

PETER WOLLEN

SITUATIONISTS AND ARCHITECTURE

THIS IS NOT a conventional scholarly essay. Instead I want to discuss a number of topics addressed by the Situationists, making a kind of collage of commentaries on what seem to me to be key elements of their thought in relation to architecture and the city—which were, indeed, centrally important issues for them. These elements are as follows: 1, the minaret; 2, the gypsy camp; 3, *dérive*; 4, Mad King Ludwig; 5, the Postman Cheval; 6, the *Merzbau*; 7, Le Corbusier; 8, Paris; 9, psychogeography; 10, *Love on the Left Bank*; 11, white bicycles; 12, *détournement*; 13, the Cavern of Anti-Matter; 14, New Babylon; 15, Watts; 16, the Architecture of Despair; 17, Vienna's Place—and finally: 18, Albisola.

I

I begin with the minaret. In 1948 Asger Jorn wrote an article titled 'What is an Ornament?', which was published in an obscure Danish journal. That same year, he had spent time in Djerba, Tunisia, which I believe is the same place that Paul Klee visited and which had such an influence on his calligraphic style of drawing. Among the illustrations to Jorn's essay was one juxtaposing a 'horsetail' and a minaret. The horsetail is a kind of plant, whose structure is very similar to that of the minaret depicted next to it—a kind of telescopic series of towers, each with a narrower diameter than the last, piled on top of each other, finally ending with a tiny little turret at the topmost point. (The picture of the horsetail looks as if it was one of Blossfeldt's famous series of photographs of plants, but I have not been able to check this.) The point Jorn wishes to make is summed up in his caption: 'Horsetail and Minaret. They resem-

ble each other, not because the minaret is a copy of a plant but because this is the natural mode of form in matter.' Underneath, there is a similar juxtaposition of a totem pole and a chestnut branch, also lookalikes. Jorn observes that 'the nature of art is not to imitate the external forms of nature (naturalism) but to create natural art. Natural sculpture which is true to its material will be identical to nature's forms without seeking to imitate.' Architecture and sculpture, I might note, here seem to be treated as if they were more or less the same thing.

Asger Jorn had gone to Djerba in order to confirm the views put forward by the Swedish architectural theorist, Erik Lundberg. According to Jorn, writing in the late 1940s, 'Erik Lundberg seems to be the first in the civilized world, America included, who has been able to give a definition of the opposition between the classical-European and the oriental attitudes to art which is correct, true to reality, and which offers a perspective for explaining works of art and their nature.' For Jorn, the pairing of European versus oriental ran together with other pairings, such as classical versus spontaneous, idealist versus materialist, Apollonian versus Dionysiac, with Jorn supporting the second term throughout—oriental, materialist, spontaneous, Dionysiac, and so on. Obviously these couplings are very broadbrush in their scope but they gave Jorn a framework for developing his ideas about art and architecture; ideas which had a big effect on Situationist thought, as we shall see.

2

Next, the gypsy camp. Another early member of the Situationist group, back in its Imaginist Bauhaus days, was Giuseppe Pinot Gallizio, an Italian artist. Pinot Gallizio had played an important role in his home town in northern Italy in defending the rights of gypsies to set up camp sites. This defence of nomadism became an important element in Situationist thought. The Belgian artist Constant, another early Situationist, designed a gypsy camp as an architectural project, creating a maquette of a complex that could be taken apart, transported and reassembled. After the Situationist International had been dissolved, Debord's partner Alice Becker-Ho wrote a fascinating little book on the Romany language. There is an obvious sense in which this abiding interest in nomads and gypsies could also be related to Jorn's support for the spontaneous and the Dionysiac, over the classical and the Apollonian. To be fixed, to be static, is to refuse spontaneous activity, to remain, in

a sense, imprisoned in a single, confining location. In fact Constant, as we shall see, designed his city project, New Babylon, to be inhabited only by transients, rather than having a settled population. In a way, it was rather like a single, city-scale mega-hotel.

