaries would be jealous]."7
ing of the official Situationist membership and the endless cataloguing of expulsions is tedious and embarrassing. At best it is an unfortunate side of the juvenile coin with which the energy of such movements is bought, and at worst a symptomatic authoritarianism of even the best-intentioned provocateurs.

Although the founding convention of the IS was held in 1957, the Situationists came to attention only a decade later, when the University of Strasbourg's Union National des Étudiants Français local turned to them for inspiration in its 1966 resistance to administrative authority. After consultation with the Situationists, the Strasbourg student union published Mustapha Khayati's *De la misère en milieu étudiant* (On the Poverty of Student Life), and with the beauty of a dada suicide it attempted to dissolve itself as a bureaucratic body. The two major Situationist statements appeared in 1967, with the publication of Guy Debord's *La société du spectacle* (The Society of the Spectacle) and Raoul Vaneigem's *Traité de savoir-vivre à l'usage des jeunes générations* (The Young Person's Etiquette Manual; often translated as *The Revolution of Everyday Life*). This complementary pair of manifestos stands—both stylistically and conceptually—as the *Tractatus and Investigations* of the movement, respectively. However, after the trials and media attention at Strasbourg, Situationist notoriety came less with these publications than with the spread of student unrest to Paris and the revolution of May 1968, when the Situationists joined *les enragés* from Nanterre and put into practice theories that would influence thinkers from Michel de Certeau, Maurice Blanchot, and Jean Baudrillard to the host of Anglo-American "pro-situ" groups that followed in their wake.14

Much of what inspired these heirs to the Situationist legacy can be found in Debord's *La société du spectacle*. Over several decades of revolutionary activity, Debord was astonishingly consistent in his arguments, in part because his early judgments would prove so prophetic. Indeed, those judgments are still incisive thirty years after the composition of *La société* because the world he describes has only become increasingly familiar.15 *La société du spectacle* abstracts and condenses the core of Debord's theories into a lapidary prose honed to 221 numbered theses. With a bitter, sharp etch "comme l'eau-forte sur le fer [like nitric acid on iron]," *La société du spectacle* describes the bleakness of a postwar culture in which capital has so thoroughly colonized the most trivial aspects of everyday life that only an equally thorough revolution of that life can now hope to offer any resistance.16 Or, in the terms of Jean Baudrillard's related concept of "total revolution," articulated a few years after the publication of *La société": "Les signes doivent brûler eux aussi [Even signs must burn]."14 With an argument that parallels Baudrillard's deconstructive link of exchange value and use value—in which the one emerges as a disguised category of the other according to a dangerously supplemental relation—Debord diagnoses the way in which the logic of capital has come to dominate and orchestrate the realm of consumption as it had previously only governed production. Where once, he nostalgically imagines, we lived in an age when time away from work was genuinely outside the demands of capital and beyond its panoptic gaze—when, in short, "no one was looking"—there is now no longer any part of the day, however ostensibly "private" (and including the very understanding of time itself), that escapes the demands of capital. Leisure time and "time off" have themselves been co-opted until there is not a single moment in the day, as William Blake would say, that Satan cannot find.

That satanic permutation is the condition of the "spectacle." Debord frustrates any easy reification of the term by carefully avoiding a single definition; in fact, such a prescription would itself be characteristic of the spectacle's natural inclination to stability and its tendency to freeze, fix, and congeal.15 Accordingly, in Debord's writing the spectacle is not, I should be quick to point out, merely "show business" (one of the denotations of the word in French), nor is it simply visual media and advertising, or even necessarily visual at all—though none of these are beyond its purview and all are specifically included in the course of Debord's argument.16 So if the spectacle is defined in one section as "capital accumulated to the point where it becomes an image," it is equally a "false consciousness of time" and an image-mediated "social relationship between people."17 Debord's concept of the spectacle, that is, maintains a "family resemblance": lacking a single definition, but constituting a range of descriptive conditions. However diverse the registers of the spectacle's referents, certain of its characteristics clearly emerge over the course of *La société*. The spectacle corresponds to an authoritarian univocality that encourages a passive reception and obedient consumption of its message. Being the "opposite of dialogue," the spectacle is a "monologue" that has no truck with interruptions or alternate presentations.18 Moreover, against the active production that it discourages, the spectacle maintains a realm of passive reproduction; as "the sun that never sets on the empire of modern passivity," the spectacle strives to render its spectator "passive," "submissive," and "unthinking."19

Because such spectacular relationships have extended from the realm of production to that of consumption, Debord casts his resistance to the
spectacle with a corresponding focus, turning to the latter with the critical scrutiny traditionally reserved for the former.\textsuperscript{20} Picking up on a line from \textit{Das Kapital}, Debord affirms that a “product, though ready for immediate consumption, may nevertheless serve as raw material for a further product.”\textsuperscript{21} Accordingly, rather than divide consumers from producers, Debord advocates the dehierarchized equalization of the two. In opposition to the spectacle’s monologue, Debord calls for a “two-way communication” in which consumers would become (unalienated) producers of meaning in their interactions with commodities, including commodified space and time.\textsuperscript{22} These dialogues would be necessarily anti-spectacular, in part, because they would avoid the reflective logic of the mirror \textit{(speculum)}. Productive dialogue, for Debord, does not reflect received structures of authority precisely because it generates signification without appeal to previous models or habitual protocols. As “constructed situations” these dialogues, by definition, have arisen on the spur of the moment, contingently, and in unforeseen ways from the material at hand. The Situationist, in this sense, is a \textit{bricolage}, making do with ad hoc tactics and eschewing predetermined or received strategies.\textsuperscript{23} Or, in the terms developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the Situationists practiced an art of continual deterriorizational. Construing even the spectacular world imposed on us as a “mobile space of play,” Debord proposes that since we have no choice but to play along to some degree, we might still make “freely chosen variations in the rules of the game.”\textsuperscript{24} By-passing the rote reactions elicited by certain codes and structures, such playful restructurings of the “rules of the game” works to destabilize the implicit authoritarianism of disciplined responses and the hierarchies they establish. The “free construction” of such situations defines “authentic poetry” for Debord, and to this end he advocates an active, playful, creative, and willfully conscious engagement with commodities in ways other than those ordained by the “machinery of permitted consumption.”\textsuperscript{25} Such creative “misuse” of commodities, codes, and environments establishes the “liberated creative activity” that Debord and the Situationists consider “true communication.”\textsuperscript{26}

