The Situ Tapes: Mehdi E.H.

Date: January 2018

Tanya Loi (TL) in conversation with Mehdi E.H. (MH), a Situationist collector, San Francisco, USA.

A discussion about all things related to Situationism and its aftermath.

Mehdi E.H., 2018

TL: I first came across your amazing SI collection on your ‘Situationniste Blog’ a few years ago. I understand that your SI collection is the largest in America. Approximately how many items do you have in your collection? What types of material does it consist of? And how many decades does it span?

MH: First a rectification – I believe my collection to be the largest in private hands in the United States. Yale’s holdings of Situationist and related material is simply phenomenal – for well over a decade, Kevin Repp (of the Beinecke Library) has worked tirelessly to create what is perhaps the most comprehensive archive around the SI. You can check it out at https://www.postwarcultureatbeinecke.org/.

As of December 2017, my collection includes a little over 2,000 items, as well as a few hundred press clippings. It consists primarily of books, pamphlets and leaflets, but also includes posters, letters, postcards, photographs, VHS tapes, CDs, DVDs, and even a board game.

The collection spans nearly 65 years, starting with the Internationale Lettriste in 1952 up to the present. I am just as interested in the SI as I am in its aftermath (so-called pro-Situationist and post-Situationist groups) and its scholarly reception.

TL: When did you start collecting SI material?

MH: In the fall of 2001, as I was idling in a bookstore in France, I stumbled upon a small, unassuming volume with an intriguing title: La Société du Spectacle (The Society of the Spectacle). The front cover, which featured a yellowed, antique-looking map, piqued my curiosity. What could this book possibly be about – geopolitics? military strategy? critical theory? As it turns out (and as I later realized), all of the above.
Hoping for some clarification, I turned to the back cover. It read in part: ‘It is necessary to read this book with the idea in mind that it was intentionally written to harm spectacular society.’ There was never anything outrageous, however, about what it had to say.

While it did not provide any clues about the text or its author, such uncompromising rhetoric made a strong impression on a 20-year old college student. What is this ‘spectacular society’ that Mr. Debord wishes to destroy? I paid a little under 6 Euros for the cheap paperback and walked out of the bookstore. That’s how it all started. (Fig. 36B)

TL: What instigated you to start a collection on the SI rather than any other countercultural group?

MH: This question really has two parts – why the SI rather than another group, and why start a collection.

The SI stands out among counter-cultural groups of the 50s and 60s in several ways. An obvious one is the continued relevance of its theoretical discourse. Take the opening sentence of Guy Debord’s *La Société du Spectacle*: ‘In modern societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.’ This was written over 50 years ago! Whether or not one agrees with the SI’s theses, it is difficult to deny the movement’s prescience.

I started collecting the SI by accident, really. I wanted to read as much of the movement’s writings as I could, and mostly purchased paperbacks. There was something truly appealing about owning the original Champ Libre first editions, so I started getting those at reasonable prices. Fast-forward to 2008 – I owned about 100 books by or about the SI, a modest reading collection. On a whim, I entered a book collecting prize geared at under-30 students. I took first place, and the generous monetary award funded a few key acquisitions.

TL: What was your first major acquisition?
MH: My first major acquisition was a copy of Guy Debord’s and Asger Jorn’s famed artist book Mémoires. Printed in vivid colors – the work of Danish master-printers Permild & Rosengreen – in 500 copies, it is one of the most important artist books of the twentieth century. Mémoires is perhaps best known for its unique cover: a single sheet of heavy grade sandpaper (specifically Viks no.2). The intent was for Mémoires to damage nearby volumes on library shelves. I remember getting the book in my hands, and realizing how it successfully expressed its radicalism in both form and content. Despite (because of?) its ambiguous relationship with its own material productions, the SI formed a particularly interesting movement to document.

TL: Have there been any particular SI texts or their successors’ works that have had a lasting influence on you?

MH: At the risk of sounding clichéd, Debord’s La Société du Spectacle transformed (and clarified) my view of the world. I will quote Debord’s fourth thesis: ‘The spectacle is not a collection of images, rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images.’ In spectacular society, relating to others is done through images, and only through them. There’s no more love, no more friendship – there’s only the projection upon others of these feelings as they are portrayed to us through images. This is a simplification, of course, but you get the gist of it.