3

Now, *dérive*. Guy Debord wrote the classic text on the ‘Theory of the *Dérive*’—usually translated as ‘drift’ or ‘drifting’—in December 1958, in the second number of *Internationale Situationniste*. He defines it as ‘a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances’. Note, again, the taste for transience and spontaneity. Debord’s basic idea is that this project of wandering through the city should be determined not by any preconceived plan, but by the attractions or discouraging counter-attractions of the city itself. It requires a ‘letting go’ of ‘the usual motives for movement and action’—we might almost say, a letting go of everyday identity. Debord seems to have been inspired in part by Paul-Henry Chombart de Lauwe’s study of *Paris et l’agglomération parisienne*, published in 1952; and particularly by its maps, which are frequently used as illustrations in the Situationist journal and in Debord’s own art works. He was especially struck by a map detailing all the movements made over a year by a student living in the 16th Arrondissement: ‘her itinerary delineates a small triangle, with no deviations, the three apexes of which are the School of Political Science, her residence and that of her piano teacher.’

Shocked by this rigid repetition of a fixed pattern of mobility, Debord conceived *dérive* as a way of creating completely new, unpredictable itineraries, dependent on chance and the spontaneous subjective impulses and reactions of the wanderer. The recourse to chance reminds us, unavoidably, of André Breton’s doctrine of ‘objective chance’ and above all of his great book, *Nadja*, which traces a series of just such aimless journeys through Paris, punctuated by a pattern of attraction and repulsion to certain buildings, or kinds of buildings, rather than others. Debord notes that this technique of *dérive* is, in a way, only necessary because his larger project of ‘psychogeography’ has not yet been sufficiently far developed. Psychogeography would make possible the creation of maps in which particular locations or regions had already been designated as favouring the arousal of one kind of affective or aesthetic response, so that a certain amount of pre-planning could take place. Meanwhile, chance was the

best method. (This text, interestingly enough, was written just as John Cage was conducting his seminars on chance procedures at the School for Social Research in New York. Probably a coincidence.)

A *dérive* could take place over a few minutes or even a few days. Duration didn't matter. Taxis could be used for rapid transport outside one's usual environment. (One Situationist demand was for the abolition of private cars and their replacement by fleets of low-cost taxis.) As in Breton's book, the *dérive* also implied the possibility of chance encounters, meetings with strangers. Debord even suggests that the subject of a *dérive* might be invited to visit a particular place at a particular time, with the expectation of meeting an unknown person, thus being forced to introduce themselves to random passers-by in an effort to identify whether this was the person he or she was looking for. This was called the technique of the 'possible rendezvous'. He also reveals a taste for straying in uncanny locations—'slipping by night into houses due for demolition . . . wandering in subterranean catacombs forbidden to the public, etc.' Here we see the *dérive* as a kind of dream journey, even an invitation to break taboos—or, perhaps, simply to enjoy what we might think of, in the architectural register, as the Gothick picturesque.

4

Fourth, 'Mad King Ludwig'. King Ludwig of Bavaria built the palaces at Neuschwanstein, Herrenchiemsee and Linderhof, strange follies perched high in the mountains, with an architectural repertory ranging from fairy-tale turrets to the Wagnerian grotto. The Mad King's follies appealed to the Situationists presumably because they defied the protocols of instrumental reason. The King built exactly what he desired, in the way he wanted, rather as if he was engaged in a kind of constructional *dérive*. The idea of the folly seems crucial to Situationist thinking on architecture, just as it was to the Surrealists. In a way, though, 'folly' is too weak a word, conjuring up as it does Stowe or Stourhead, monuments of the eighteenth-century picturesque; a better term might be 'outsider architecture'. On the other hand, a builder like Gaudí was a professional architect, despite the idiosyncrasy of his work; Niki de Saint-Phalle, who has built a series of strange houses, in France and Italy, is a professional artist. Perhaps the main point is that all these buildings seem to meld sculpture with architecture, and to be works of the untrammelled imagination rather than of

controlling reason. In the pre-Situationist journal *Potlatch*, Ludwig was invoked alongside Claude Lorrain, Piranesi and the Postman Cheval as a pioneer of psychogeography.