These figures of “communication” and “poetry” are not coincidental, and Debord frequently casts his arguments for political resistance in the terms of communicative and artistic practice. In linguistic terms, the spectacle corresponds to the conventional “conduit” models of communication, in which an addressee (to use Jakobson’s terms) constructs and transmits a message to a receptive addressee. Or to translate this hierarchy to a literary model: writers produce texts which readers then consume. “True communication,” in Debord’s sense, disrupts these hierarchies with an anarchism of mutual production that pushes the dialogue between reader and writer to such a degree of interaction that the very distinction between the two disappears; typically passive readers become “both producer and consumer,” as “writing” and “reading” are seen to decline to the same verb.\textsuperscript{27} Debord works to “define comprehension as something other than consumption. (\textit{Other then}) So it’s politicizing: a radical reading embodied in writing. A writing that is itself a ‘wild reading’ \textit{solcito} wild reading.”\textsuperscript{28} Jean-Marie Apostolidès relates this aspect of Debord’s critique to the surrealists, invoking Pierre Bourdieu’s understanding of “\textit{un champ nouveau [a new field]}” which is “\textit{de l’imaginai re},” \textit{expérimental},” and where “\textit{l’incitation n’y est plus de recevoir les oeuvres passivement, mais de les produire pour clarier le champ d’expérience individuel [the provocation there is no longer to passively receive works of art but to \textit{produce} them in order to open the field of individual experience]}.”\textsuperscript{29} Communicating vessels. Where “vessel” is a verb.

Indeed, the defiant activity of words when they refuse to be merely containers for instrumental communication is a touchstone of Situationist poetics, and because “words coexist with power in a relationship analogous to that which proletarians . . . have with power” their resistance is both a model for political activity and one version of a politically aware writing.\textsuperscript{30} Throughout this book we will see examples of an active language, and while I will not belabor the point, the political force of their example should not be forgotten. Although, in Debord’s analysis, “words \textit{work}—on behalf of the dominant organization of life,” they are not mere markers of “unambiguous signals” in an exchange of information because they are not in themselves “informationist.”\textsuperscript{31} This anti-semantic aspect of language will be examined more closely in chapter 3, but when language exceeds its communicative authority—in those moments when its familiar and overworked utility stutters to reveal its “fundamentally strange and foreign” nature—one catches a glimpse of “the insubordination of words.”\textsuperscript{32}

Indeed, the question of an insubordinate Situationist linguistics is worth considering. If the Situationist revolution must extend to “every aspect” of life and refuse to any longer “\textit{combat alienation by means of alienated forms of struggle},” what of the textual realm, in which the “ruler’s chief weapon” has always been “the written word”?\textsuperscript{33} All reading, of course, involves the reader’s production of signification to some degree; the point is that such production is too often routine and disciplined by preestablished and inflexible protocols. Nor, on the other hand, is the “indetermi-
nate” text a guarantor of Debordian dialogue. Even those works which encourage or require creative reader participation can operate in accord with hierarchies and manipulative control; indeed, that manipulation is frequently all the more insidious given its uteriority. In both cases, the force of the Situationists’ response lies in their emphasis on the creative misuse of established codes, existing structures, and inescapable conditions. When that principle of revolutionary activity is translated to language and literature it constitutes a “paragrammatics.” In Leon Roudiez’s definition, any reading strategy that challenges the normative referential grammar of a text by forming “networks of signification not accessible through conventional reading habits” is paragrammatic. The chapters that follow will consider a series of paragrammatic strategies—from readings that ignore word boundaries, or select and recombine certain letters from words rather than taking them in the conventional order, to readings that proceed vertically down the page rather than horizontally from left to right. Before turning to examples of the Situationists’ own paragrammatics, I want to emphasize the political stakes of such activities, which bring revolutionary action to the field of literature, and ultimately to language itself.

**Coups de Dé’s**

The insubordination of words... has shown that the theoretical critique of the world of power is inseparable from a practice that destroys it.

—Mustapha Khayat

The ludic aspect of the Situationists’ dialogue with the world around them should not eclipse the imperative with which they playfully misused found objects. Debord and his compatriots understood that any games were wagered against an opponent who would always be one move ahead. Accordingly, their analysis takes into account the fate of opposition in a world so thoroughly colonized by modern capitalist structures that acts of resistance are not only anticipated but have themselves been incorporated as an integral part of the strategy of capital to begin with. In the modern arena, the most outrageous assaults of the political and artistic avant-gardes are no longer merely repressed, or ignored, or even assimilated, so much as they are transformed—according to an increasingly rapid cycle of recovery—into tactics in the service of the very powers they were originally meant to attack. But “l’avant-garde,” as Asger Jorn knew, “se rend pas [doesn’t give up].” Whether in the street or the pages of a book, we encounter codes and structures that we inherit, inhabit, and cannot simply refuse. These _donées_, however, do not mean that the situation, however dire, is entirely hopeless, and the Situationists offer tactics for playing under precisely such conditions. Indeed, part of the force of the many labyrinths which spiral through the pages of Situationist texts is their representation of structures in which one is trapped and hopelessly lost; if the Situationists no longer make attempts to exit from these mazes, it is because they recognize that the only escape is to transform the geography in which one is (always) already trapped. If the Minotaur, surrealism’s totem animal, can no longer simply be killed off, or avoided, he might yet be _dé­tourned_ with a deft veronica—with that flash of the red and black flag that flew over Paris in the summer of 1968.

Through his elaboration and examples of such _dé­tournements_, Debord provides a model for productive engagement with given and inescapable forms. _Dé­tournier_ to “deflect” in French, is the verb used to describe illicit diversions: embezzlement, misappropriation, hijack. In the Situationist lexicon the word became a _terme de métier_ short for the phrase “_dé­tournement des éléments esthétiques préfabriqués_ [diversion of ready-made aesthetic elements].” The antithesis of quotation, which marks and reinscribes authority, _dé­tournement_ pursues a poetics of plagiarism in the tradition of Lautréamont, whose infamous syllogism declares: “Les idées s’améliorent. Le sens des mots y participe. Le plagiat est nécessaire, le progrès l’implique [Ideas improve. The meaning of words plays a part in this development. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it].” Taking what is given and improving upon it, _dé­tournement_ unsettles hierarchies by initiating a dialogue in a formerly monologic setting and inscribing multiple authors and multiple sites for the generation of meaning. To maintain that dialogue and prevent it from simply reverting to another monologue, both the ready-made elements and their manipulation must remain evident. Rather than effecting a mere cancellation or negation, _dé­tournement_ thus pursues a logic parallel to that of modernist collage, in which elements maintain a simultaneous reference to both their original contexts, which are never entirely effaced, as well as to the new collage composition into which they are introduced. Each collaged element, as Groupe µ writes, thus “necessarily leads to a double reading: a reading of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin, and a reading of the same fragment incorporated into a new, different totality.” Within that new totality, moreover, the elements
of collage—like those of un objet détourné—always maintain a certain autonomy, and they resist the subsumption of one by the other; "in collage," as Marjorie Perloff notes, "hierarchy gives way to parataxis." 39