The front cover of a later American edition (Detroit: Black & Red, 1973) offers an apt visual metaphor: taken at the premiere screening of the first full-length, color 3-D motion picture at the Paramount Theatre in Oakland, it shows an audience of moviegoers engrossed – held captive, really – by the same moving images. They are not communicating with one another in any way, however. As I think about our relationship with technology and the media – take, for instance, how groups of friends can be seen sitting together, messaging on their cell phones instead of talking to one another – Situationist concepts apply today just as they did 50 years ago. Perhaps even more so.

TL: From your collection who would you say is the most influential female member of the SI and why? And also who do you feel is the most influential female contemporary successor of the SI?

MH: Your first question is a tough one. In my opinion – take it for what it’s worth – it’s a tie between Michèle Bernstein and Jacqueline de Jong. Both are extraordinary women, but each contributed to the SI in a very different way.

Michèle Bernstein was a founding member of the SI in 1957 and was an official member of the group until 1967. She contributed several articles to Internationale Situationniste, and her name is found on many leaflets produced by the group. Unlike most Situationists, Bernstein also had a successful career as a fiction writer, authoring two somewhat successful novels: Tous les chevaux du roi (1960) and La Nuit (1961). To top it all, Bernstein basically financed Debord and the SI in their early years. Ralph Rumney sums it all up when he states that: ‘to me, she is the most Situationist of all. She was the one in Cosio who picked everyone up on the fact that one does not say “Situationism” but “Situationist”, because when it becomes an “-ism” chances are that it will turn into an ideology, a sect. She would surely deny this, but I had the impression that she had a certain authority over Guy.’

Jacqueline de Jong joined the SI a bit later, in 1960, as a member of the Dutch section. In fact, De Jong was the Dutch section after Constant’s expulsion (‘Now all of Holland belongs to you’, wrote Debord to her). She split up with the group after only a few years, and is best remembered for the extraordinary avant-garde magazine she edited and published – The Situationist Times. Six issues were released between 1962 and 1968, some with specific themes – e.g., issue no.4 focused on labyrinths. Collaborators included Asger Jorn (who was her lover for a decade), Noel Arnaud, Pierre Alechinsky, Gaston Bachelard, Roberto Matta, Wilfredo Lam, Jacques Prevert and many others.

Situationist Times was a truly eclectic publication, unlike anything the SI ever produced. And I didn’t even talk about De Jong’s successful 50+ year career as a visual artist... Now you see why it’s such a difficult choice between De Jong and Bernstein!

As far as contemporary successors, it’s really hard for me to say... I like what Pussy Riot do, but calling them a successor of the SI is far-fetched. Likewise, Paris-based collective Claire Fontaine has produced some interesting Situ-influenced pieces.

TL: What counter-cultural groups or individuals do you think have been the most successful in incorporating Situationist concepts?

MH: Hundreds of individuals or groups have, to a certain degree, appropriated Situationist concepts. A much smaller number, however, successfully built on the SI’s theoretical apparatus to generate new political or artistic discourse. Tiqun (1999–2001) is one of those. Though short-lived – the group dissolved itself after publishing only two issues of its eponymous journal – it had (and continues to have) a profound influence. The Coming Insurrection by the Invisible Committee (which is thought to comprise former Tiqun members) even achieved popular fame, with conservative journalist Glenn Beck lambasting the book on television. But there are many others, of course.

TL: How influential would you say the SI have been on the contemporary American scene artistically, culturally and politically?

MH: The SI had a significant influence on the U.S. leftist milieu from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s. Several groups emerged out of a few key geographic centers: San Francisco and the Bay Area, New York City, and Detroit - Ann Arbor area. I will give a few examples.

In New York, Ben Morea founded Black Mask, which published an eponymous journal. One of the group’s first actions was to shut down the MOMA. Morea remembers: ‘The Museum and gallery system separated art from that living interchange and had nothing to do with the vital, creative urge. Museums weren’t a living house, they were just a repository. We were searching for ways to raise questions about how things were presented and closing down MOMA was just one of them.’

In San Francisco and Berkeley, Ken Knabb created the Bureau of Public Secrets, which continues to this day. Knabb was at the epicenter of the West Coast Situationist scene, publishing many original Situ-influenced pamphlets and posters, and translating SI texts into English for American audiences.