5

Perhaps the building most mentioned there was the Palais Idéal of the Postman Cheval, another Surrealist favourite, which is to be found in a small village near Lyon. A photograph of Debord at the Palais Idéal can be found in the museum at Silkeborg, in Denmark. Instigated by a dream based, perhaps, on memories of a mock Asian palace seen at a Grand Exhibition in Paris, the Palais Idéal falls into the category of highly ornamented buildings approved by Jorn, with a quasi-organic feel to them—as if they had grown out of the rock, rather than been carefully planned and constructed by their obsessive, artisanal creator. Moreover, there are abundant references to North African architecture—to an Arabian Mosque, an Arabian House and construction in the Egyptian style, according to Cheval himself. It is important, too, that Cheval, like Constant or Pinot Gallizio or, indeed, Ludwig of Bavaria, was not a trained architect working to a commission, but a visionary, willing to devote his life to realizing his dream. Although we might think of him as a compulsive obsessive, from another vantage point he could be described as an entirely free man, whose life outside his work as a postman was devoted to his great, imaginative project. In fact, even his hours as a postman were devoted, partially, to the task. He kept a lookout for useful chunks of rock, the soft limestone of the region, as he cycled down the country lanes with his mailbag, stopping to place them at the side of the road to be collected later, in his cart, for use in the building.

6

Kurt Schwitters's *Merzbau* in Hannover is, so to speak, the practising artist's version of outsider art, a single room densely packed with the signs and symbols of an intensely private imaginative world. Yet it also appears orderly and sophisticated, with a clear sense of geometrical design and carefully contrived focal points for the eye. For the artists who made up the bulk of the Situationist group, particularly in its early years, Schwitters was a more appropriate role model than either the crazy, authoritarian king, with his apparently unlimited resources, or the strange, unsophisticated postman, with his single compulsive life

project. Schwitters was well aware of what he was doing and why, even as he was prepared to use elements of chance or to follow a sudden impulse. The scale of his work, too, was much less grandiose, almost domestic. It's not that the Situationists didn't have a megalomaniac side—it is more that their truly grand public visions of constructing whole new revolutionary cities were much more ambitious than those even of outsider artists, while their private projects (films, installations, models, etc.) were actually quite feasible.

7

The counterpart of the Situationists' praise for Schwitters can be found in their hatred of Le Corbusier and modern, rationalist architecture in general. In some sense, too, Corbusier could be seen as a rival, with his own megalomaniac city plans—devised, however, on a very different intellectual basis. The dislike for Le Corbusier can be found very early in Jorn's writings. Jorn had studied painting as a young man with Fernand Léger, and had actually worked, at that time, on a painting-decoration project under Le Corbusier's direction. In the words of the most acute commentator on Jorn's thinking, Graham Birtwistle, 'these experiments made a deep impression on him, stimulating both an antipathy to the kind of theory and practice he had encountered in Paris and a lasting respect for Léger and Le Corbusier whom Jorn apparently went on to regard as the most noble of foes.'¹ Jorn's polemic against Corbusier was mainly directed at his functionalism, his reductive vision of architecture as a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. It was precisely because he was searching for a way of mounting a critique of Corbusier, so it seems, that Jorn turned to Erik Lundberg with such interest and enthusiasm. Essentially he set himself the task, never completed, of constructing a counter-theory to that of Corbusier.

One of Debord's main arguments against capitalism was contained in his film, *Critique of Separation*, released in 1961, with its call for an attack on the totality of society, because only a total revolution could overthrow the separation of subject and object capitalism entailed. Jorn, somewhat earlier, had developed his own critique of separation, but in a different context: the critique of Corbusier:

¹ *Living Art: Asger Jorn's Comprehensive Theory of Art between Helhesten and Cobra, 1946–1949*, Utrecht 1986.

The logical functionalists saw a value in the division of architectural elements into supporting, isolating and enclosing elements, just as they attempted to divide the towns into districts for families with children, districts for the elderly, for students, artists, etc. It is even claimed that it is natural, as if the functions of life allow themselves to be split off from one another. Is it for example the human skeleton which supports the muscular system? Or do the muscles support the skeleton? Is it the stalk or is it the sap which is the supporting principle in a tulip? Can a skeleton stand without muscles; can muscles hold a skeleton up without blood? Can a tulip stand up without help from its sap?