Where collage might simply acknowledge the conjunction of elements from different registers, however, détournement focuses on the deformation of those registers and the frustration of their seemingly natural conclusions; it re-engineers objects and events on their own terms, but counter to their ostensible ends, turning the codes of appropriated elements against themselves. Détournement, in short, is a communication containing its own critique. Because that critique disrupts the smooth operation of ideologies, laying bare the seemingly natural structures and logics that would otherwise be taken for granted and then employing them in startling and novel ways, Situationist diversions are frequently trips of estrangement (devices of making strange). In the words of Shklovskii's classic definition of such devices, détournements, that is, to work "make the stone stony"—so that it can be hurled through a plate-glass shop window or at a police van on the rue Gay-Lussac. 40 As a graffiti read in May 1968, when writing spread across the walls of the Sorbonne and Les Halles in a realization of Lautréamont's dream of a poetry one day written by everyone: "Sous les pavés, la plage [Under the cobblestones, the beach]." 41

With its restructuring of the urban landscape, graffiti may in fact be the most familiar instance of détournement. At its simplest, graffiti can turn the sign of impassive corporate power—the solid expanse of an uncommunicating wall, for instance—into a support for the declaration of precisely those voices it would exclude. Depending on the context, moreover, the effect can be more pointed. In my West Berkeley neighborhood, for example, a group of "vegan vandals," as the newspapers referred to them, were active in the early 1990s. One of their interventions strategically painted out letters in a billboard advertisement for yogurt; against a background of smiling, healthy, exercisers, the original copy read "Good Fast Food." Détourned, it read: "Goo Fat Od." A different group (one assumes) used the same tactic to détourn a nearby municipal street sign, which had been posted outside a liquor store as part of a campaign against drunk driving. The sign originally read "DUI: you can't afford it"; with a pun on the name of the car company, the sign now reads "DUI: you can ford it." Like the poetry of May 1968, this pro-situ graffiti follows a strangely proleptic genealogy: it has been inscribed on the city following principles developed from artists who had themselves originally been inspired by anonymous urban graffiti. Les lettristes (François Dufrêne, Maurice Lamâtre) and les nouveaux realistes (Mimmo Rotella, Raymond Hains, Jacques Villéglé), for instance, had been working "au pied du mur [at the foot of the wall]" since the beginning of the 1950s—removing fragments of torn posters and recontextualizing them in ways that were reminiscent of Brassaï's mid-century photographs of reframed and aestheticized Parisian advertisements and graffiti.

One of the artists who worked seriously with those détaché street posters was Asger Jorn, and he indexes graffiti explicitly in his 1962 painting L'avant-garde se rend pas, and implicitly in the 1959 Paris by Night. 42 I have already noted the central role Jorn played in the founding of the Internationale Situationniste, and I want to consider his peinture détournée (diverted painting), which provides a good illustration of the Situationist aesthetic. Exhibited as a group of "modifications" in 1959, with a subsequent series of "nouvelles défigurations [new disfigurations]" shown in 1962, they were constructed by reworking thrift-store paintings of kitsch scenes and high-art imitations. On the realist portraits and landscapes he picked up secondhand, Jorn overlaid his distinctively dripped abstractions and gestural, roughly figured primitivism. In part, Jorn's defacements are the typically hostile and scandalous avant-garde response to emblems of artistic "tradition," displaying the irreverence but not always the ironic good humor with which Duchamp suggested, in the Green Box, that one use a Rembrandt as an ironing board. In many of the détourned portraits, however, such as Fraternité avant tout and Les deux pingouins, the force of those gestures also reveals the aggression of Jorn's response to the static smugness of "high society" and the self-satisfied image of the haute bourgeoisie has of itself. Not coincidentally, in Debord's terms that mirror image is the very definition of the spectacle; just as the spectacular "commodity contemplates itself in a world of its own making," so through the reflection of the spectacle "the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise. The spectacle is the self-portrait of power" which becomes a narcissistic, "uninterrupted discourse about itself, a laudatory monologue." 43

The irreverence with which Jorn's defacements break the drone of that monologue is certainly gratifying, but his détournements go beyond a simple mockery or negation of the original. Unlike Duchamp's I.H.O.O.Q., to which it obviously alludes, L'avant-garde se rend pas, for example, is less an act of defacement than the remotivation of an image that would originally have signified with the sort of hackneyed elicitation of habitual response ("nice little girl," say) that leaves such emblems all but unseen. In
part, the difference between Duchamp's and Jorn's barbering is an effect of the difference between the singular icon of high art and an anonymous painting. In Jorn's détournement, however, even the dirty, brownish pigment added to the figure's bust is applied with a certain soigné delicacy, matched by the care with which he has drawn in the facial hair; these gestures stand in marked contrast to the blunt lettering and childish figures that surround her. Moreover, by suggesting that those figures were scribbled on the wall by the girl herself, Jorn revitalizes the stasis of the original scene with a sense of narrative, and he generates a range of new significations from the tension between the original painting and its détournement. The girl's politely neutral and unemotional smile takes on an impish cast, and her direct gaze, perhaps originally even ingénue, acquires a certain impertinent defiance, as does the prim pose with hands held demurely and passively in front, pleading a blamelessness blatantly contradicted by the evidence behind her. "Who me?" her pose seems to deny with a faux innocence. Indeed, the jump rope held in those hands is emblematic; on the one hand, a sign of child's play, la corde à sauter (jump rope; saute aux yeux [it's obvious]), cannot, on the other hand—however limply bunched—entirely cancel the whispered confession that her play has trop tirée sur la corde (gone too far).