The Midwest also saw some Situationist-influenced activity, with Fredy Perlman publishing Worker-Student Action Committees, May 68 upon his return from Paris. He then wrote The Reproduction of Daily Life and worked with a few others to translate The Society of the Spectacle into English in 1970.

The SI’s influence in America declined significantly after the 1970s, but one can obviously find traces of situationist theories in anything from Hakim Bey to Adbusters...

TL: Do you feel the SI have been as influential in other countries as they have been in the UK, France and America? Is this illustrated in your collection?

MH: This is a great question. In building my collection, it became abundantly clear that the SI’s influence is most evident in France, the UK, and the U.S. However, the movement also left an important mark in several European countries. Situationist theses occasionally travelled far and wide – sometimes to rather unexpected places. I will pick a few examples as illustrations.

Scandinavia: The Second Situationist International (also known as Bauhaus Situationiste) was active in the Nordic countries, particularly Denmark and Sweden, with the likes of Jorgen Nash (Asger Jorn’s brother). The periodical Drakabygget was the organ of this movement – its title was directly borrowed from the name of Nash’s farm, which by then had been turned into a kind of artists’ commune. It was subtitled Tidsskrift for kunst mot atombomber, påbaroch politiker (‘Magazine for art against atomic bombs, popes and politicians’). The last issue came out in 1984.
Germany: Following their ejection from the SI, Gruppe SPUR went on to produce some additional works. In the mid-1960s, they collaborated with WIR and a joint publication ensued. Lothar Fischer, Heimrad Prem, Helmut Sturm and HP Zimmer all remained active to various degrees afterwards. Groups like Projektgruppe Gegengesellschaft continued publishing translations of SI texts well into the 1970s.

The Netherlands: As mentioned earlier, Jacqueline de Jong carried on the SI’s legacy through The Situationist Times and later on her paintings. Constant (Nieuwenhuys) carried on his work on New Babylon – an anti-capitalist, urban utopia where work is replaced with play – through 1974. Contemporary architects like Rem Koolhaas were heavily influenced by Constant’s work. Constant was also involved in Provo, a counter-culture movement that shook Amsterdam in the 1960s.

Italy: Gianfranco Sanguinetti – the last remaining member of the SI – was very active in Italy in the 1970s. He co-authored La Veritable Scission with Debord in 1972, then wrote the incendiary pamphlet Rapporto veridi cosulle ultima opportunita di salvare il capitalismo in Italia (The real report on the last chance to save capitalism in Italy) under the pseudonym Censor. Later on, some of the participants in Movimento del ‘77 were influenced by Situationist theses. Italian publishers such as Nautilus continue to make Situationist texts available in Italy.

The Caribbean: Situationist theses reached Jamaica with Fundi, aka Caribbean Situationist, aka Joseph Edwards, aka George Myers, a proponent of self-management who authored the Situationist-influenced pamphlet None Shall Escape: Radical Perspectives in the Caribbean, among others. His writings have recently been reprinted in Workers’ Self-Management in the Caribbean: The Writings of Joseph Edwards.

TL: Are there any particular contemporary successors of the SI that you have an interest in or are currently collecting? Why these individuals in particular?

MH: I am building ‘depth’ in my collection – so I have an interest in acquiring material by all groups who are significantly influenced by the SI. I am fascinated by how specific Situationist theses are deployed to analyze or interpret modern reality.

Take Processed World, a group most active in the Bay Area in the 1980s and early 1990s. Their eponymous magazine – which ran an incredible 24 years (1981–2005) – focused on the absurdity of office work at the dawn of the information age. It used humor to communicate its message, applying the Situationist technique of détournement in an original fashion. To quote Processed World: ‘Dozens of images were gleaned from the business and computer press (Business Week, Fortune, Modern Office Procedures, Today’s Office, Food Processing News and others) and then revealingly altered, or as the French would say ‘détournee’. Sometimes these images and slogans are used in collage, but more often they have their overt message inverted or diverted by small additions or subtractions. A subjectively truthful caption changes the sense of a conformist image, or a bland corporate catchphrase is turned inside out by a bizarre or sinister graphic.’

TL: Have you met any members of the SI or anyone who had a direct link with the Situationists, who have had an influence on you or have been particularly interesting to meet in terms of personal stories?