As Birtwistle observes, 'Jorn's polemical point is clear: modern design needs to learn anew the lesson of organic unity from natural, material life'. Jorn himself summed it up as follows, in another paper: 'The functionalists have defined urbanism as the creation of our framework for living. If this good idea is to be developed further we must substitute for a rationalist framework an artistic way of working, in which all branches of art co-operate in an organic "art of unity".' This, of course, was what Schwitters attempted in uniting painting, sculpture and architecture in the *Merzbau*. Looked at another way, Jorn's underlying claim was that 'the framework for living' was not one that could be imposed from outside, externally, by city planners and architects. It had to be built in co-operation with the inhabitants of the city themselves, whose free input was needed, just as the skeleton needed the muscles and the stalk the sap. In this way, a critique of Corbusier developed into a theory of 'unitary urbanism', which developed into a critique of the totality of capitalist society, which in turn led to the political doctrines of councilist democracy and workers' control that characterized the uprising of May 1968.

8

The focus of Situationist thought, of course, was Paris. Paris was the city in which they lived, aspects of which they both loved and hated, and Paris was the city where the barricades went up in May. The Situationists paradoxically combined a revolutionary—even a utopian—concern, to create an entirely new Paris of the future, with a strong conservationist streak, endlessly condemning the destruction of old streets and protesting the bureaucratic 'modernization' of the city. For instance, the destruction of the Rue Sauvage in the 13th Arrondissement was specifically mourned in *Potlatch*. Later, the destruction of the old market area

around Les Halles, to create a shopping centre and an art museum, was fiercely attacked by Debord. When I co-organized the Situationist exhibition at the Beaubourg, Debord indicated that he would not be able to attend because he had sworn never to set foot in the building. First, it bore the hated name of Pompidou, the accursed foe of 68, and, second, it was the poisoned fruit of the destruction of the previous huddle of street and café life, beloved by Debord and his comrades.

A number of areas of Paris, on the other hand, were singled out for positive attention. Arrondissement 7 was favourably invoked—the district around and behind Les Invalides. The Square des Missions Étrangères, near the junction of Rue de Babylone and Boulevard Raspail, was specifically recommended. 36 Rue des Morillons was praised. This could be the abbatoir, according to my map. It would be easy to carry out a Situationist tour of Paris, because Debord's two folding maps of the city specifically pick out the areas worth wandering in and indicate with bright red arrows possible directions for taxi journeys between them. Areas of the city suggested for special attention and research were the Butte-aux-Cailles, near the Place d'Italie; the 'Continent of Contrescarpe', presumably the area round the Place de la Contrescarpe; the Morgue; Aubervilliers, just outside the city limits to the north; and the Désert de Retz. In this sense, we can see that the apparent call made by the Situationists for 'total' revolution needs to be somewhat nuanced. While social relations should be totally transformed, the best of the past should be honoured and preserved. In fact, in many of Debord's texts, there is a strongly elegiac note and an intense involvement with the past, not only its struggles and failed revolutions, but also its literature and its monuments.

9

A brief word on psychogeography, the field of research which guided the Situationists in their appraisal of the city and its architecture. It is first introduced into Situationist discourse by Guy Debord, in the following way:

The word *psychogeography*, suggested by an illiterate Kabyle as a general term for the phenomena a few of us were investigating around the summer of 1953, is not too inappropriate . . . *Psychogeography* could set for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals. The adjective *psychogeographical*, retaining a rather pleasing

vagueness, can thus be applied to the findings arrived at by this type of investigation, to their influence on human feelings, and even more generally to any situation or conduct that seems to reflect the same spirit of discovery.

Then follows an example in the form of a question: 'It has long been said that the desert is monotheistic. Is it illogical or devoid of interest to observe that the district in Paris between Place de la Contrescarpe and Rue de l'Arbalète [the Continent, again?] conduces rather to atheism, to oblivion and to the disorientation of habitual reflexes?'