That same combination of impudence and abnegation also colors Jorn's own puerile scribblings, which themselves carry a certain disavowal. Although the difference between marking the photographic reproduction of a painting and irrevocably marking the surface of the painting itself is not inconsequential, Jorn quotes Duchamp's audacity rather than effectively reenacting it. Originally, L.H.O.O.Q. was also an act of ocrannennus, although it has itself become familiar in turn; Debord was not alone in noting that "les moustaches de la Joconde ne présentent aucun caractère plus intéressant que la première version de cette peinture [the Mona Lisa's whiskers are no more interesting a feature than the original version of that painting]." Jorn's détournement gains interest because it extends not just to the found painting, but also to Duchamp's mustache: redirecting its original purpose and putting it to new uses so that it can again be meaningfully seen. Because of the rapidity with which the most defiant gestures are recuperated—the high-art status of dada's anti-art statements being a case in point—effective revolution must be continuous, which is precisely why l'avant-garde se rend pas. To this end, one should of course not regard Jorn's détournements as finished objects to be read like traditional paintings; they record his own engagement with a painting and should be a spur to the subsequent détournement of his own diversions. Accordingly, the implicated but unintegrated status of original and détourned elements in Jorn's paintings—their "dialogue," in Debord's terms—helps to forestall his work's lapse into a readily assimilable stasis; Jorn keeps the two far enough apart that the new work switches constantly between its original elements and their deflection, sparking like a cylinder between the two poles of a dynamo. In L'avant-garde se rend pas, that tension is maintained in large part through the recursively homologous structure of the painting: Jorn's illicit scribbling is mise en abîme in the implied scene of the girl's own illicit scribblings.

Jorn negotiates a similarly undecidable ambivalence in his 1962 disfiguration Les deux pingouins (The Two Penguins), which again underscores the difference between his work and the original painting even as it connects the two, bringing them close enough to engage in a meaningful dialogue. Although many of Jorn's titles amount to no more than uninspired calembours—Le barbare et la berbère (The Barbarian and the Berber), or La vie d'une nature morte (The Life of a Still Life; literally, a "dead nature"), for instance—they often repay attention. A title like Arbre arbitraire (Arbitrary Tree), for example, nicely evokes de Saussure's famous illustration in the *Cours de linguistique générale* and underscores precisely the way in which the arbitrary, unmotivated nature of the sign can be remotivated so that arbitraire can in fact generate arbitraire. "I always go for a title that has the maximum number of meanings, yet applies to only one single object," Jorn has remarked, and "les deux pingouins" is worth considering beyond its obvious reference. At one level, Jorn merely insists upon the humor inherent in the original portrait: a man starched in a formal "penguin-suit" and looking—as does a penguin—"à fois guindé et comique [simultaneously stilted and comical]." But why only "deux" penguins, when each panel ghosts a doubled image so that there are really four penguins visible in the painting? The answer, it turns out, is close at hand. Unlike English, French actually does have two "penguins"; outside of ornithological texts, pingouin and manchot are used almost interchangeably. Moreover, Jorn hints at this other penguin by leaving one of the man's hands manifestly visible even as his arms have been obscured and shortened into rough approximations of wings. "Un manchot" also denotes a one-armed man, and it would have described not only the figure in the painting but also the condition of Jorn himself working in the one-armed medium of oils rather than the two-handed mode of ceramics with which he divided his artistic time. A hand in the bird, in other words, is worth pushing the two. If Jorn's own "hand"
is visible in the drips and rapidly worked figurations on this painting, it
never entirely effaces the realist hand of what was there "avant [before]" (as
the first panel of the diptych is inscribed). Idiomatically, _il n'est pas manchot_
denotes "he's good with his hands," and this is precisely the distinction that
separates Jorn's gestural painting, with its studied primitivism, from the
more or less awkward (or is that awkward?) techniques of his thrift-store
sources.

Thus, in accord with the Situationists' valuation of productive insub-
ordinating, Jorn unsettles the hierarchies of signification within his modi-
fied paintings; he (mis)uses certain elements by both frustrating their pre-
sumed signification within a particular semiotic system and emphasizing
their potential to generate meanings within other, separate regimes. Jorn's
interventions, that is, remotes certain images (rope, bird, hand, etc.) so
that they become elements in a linguistic code that works independently
of, or even against, their ostensible visual use as represented images. Simi-
larly, part of the force of the sources Jorn appropriates is that their repre-
sentationality provides a background against which his abstractions are able
to signify as oppositionally opaque and insubordinate marks that cannot be
assimilated to a referential discourse. (Were Jorn's source one of Pollock's
drip paintings or one of Malevich's suprastimatist compositions, that is, the
force of his own marking would be quite different.) The point is worth em-
phasizing: to merely disrupt the illusionistic surface of his sources would
simply reinstate one authority with another, and the distinctly _détourné_
quality of Jorn's interventions derives from the way in which he prevents
any given framework from wrestling a secure authority. This sense of Situ-
ationist "dialogue" emerges not just from the implication of particular ele-
ments in multiple signifying systems, but also from Jorn's method of com-
plcitously inscribing himself and his own insurrectional gestures into the
space of even the most compliant original painting. As we have seen with
both the _mise en abîme_ graffiti of _L'avant-garde se rend pas_ and the an-
nouncement of one-handed skill in _Les deux pingouins_, Jorn draws analo-
gies between his own activities and those of his subjects, thus unresolvably
complicating the relation of process and product in such a way that neither
painting nor (over/painted) can secure an unambiguous priority or uncon-
tested authority over the other. So even when the original portrait threat-
ens to disappear beneath the splatter and drip of Jorn's modifications in
the second panel of _Les deux pingouins_, the play of Jorn's title helps to sus-
tain the dialogue that Situationist _détournements_ requires. By showing his
hand, as it were, Jorn invites the viewer to recognize the puns, but the full
force of those puns' meaning requires the viewer to simultaneously recog-
nize both levels of the _détourned_ painting, without allowing one to either
take precedence or collapse entirely into the other.

In a number of other _détournements_, Jorn also insists on making visible
what is effaced, even as he displays the obscurant overpainting. In several
works, Jorn images and emphasizes ducks; among the 1959 modifications,
for instance, one finds _Le lac des canards_ and the hilariously ridiculous _Le
canard inquiétant_. As with the penguins, this avian subject matter is not
incidental. The French _canard_, like the English "duck," denotes not just
the waterfowl but the cotton canvas of the painting itself—what realism
attempts to render invisible and what Jorn returns to view. At the same
time, the wet and fluid oil with which he further obscured the duck of
the original canvases, as evidenced by its drips and runs, might well have
evoked the adjectival sense of _canard—très mouillé_ (all wet)—and idiom-
atic phrases like _mouillé_ and _trempe comme un canard_. The pictographic
graffiti in _L'avant-garde se rend pas_, it turns out, are far from gratuitous: a
bird and a one-handed man—_canard et manchot—in dialogue with Jorn's
other _détournements_ and once again leaving their conversational trace on
the surface of the painting.