MH: I had the opportunity to meet a few of the original members of the SI, as well as numerous individuals who were heavily influenced by Situationist ideas. Initially, I was concerned that, as a collector, I may be viewed suspiciously (at best) or with hostility (at worse). In a way, archiving the SI could be considered a duplicitous, even counter-revolutionary act. Situationists explicitly rejected the curation of cultural artifacts, denouncing it as a reactionary, bourgeois–like notion. They also encouraged piracy in an attempt to broaden the circulation of ideas beyond institutionalized channels. After all, the SI’s journal states that ‘All texts published in Internationale Situationniste may be reproduced, translated, or adapted without indication of origin’.

I presented myself for who I was – an archivist and (to some extent) a scholar, but neither an activist nor a political ally. If you look at my blog, I take a strictly bibliographical stance, presenting
WE MAKE REVOLUTION IN OUR SPARE TIME

Situationist artifacts without any ideological positioning. In a milieu rife with internecine wars, my position as a neutral third-party, a mere chronicler, resonated.

While I would prefer not to share specific anecdotes — after all, these were private encounters — I will say that I was genuinely surprised at how welcoming everyone was. Some SI members invited me into their homes, others shared fond memories with me, and some even became friends. I learned a lot, and it’s been humbling.

TL: What are your thoughts on Alice Becker—Ho selling Debord’s collection to the BnF for 2.7 million euros as you yourself have already stated that you’ll be transferring your collection to a higher learning institution? And what are your thoughts about institutions holding exhibitions about the SI, and even museums purchasing items for their permanent collections? A lot of pro-situs that I’ve interviewed are completely against the SI being ‘recuperated’.

MH: I do not feel competent to judge Alice, or the many others who deal in Situationist material. The SI is a critically important political and artistic avant-garde movement — one that truly shaped the twentieth century. I support all individuals and institutions who not only preserve, but also make available SI artifacts to as large an audience as possible.

As far as my own collection, my hope is that it can ultimately find a good home — a place where it is valued and broadly shared. But this is still a few decades away... In the meantime, I provide an open access to my archive. Anybody can request a visit and check out anything they like. I also frequently scan/photograph content that researchers (or in a few cases translators) would not otherwise have access to. Last, but not least, I use my blog to share some of my most interesting or unique pieces with a broader audience. As you see, my approach is different from more traditional collectors who lock their ‘gems’ in a secure vault that only they can access.

TL: Give us some interesting facts about the SI that you have come across from your vast collection that we wouldn’t necessarily know from material already published?

MH: One thing I have done is attempt to collect every edition of *De la misère en milieu étudiant* (On the poverty of student life), Mustapha Khayati’s pamphlet lambasting university students for their subservience to bourgeois society and its institutions. Initially, I was under the impression that I would need to gather twenty, maybe thirty volumes. However, I kept finding new, undocumented editions from places like Australia, Chile, Switzerland, Russia, Serbia, and Hong Kong. To date, I have collected nearly sixty editions, and I know of a few others I am still missing. Through this, I learned that Situationist ideas spread much further than I (and many others) had initially believed.

TL: Theoretically, culturally, artistically and socially speaking who do you think have been more influential — the British Situationists (King Mob) or the Situationist International?

MH: Probably not a question I want to answer!

TL: From my experience every counter-cultural group has had some sort of downfall, such as going against their original ideology in favour of financial gains etc. What would you say the SI’s downfall was?

MH: This is a really complex question, of course, and every historian of the SI will have a different opinion on the matter. Let me break it down into immediate vs. deeper causes.

By the late 1960s/early 1970s, there was significant internal debate within the SI. Documents like the *Debat d’orientation de l’ex-Internationale Situationniste* (a compilation of 35 internal documents of the SI debating possible strategies in the aftermath of May 1968) and *La Véritable scission dans l’Internationale* (The Real Split in the International) shed some light on the growing divide between members of the organization. By 1972, as a result of numerous exclusions and departures, Gianfranco Sanguinetti and Guy Debord were the only remaining Situationists. The SI was disbanded shortly thereafter.