At this early stage of Situationist thought, the principal idea was simply to make delirious proposals with as much seductive power as possible, with the long-term aim of transforming 'the whole of life into an exciting game'—the play principle before the work principle, *homo ludens*, in Huizinga's words, before man as thinker or worker. Chirico's arcades could be models for a new city architecture, Claude Lorrain's paintings of harbours at dusk have a strange beauty: not 'a plastic beauty—the new beauty can only be a beauty of situation—but simply the particularly moving presentation, in both cases, of a sum of possibilities'. Thus, from the start, psychogeography was bound up with the creation of situations; and the concept of situations was expanded, in time, to cover not just the city, but the whole of society, the totality of possibilities open in an unalienated community. Debord goes on to broach some further practical projects. For instance, all the equestrian statues in Paris could be taken down and reassembled somewhere in the midst of the Sahara, arranged as if for 'an artificial cavalry charge'. Not just all the statues in Paris, in fact, but all the statues 'in all the cities of the world! The new ensemble should be 'dedicated to the memory of the greatest mass-crucifiers of history, from Tamburlaine to General Ridgway. Here', Debord concludes, 'we see reappear one of the main demands of our generation: educational value'. In the city itself, a new awareness of the atmospheric effect of streets would make it possible to create exciting new varieties of emotional experience, by creating urban décors in a way 'analogous to the blending of pure chemicals in an infinite number of mixtures.'

IO

Ed van der Elsken's book of photographs, *Love on the Left Bank*, gives us a fascinating insight into the life actually lived in Paris by the future Situationists, then still rebel Lettrists or Imaginists. The central

character, a Mexican—whose point of view the photographer seems to take—has arrived in Paris as a hitchhiker, sleeping out on benches. Soon he makes some new friends and wanders from café to café with an Australian girl, in search of the scene. The book consists mainly of photographs taken in Left Bank cafés, portraits of their denizens napping, embracing, drinking, putting money in the juke-box, playing chess, whispering, selling hashish, reading psychology textbooks, acting as nightclub guides for tourists, begging, playing the guitar, handing out publicity leaflets in the street, painting, grinning, eating cheese sandwiches, sleeping in a news cinema or the metro, arguing, singing, smoking hashish, flirting, getting drunk, picking a fight, dancing, making up, listening to music, just waiting, being sent to jail, dreaming, falling in love. Finally, he returns to Mexico. In fact, it is a very confined life, limited by lack of money and, I suppose, lack of focus, if that's the word. It seems to be dark all the time. Who knows what happens in the daylight?

It is the same world, or at least an overlapping world, as the one Debord celebrated in his film, *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Brief Enough Period of Time*, made in 1959, also a kind of documentary, an avant-garde documentary, made two or three years after the time of van der Elsken's book. Already a lot has changed. Debord begins by invoking the architecture of the Left Bank quarter, Saint-Germain-des-Prés. In tall buildings live the ordinary, nondescript people, the *petits bourgeois*—buildings designed to shelter them from the street-life below. The people down below, the young people we saw in van der Elsken's book, are members of a kind of provisional micro-society. They are on the margins of the economy. They are consumers rather than producers—above all, they are consuming their own time, their own free time. Life doesn't change very much. They go back to the same places over and over again. No one wants to go to sleep. They are looking for a way out. They are lost in a kind of labyrinth. They have no sense of the future. They will never again be so free. Everything seems impermanent, including relationships. Their freedom is really only a dream. Their sense of play is inherently unstable. Any moment, everyday life can reclaim its rights. The game they play has strict spatial limits imposed upon it.

Outside their little area, there is a whole city in which you would never meet anyone you know. Sometimes the police come and take people away, perhaps to an institution, perhaps to return them to their detested

families. At least these people, the subjects of the film, are aware of the inadequacy of the area in which they live. They (now Debord switches to 'we') want to find another way of using the urban landscape, they want to find new passions. The atmosphere of the places they frequent makes them feel the potential power of an architecture which has still to be created, its power to provide a basis and a framework for less pointless games. The present urban environment simply proclaims, with violence, the requirements and the tastes of the dominant society. Everything has to be changed. Here the screen goes blank.

What is interesting about Debord's film is the way in which the call for revolution follows directly from a critique of spatiality and architecture. It is as if architecture is the point where the hidden power of the dominant society imposes itself most directly and yet in a way which is unnoticed. It is at this point that we can begin to see how the critique of city architecture, the project of a Unitary Urbanism, could have been transformed into a call for social revolution. He begins with a marginal micro-society, outside the world of work, scraping by, street selling, stealing, and then goes on to analyse the way in which, although they all dream of leaving, going back to Mexico (so to speak) they are really trapped in their little area. The only way out is in the police van. They are trapped not simply because of their own lack of vision, although this is part of the story, but also because of the spatial fragmentation of society, its segregation into different micro-societies which never really meet. Hence the project of Unitary Urbanism, which itself is then seen to imply social revolution. Society as a whole, totalized society, has to be transformed before particular micro-societies can change themselves.