**Message in a Bottle**

_Life is an anarchy of clair-obscur._

— _Georg Lukács_

_The perfection of suicide is in ambiguity._

— _Guy Debord_

In 1957, just as the Situationniste Internationale was coalescing, Jorn and
Debord collaborated with the lithographer and printer V. O. Permild
to make two extraordinary books, _Fin de Copenhague_ and _Mémoires_. To
some extent, these works recall Gil Wolman's _récit détourné_ (diverted nar-
rative) "J'écris propre," which had been published the previous year in the
proto-Situationist journal _Les livres nus_. Like Wolman's story, these books
announce themselves collage works "entièrement composé d'éléments pré-
fabriqués [composed entirely of prefabricated material]; but to that scav-
enged, fragmented, and sutured language they add line illustrations, pho-
ographs, and Jorn's distinctive overpainting of drips, spatters, and runs. In
the case of _Mémoires_, which is divided into precisely dated sections, the col-
lage elements are salvaged from a variety of books, popular magazines, and
souvenirs from Debord’s lettrist days, which it recalls with the unrelenting “melancholy of a world passing away.” In the case of Fin de Copenhague, which is at once more styptic and humorous in its critique of spectacular culture, all of the material was purportedly raided from a single news kiosk and assembled in a single, inspired day. For all of its improvisatory haste, however, the text’s wit and economy of means is superb; if a movie advertisement appears to reference la société du spectacle, for instance, its placement is motivated both because the title—Vera Cruz—rhymes with the cruise liner that appears on the same page, and also because “superscope” graphically echoes the “Copenhagen” written super, or above it.

Constructed as détournements of found material reorganized to tell new stories, the language of these books also undergoes its own analogous détournements. Specific calembours, as we have seen, work effectively to maintain the dialogue of Jorn’s modifications, but paronomasia, as such, is integral to Situationist practice as well. At the level of the word, the pun itself is a détournement. Puns differ from polysemy or mere homophony by holding two registers simultaneously in play and dialogue with one another, rather than simply switching between them. The graphemic or phonemic ensembles of the word are hijacked in a pun so that the apparent direction of reference—the semantic telos of the word—is diverted from its ostensible destination. That signified is not simply bypassed, however; a trace of its semantic vector always remains as the word gestures towards both its original and modified meaning at the same time. The pun, in short, is a word beset by eidetic memory. In their collage books, Jorn and Debord work to create contextual registers with such precise semantic fields that the pull of reference causes words to hover in suspended resonance between the balanced play of competing forces. Or perhaps the effect of these words is less like a champ magnétique and more like the undecided movements of subatomic particles simultaneously swerving towards discrete and irreconcilable states of affairs, tracing their clinanamatic paths between subatomic matter under the sway of a gravitational semantics.

Examples of these puns, and the degree to which Jorn and Debord carefully balance their simultaneous references without privileging one over the other, will emerge in the course of this chapter. To begin with, I want to concentrate on the way in which Fin de Copenhague emphasizes its status as a book by punning on elements of its formal structure. Originally bound in flong, made from what is apparently a Danish newspaper, the covers sport a large advertisement for shaving products. The front cover is dominated by a headline that reads “barberspejlet! [shaving mirror],” and the back cover is taken up by the image of a man looking in the mirror as he shaves. The starkly blanched face of that shaver thus both literally and figuratively a une mine de papier mâché. Moreover, being bored and being shaved are the same in French (être râé), a coincidence that Jorn and Debord exploit to connect the book’s covers with its opening lines: “Fin de Copenhague[:] je passais mon temps . . . [avec] la sensation d’être écrasé de fatigue [I have passed the time . . . (with) the feeling of being crushed with tedium].” To further underscore the connection, that somewhat melodramatic “écrasé [crushed]” literally inscribes “rase [shaved].” Razor blades, in any case, are central to the construction of the collaged pages of the book; the banalities and boredom of Copenhagen are referenced in the banalities and boredoms of Copenhagen are referenced in the collages of Copenhagen through the collagists’ shavings (copeaux). With the addition of the advertising copy, these sliding references accumulate at a dizzying pace; the display line at the bottom of the front cover opens “år [year],” suggesting the scar (Danish ar) of a shaving cut that might come from the product advertised as the ”skarpeste klinge [sharpest razor]” or “blad [blade]”—a Danish homonym which itself neatly collapses the straight-edge and the “newspaper” (blad) that was cut to assemble the very book that contains it. This self-reflexiveness is underscored by the cover’s image of self-reflection—a man looking at himself in the barberspejlet—and, in a line erased so that one must in fact look through it, the caption below that shaver invites one to “gennem [look through],” Taking the cue and figuratively looking straight through the book from that line to its parallel position on the front cover, the reader finds the interlingually punning “videre”: an adjective in Danish, meaning “broader” or “wider,” and in Latin the infinitive of the verb “to look.” Beyond the obvious mockery of spectacular culture in Fin de Copenhague, these more subtle anaphoric and cataphoric references ask the reader to strop, look, and listen carefully.

This type of bibliographic self-reflexiveness also inscribes the book’s authors into the very weave of their work’s material, repeating the way in which we saw Jorn implicate himself within the signifying networks of his paintings. Fin de Copenhague was published as an édition de luxe limited to 200 copies: “Ein Wertvolles Buch [A Valuable Book],” as one of its own pages announces in bold gothic type. In accord with art world practice, Jorn signed each copy by hand, but the book is wittily countersigned by its very construction and design. Binding is the art of gathering signatures, of course, and the “signature” of the third collaborator, for instance, appears not only in the colophon, but also mise en abîme under the movie advertisement with a collaged bit of business stationary from his print-
ing firm: “Permelid & Rosengreen.” Similarly, with a shift (cabin) across word boundaries, Debord’s name explicitly emerges from an advertisement copy for a “store kolde hotel [big deli spread].” The other inscriptions, however, are less obvious. To begin with (d’abord), in this work of cuttings (des bords), the printing is bled: most of the collaged images project beyond the margins, and the overlapping painted designs all overflow the edges and run off the page: the layout, that is, continually déborde (overruns) the margins. Additionally, those flows of ink color-in the outskirts and surrounding areas (abords) of the collaged or schematized city maps that fill several pages, as well as the approach (abord) to “Mt Kilimanjaro” on another. Jorn’s name implicitly appears throughout the book as well; as a work comprised of newspapers (journaux) documenting a single day’s work (journée), Fin becomes a page in Jorn and Debord’s collective logbook (journal de bord)—a nautical reference corroborated by the weather charts, sea maps, and cruise advertisements that it contains.