However, it appears to me that the SI was ultimately unable to survive May 1968. This was a point...
of crystallization, an opportunity to carry theory into practice. Ultimately, however, and despite its magnitude, the movement failed. So what was there to do, then? It wasn’t just the SI – many, if not most, other ultra–left groups faced a crisis after that.

**TL:** Briefly, what would you say is the lasting legacy of the SI?

**MH:** The Situationist legacy is a very broad one – are we talking about impact on arts, culture, politics, architecture, urbanism? The amazing thing about the SI is that it was able to re–shape the discourse across such a wide range of fields.

In a way, key concepts that cut across disciplines are perhaps the most lasting legacy of the group. The technique of détournement, for instance, is at the heart of the artistic and political practice of numerous counter–cultural groups, such as Processed World, the Billboard Liberation Front, Adbusters...However, and perhaps even more interestingly, détournement’s subversive aim was itself subverted as the concept became part of popular culture. Think about the ‘meme’ culture that is now all the rage on the Internet...

But yeah, I could also talk about dérive, about psychogeography, and much more...

**TL:** What are your 5 most treasured possessions from your collection and why?

**MH:** The most difficult question of them all! I will pick a few items that have a special significance to me. In no particular order:

1. [Debord, Guy]. *Le Jeu de la Guerre*. Paris: Les Jeux stratégiques et historiques, [1977?]. White cardboard box; 36 x 28.5 x 3.5 cm. The box contains the game rule (23 p.; 22 x 26 cm.; black ink on white stock), the game board (55.5 x 44 cm.; black and white squares) and 34 round–shaped, wooden games pieces.

This is the only board game in my collection – and the only Situationist board game I know of. Three or four metal prototypes were handcrafted by a Parisian artisan, and a commercial batch with wooden pieces ensued. While it is unclear how many copies were produced, it is believed that they sold out. The other copy I know of is at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, part of Guy Debord’s archive.


I have two copies of Mémoires – one with the landmark sandpaper cover, and another where it has been replaced with a cover made of 110 razor blades. The work of Michel Guét, an artist and writer who was close friends with Ralph Rumney, it is an homage to Jorn and Debord. I love this item because it is a one–of–a–kind détournement of an amazing book.
3. Debord, Guy and Jorn, Asger. *Fin de Copenhague*. Copenhagen: Bauhaus Imaginiste, May 1957. n.p. [36 pp.]; ill.; 24.5 x 17 cm.; ill. blue–gray publisher bindings impressed with a page ‘liberated’ from the Danish newspaper *Politiken* (each copy was made with a different page, and is thus unique).

*Fin de Copenhague* was produced as an artistic experiment, with Debord and Jorn stealing a huge amount of newspapers then creating the book’s 32 collages in a drunken revelry. 200 copies were then printed, numbered and signed by the artists. I am very fond of my copy because it was personally gifted to Ole Jorn by his father, Asger Jorn. It is warmly inscribed ‘Til Ole, fra Papa’ (‘To Ole, from Papa’).


This is the only Arabic language item in my collection. *Sultat-al-Majaliss* was a short-lived periodical inspired by Council Communism and Situationist ideas. While a French P.O. Box is given as the address of the journal, it was conceived (and likely published) in Beirut. Former SI member Mustapha Khayati and anarchist Latif Lakhdar collaborated on this first iteration, recruiting other Arab leftist sympathizers along the way. ‘Our journal’, the editors claim, ‘is the first Arab Marxist journal’ that advocates for ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat and of workers’ councils in the Arab world.’ The promising publication was to be short-lived, however, as the civil war broke out in Lebanon and no more issues were released.

5. Debord, Guy and Blanc, Anita. *Correspondence with Anita Blanc*. Original correspondence between Guy Debord and Anita Blanc on the back of 14 handwritten and typed postcards (ca. 10.5 x 15 cm. in size). Written between 1988 and 1990, all are accounted for in *Correspondance, Vol. VII* (Paris: Fayard, 2008).

Anita Blanc was one of a handful of employees (and Guy Debord’s day-to-day contact) at Editions Champ Libre/Gerard Lebovici. They had a shared passion for cats, which explains the deliberate and consistent choice of postcards representing felines. I like these postcards because, while Debord tackles a number of serious matters (such as the translation of his works into English and Spanish), he also takes on a lighter tone. It’s a chance to take a peek at the cat-loving man behind the stern theoretician.