Given that nautical context, in fact, the semantic drifts of appropriated language in Fin de Copenhague suggest—or derive from—a central Situationist concept: la dérive (leeway, drift, adrift).53 As a Situationist terme de métier, “dérive” denotes “une technique du passage hâtif à travers des ambiances variées [a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances].”54 Or, in other words, disoriented wanderings, usually through abandoned buildings or city streets. Developed by Chtcheglov, Rumney, and other “new urbanists,” that playful, unmotivated wandering—a “déambulation [aimless ambulation]” in explicit contradistinction to a “promenade [stroll]”—proceeds regardless of habit or the coercions of civic planning, and without any goals other than attunement to the lure or repulsion of the landscape and a surrender to its possibilities.54 A dérive thus charts microclimates of “psychogeographical space” according to an ecology of emotion rather than established architectures or physical distance:

Une ou plusieurs personnes se livrant à la dérive renonces, pour une durée plus ou moins longue, aux raisons de se déplacer et d’agir qu’elles se connaissent généralement, aux relations, aux travaux et aux loisirs qui leur sont propres, pour se laisser aller aux sollicitations du terrain et des rencontres qui y correspondent.

In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions or the terrain and the encounters they find there.55

In short, Rimbaud’s dérèglement applied to urban travel. The Situationists thus join the crowd of all those other promeneurs, flaneurs, and drifters of unreal cities: De Quincey, de Nerval (Labrunie), Baudelaire, Whitman, and most importantly, Aragon and his surrealist comrades. Against that tradition of the faire aller, however, les dériveurs are not passively awaiting the prurient thrill of a choc from around the corner, or voyeuristically hoping to glimpse une scène chatouillement, or even necessarily exploring new and uncharted territory; they are out to actively create the situations of their drift. Indeed, if not sufficiently lost or drunk to effect the proper disorientation of a nonlaminar flow, they could always resort to technologies of dérivant, such as following the map of one city while in another.56

The spread and drift of the paint that flows through (and off) the pages of Jorn and Debord’s Situationist books obviously mimics the dérive. Accordingly, Greil Marcus reads Jorn’s painting in Mémoires representationally: the “seemingly blind strips of color turn into avenues, then Debord’s words and pictures change Jorn’s avenues into labyrinths.”57 To some extent, and for certain pages, this is certainly correct, but as Fin de Copenhague manifests, Jorn’s apparently abstract painting is also figurative in another sense: the distinctive liquid overlays in these books index other referents as well. Indeed, the look of those designs is familiar not so much from Jorn’s canvases—though you can see them there as well—as from the autobiographical scenes of Debord’s films. Glimpsed in frames of Sur le passage de quelques personnes . . . (1959) or Critique du separation (1961), they are in fact the very mise-en-scène of the artistic and revolutionary bohemian world inhabited by Debord and Jorn. With drips, splashes, smears, and fingerprints, Jorn stains the pages of their books as though they were café tables set amid the stuff and debris of Situationist haunts like Chez Charot, Café de Mabillon, Chez Moineau, or one of the other seedy café bars around the Saint-Germain-des-Prés where Gil Wolman recounts vomiting “copiously.”58 Where, moreover, crowded, careless, inebriated patrons—attempting to negotiate the closely spaced and unsteady tables—sent liquid sloshing over saucers onto unlevel tabletops, leaving it to ring and pool haphazardly, where hands unsteady from too little sleep and too many drinks misjudged, or gestured overemphatically, and where, later, they idly drew in the spill and splatter with burnt-out matches, tracking through the cigarette ash that speckled the whole in its turn.

I do not mean to be gratuitously discursive here; far from incidental, these very details of everyday life “at the café terrace” are central among the narratives written into Situationist books and woven between their
fragments. With their wine-tinged memories, the pages of Jorn and Debord's books record a lost world of habit, gesture, and etiquette: in short, the sense of the 6yr or vie quotidienne that was so central to Situationist theory. Filling the dream with which Chtcheglov had helped launch the IS, Jorn and Debord, in other words, were building the hacienda “where the wine is finished off with fables from an old almanac.” Or, as Situationist style might have repeated, where old almanacs are finished with wine. Indeed, the contemporaneous issue of the journal Internationale situationniste (no.3) proposes a three-dimensional novel, cut into fragments and pasted on bottles of rum, allowing the reader to follow its narrative at whim; Mémoires and Fin de Copenhague essentially reverse this scheme, printing rivulets of rum on the pages of a fragmented novel.

The construction of Situationist texts, if not the construction of situations themselves, was done under precisely such conditions—and under the influence. By recalling the very space and story of their own construction, these books fulfill a key principle of Situationist aesthetics: “la principale force d’un détournement étant fonction directe de sa reconnaissance, consciente ou trouble, par la mémoire [the main force of a détournement is directly related to the conscious or vague recollection of the original contexts of the elements].” As Debord notes in the foreword to the 1993 re-reproduction of Mémoires, the book “était en grande harmonie avec la vie réelle que nous menions alors [was in full accord with the life that we then lived].” And that life was consumed by drink. The IS was founded “in a state of semi-drunkenness,” and a survey of the photographs documenting the meetings and conferences of CoBrA, the lettrists, and the IS reveals one constant among shifting sites and personnel: the ubiquitous bottles of alcohol, glasses of wine, and beer steins. Debord’s own drinking, in particular, is well known; “c’est un fait,” he writes, “que j’ai été continuellement ivre au long du périodes de plusieurs mois; et encore, le reste du temps, avais-je beaucoup bu [it is a fact that I have been continuously drunk for periods of several months; and the rest of the time, I still drank a lot].” Debord devotes the entire third chapter of his autobiography, Panegyrique—a work of overwhelming melancholia cut only by megalomania— to alcohol, which he claims “a été la plus constante et le plus présente [has been the most constant and the most present]” thing in his life. In particular, writing and drinking come hard upon the other in Debord’s account: “J’ai écrit beaucoup moins que la plupart des gens qui écrivent; mais j’ai bu beaucoup plus que la plupart des gens qui boivent [I have written much less than most people who write; but I have drunk much more than most people who drink].” When Michèle Bernstein quips, with all the bitterness of the dregs, that Debord’s purges extended to those who set “their wine glasses on the table in a bourgeois manner,” her sarcastic figure is not incidental. Fin de Copenhague and Mémoires record the marks those glasses left in a different manner.

Indeed, lest the point be missed, Fin de Copenhague renders graphically explicit the equation of spilled alcohol with Jorn’s poured paint. In addition to a scotch label which floats at the top of one page (anticipating Gil Wolman’s “scotch art” by six years!), the book features several illustrations of tilted bottles, either pasted in at horizontal angles and threatening to spill or actually emptying out onto the page. Even if, in contrast, “les bouteilles se couchent [the bottles are hidden]” in Mémoires, they resurface a decade later, when they could be seen in reserve behind the barricades in the summer of 1968: emptied, drunk dry, détournés, refilled with petrol and stopped with rags to make Molotov cocktails. Jorn and Debord’s books make a plea for that revolution, and Situationist intoxication is intimately bound to their revolution of everyday life, although they did not, perhaps, foresee the way in which the consumption of alcohol would be a necessary prerequisite for revolutionary action: the tools of the alcoholic and the street-fighting bricoleur linked in direct proportion to one another. However, when they had Mémoires bound in a heavy-gauge sandpaper they would have foreseen the implicit pun. This binding was ostensibly meant to destroy the books next to the barricades. Debord’s own reading, in particular, is well known; “c’est un fait,” he writes, “que j’ai été continuellement ivre au long du périodes de plusieurs mois; et encore, le reste du temps, avais-je beaucoup bu [it is a fact that I have been continuously drunk for periods of several months; and the rest of the time, I still drank a lot].” As an emblem of both the revolt against the state and the revolution of everyday life, the spiritual, in Situationist books, is thus always imbued with politics. Since none of the commentators on Situationist books mentions even the thematic prevalence of this subject, I want to conclude this section by making clear how thoroughly the flavor of that politicized alcohol extends through Mémoires and Fin de Copenhague, which—even beyond Jorn’s painting and the visual figures of bottles—are soaked in alcohol. With what may indeed be “all the pleasures of the summer,” or at least...
"all the necessary conditions," the very first page of *Fin de Copenhagen* features a Danish drink menu printed in boldface:

5 slags øl
17 slags vin . . .
solberrom
perbermynteliker
1.31 pr. genstand

5 fine beers
17 fine wines . . .
flavored rum
mint liqueur
1.31 each

After this aperitif, the underlined "Drink—£300" similarly stands out in the center of a later page, and in one opening the bilingual copy from a Dubonnet advertisement, glamorizing an ethos of "dissipation," mirrors a statement at the top of the other page: "Dix minutes après, l’émotion étant / dissipée, on buvait le champagne [Ten minutes later, the emotion having / dissipated, the champagne was drunk]." Such references are even more common in *Mémoires*, where the first page metatextually announces: "il s’agit d’un sujet profondément imprégné d’alcool [it’s all about a subject deeply drenched in alcohol]." The collaged fragments which follow corroborate this opening claim. On one page Debord declares, rather pompously, "the wine of life is decanted, and the dregs alone remain of that pompous cellar." He then turns from the metaphoric to the literal a few pages later, admitting that in fact "il reste du vin [there’s still some wine left]." "Nous bûmes," Debord recalls, "outre mesure de toutes sortes de vins [we drank beyond measure all sorts of wines]," and among "tous les sirops somnifères du monde [all the world’s somniferous cordials]," he queries "Moi, ivre? [Me, drunk?]." Debord records being "sous l’influence de l’alcool [under the influence of alcohol]" or "pas ivre en ce moment [not drunk at the moment]," and he differentiates like a connoisseur of intoxication among "boire [drinking]," "en train de boire [in the midst of drinking]," and "Après boire [After drinking]."67

The suffusion of these books with alcohol unsteadies other quotes as well. Part of the collaged material in *Mémoires*, for instance, draws from a soft-porn story, but in its intoxicated new context, the alcoholic and orgasmic blur in a beautifully tight fit—“Beau comme le tremblement des mains dans l’alcoolisme [Beautiful like the trembling of hands in alcoholism],” as Lautréamont would write in a line appropriated by Debord.68

Puis les secousses s’espacent, s’atténuent, s’apaisent . . . Elle se mit à trembler, sans répondre . . . Ainsi les grandes convulsions pas encore entièrement apaisées . . . A un moment, si je ne l’avais retenue, elle se serait affalée sur le sol en proie à des convulsions

Then the tremors diminish, attenuate, calm . . . She set to trembling, without answering . . . Thus the great convulsions were no longer entirely soothe. . . At one point, if I hadn’t restrained her, she would have collapsed on the ground in the predatory grip of convulsions.

Alcohol similarly flavors other apparently random elements of these collages. The recurrent pirate references from Robert Louis Stevenson are motivated not only because they represent an ethos of criminal and anarchic counter-market lifestyles, but also because they’re done in with drink ("La boisson . . . [les al expédié]"), singing "Yo-ho-ho! et une bouteille de rhum [Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum]" to the end—a line that echoes through *Mémoires* to serve as a refrain for Debord’s book as well as Cochon-Roiti’s song. The description of being "se dessèche [parded]" becomes equally charged in *Fin de Copenhagen*, where the recurrent weather maps reveal an alcoholic logic: they predict how wet and dry the coming days and weeks will be, bringing together cool drafts and the draughts of *alcool*. If Jorn and Debord’s collaboration was spontaneous, and hence without "drasts" in the artistic sense, it would nonetheless have gone through a series of proofs (épreuve if not teneur), and indeed, even the degree symbols on the repeated meteorological charts begin to look like indications of proof rather than temperature. All of which, significantly, merges in the homophonic play on the English "fan" and the French "fin" in the Dubonnet page—a linguistic drift beautifully complicated when the tide turns away from phonetics: a tail "fin," in French, is, significantly, une dérive (and one should not forget the image in *Fin* of an airplane, with its tail fin silhouetted). In the end, the phonetic difference between *la fin de Copenhagen* and *le vin de Copenhagen* (wine from Copenhagen), or the graphic difference between the actual title and *Fin de Copenhagen* (brandy liqueur from Copenhagen), is provocatively slight.69 An issue for connoisseurs.
Wasted Time

Le meilleur, c'est un sommeil bien ivre, sur la grève.
—Arthur Rimbaud

Life can never be too disorienting.
—Guy Debord

We have seen that alcohol is not simply a biographical accouterment, nor merely incidental to the mise-en-scène of Situationist haunts. Associated as it is with the politicized transformation of everyday life, and working to effect the heightened détournement of punning language in Situationist books, alcohol is also intimately bound with another central theme of Jorn and Debord’s books, and one of Debord’s central objects of critique: time. Alcohol can fundamentally alter one’s relationship to time. In a banal sense, it can obviously organize time, as in the “cocktail hour,” or through the association of particular drinks with particular times of the day, but the effects can be more profound as well.29 I want to be clear that I do not mean by this the flush and rush of the first drink (which can of course revive and excite one about the future), nor do I mean to suggest the petty inebriation of the first few (the draughts of the weepy drunk, bringing the past into the present like cases carted from the cellar to be relived); I mean a true, thorough, richly dark intoxication. Intoxication to such a degree that it effects a type of continuous present: not like Stein’s, starting again and again, but one that stretches and suspends the present. And thereby obliterates it. The effect, in short, of looking up from the glass at the clock with a shock. We speak of “forgetting all about the time,” but the shock is that we have forgotten all about time itself. Or rather, that we have recognized a new experience of time unmoored from its regulation by that clock: time superceded to the point where it forgets itself in an ethyl blind.71 That point “est au delà de la violente ivresse, quand on a franchi ce stade: une paix magnifique et terrible, le vrai goût du passage du temps [lies beyond violent drunkenness, when one has passed that stage: a magnificent and terrible peace, the true taste of the passage of time].”72

This effect of a time reorganized by alcohol, one should note, is quite different from Gilles Deleuze’s elaboration of time’s reorganization by alcoholism.73 In his terms, “Alcoholism does not seem to be a search for pleasure, but a search for an effect which consists mainly in an extraordinary hardening of the present.”74 Debord in fact exemplifies precisely this alcoholic time in Panégyrique, with its frequent use of “j’ai bu.” “The alco-

holic,” Deleuze argues, “does not live at all in the imperfect or the future; the alcoholic has only a past perfect (passé composé) . . . . as if the softness of the past participle came to be combined with the hardness of the present auxiliary.”75 To harden rather than obliterate the present, however, would run counter to Situationist dreams; a present frozen and brought forward into the future like an artifact—a spectacle displayed in the museum of time—would fail to constitute a “situation” in Debord’s terms. “Situations are conceived as the opposite of works of art, which are attempts at absolute valorization and preservation of the present moment.”76

While Deleuze recognizes that there is also the time of alcoholic need, in which “every future is experienced as a future perfect (futur-antérieur),” his discussion of Lowry, surprisingly, passes over the intoxicated time of alcohol itself: the “circumfluent” and “paralysed” time described in the final pages of Under the Volcano.77 With a nostalgic gloss appropriate to Debord’s tone in Panégyrique, Deleuze proclaims: “alcohol is at once love and the loss of love . . . object, loss of object and the law governing this loss.”78 One cannot help but hear the example he refrains from giving: time and the loss of time. In that loss of time situations are found.

For all their experimentation and radicality, Jorn and Debord’s collaborations fail to extend their understanding of revolutionary time to the level of the book itself. Debord, predictably enough, critiques linear and sequential narratives; such “a chronology of events” evokes “an inexorable movement that crushed individuals before it.”79 Mémoires, however, enacts precisely such chronologies with its finalized and sequential dating of material corresponding neatly to its standard, linear, codexal sequence (spine to the left and pages turned one after the other from right to left). In contrast, the discontinuous and fragmented pages of Fin de Copenhague work against linearity to the extent that their parataxis blocks the smooth transition from one page to the next. Indeed, one might read the structure of Fin as a model for anarchist soviet: a federation that resists the subservience of the individual page to either an overall design or to an irrelevant autonomy. The pages in Fin, that is, deny precedence but share recurrent motifs, thus creating a spatial analogue to “individual and collective irreversible time which is playful in character and which encompasses, simultaneously present within it, a variety of autonomous yet effectively federated times.”80 In the end, however, the conventional understanding of the page as “a sort of enclosed space” which follows on another in an orderly “succession of artificially distinct moments” like the “accumulation of equivalent intervals” or spatialized examples of “time cut up into equal
abstract fragments," is too ingrained to be offset by an exacerbation of their discrete enclosure of space. The layout of pages even in Fin de Copenhague ultimately enacts the very structures Debord critiques.

This may seem a rather petty and harsh assessment of Jorn and Debord's work, arrived at only after interrogating the most trivial and incidental aspect of a book which otherwise, as I have just been arguing at some length, displays an exemplary Situationist practice. But the significance of such details, and the unflinching attention they require, is precisely the lesson a radical formalism might learn from that Situationist practice. The dream of politics requires both a sleepless watch, an insomniac vigilance Argus-eyed and lidless, and also—as the title of Michèle Bernstein's manifesto announced in the premier issue of the IS—"Pas d'indulgence inutile [No useless leniency]." We awake into the dawn of the dream of politics with precision, and "out, l'heure nouvelle est au moins très-sèvere [yes, the new hour is, at the very least, quite severe]."

2. The Politics of Noise

Unmasking the "Face of the Voice of Speech"

"How often do critics consider poetry as a physical act? Do critics look at the print on the page, at the shapes of the words, at the surface—the space of the paper itself?" Having posed these questions, Susan Howe acutely answers: "Very rarely." In the last chapter, we saw the consequences of overlooking precisely such details; having tested the relation of certain physical poetic acts against the specific political claims of the Situationists, this chapter will turn to a more general examination of the political dynamics of the text at those moments when it threatens (or promises) to become illegible. As in the previous chapter, I will continue to explore the degree to which textual and bibliographic details can motivate the work within which they not only signify and provide material support, but also continually offer points of resistance, contradiction, and the necessity—for both readers and writers—of making irrevocable ethical decisions. By way of example, I will focus on the writings of Howe herself, who began her artistic career as a visual artist and has in fact been one of the rare exceptions to the critical blindness towards the most visual acts of poetry. In her important scholarly work on American literature, and especially on the manuscripts of Emily Dickinson, she evinces a close attention to visual prosody: the look of texts on the page and their necessary imbeddedness in the materiality of that page through details like size, cut, color, and watermark. "Messages," as Howe wittily asserts, "must be seen to be heard to say." One might, of course, question the extent to which Howe reads her