II

When the revolution came and the micro-society broke out of its limits, in May 1968, when re-totalization seemed to be on the agenda, it nonetheless failed. Perhaps the only practical endeavour which remained was the White Bicycles project in Amsterdam, organized by the Provos, for whom Constant was an important source of ideas. White bicycles could be ridden by anyone, left in the street when the journey was over and then picked up by someone else to use for another journey, and so on. Free, spontaneous transport anywhere in the city. It resembles the idea of the *dérive*, rather than that of Unitary Urbanism, but for a short while, as long as there was goodwill, it seemed to work. Perhaps it was the near-

est the Situationists came to changing the urban environment. The main activity of May 68, however, was the promotion of occupations and, most celebrated of all, the painting of graffiti. Occupations changed the relations of power, temporarily, but didn't change the architecture. Graffiti entered the popular memory, but in the end they were scrubbed off.

12

The Situationists' wilder projects for *détournement* never took off. In *Potlatch*, there had been any number of visionary proposals: the Metro should be running all night, special aerial runways should be constructed to facilitate journeys across the rooftops, churches should be turned into children's playgrounds (or Chambers of Horror), railway stations should be left exactly as they are—except that all timetables and travel information should be removed from them. Graveyards should be abolished. Prisons should be opened. Street-names should be changed. All museums should be closed and the art works distributed, to be hung in bars and Arab cafés. *Détournement* had already been outlined as a strategy in *Les Lèvres Nues* (*Bare Lips*), back in May 1956, in an article on its methods co-written by Guy Debord and Gil Wolman. Essentially the idea was something like Bertolt Brecht's concept of re-functioning. (In fact, Brecht is cited positively in the article, on the subject of making changes to the classics, so perhaps there was a direct connexion.) The two basic ideas underlying *détournement* were those of re-contextualization and active plagiarism, ideas found subsequently in the writings of Kathy Acker, who had certainly read Debord and the Situationists.

The article is mainly about literary re-functioning—inserting passages from one text into another in order to change their meaning and effect, creating new, unexpected meanings by juxtaposing well-known passages in a surprising way, changing the sense of existing texts by making a series of word changes, and so on. But there are also sections on film (the power of montage) and architecture:

To the extent that new architecture must apparently begin with an experimental baroque stage, the architectural complex—which we conceive as the construction of a dynamic environment related to styles of behaviour—will probably re-function existing architectural forms, and in any case will make plastic and emotional use of all sorts of re-functioned objects: calculatedly arranged cranes or metal scaffolding replacing a defunct sculptural tradition. This is shocking only to the most fanatical admirers of classic French gardens.

On the scale of the city, Debord and Wolman outlined an ambitious plan for transferring whole neighbourhoods from one city and inserting them, exactly as they were, into another. 'Life can never be too disorienting: refunctioning on this level would really make it beautiful.'

13

Some time later, Pinot Gallizio developed a plan for 'Industrial Painting', in effect a re-functioning of both painting and the assembly-line by yoking both together. He devised a kind of Heath Robinson machine which, using industrial paints, could cover rolls of canvas fed through it with arbitrary spatters of paint. In some ways, of course, it was intended as a conceptual re-functioning of Jackson Pollock, inserting his style of painting into an absurd industrial context. Pinot Gallizio then developed the idea by suggesting that immense rolls of industrial painting could be used as road-surfaces on the *autostrada*, until Italy's motorways were all paved with Abstract Expressionism. More modestly, Pinot Gallizio actually constructed a 'Cavern of Anti-Matter' with his industrial paintings forming the walls and ceilings, creating a cavern or grotto that was an entirely man-made—or rather, machine-made—painterly environment. I found it a strange experience standing there, when it was reconstructed in the Beaubourg after Gallizio's son found the original rolls, stored away in a cellar. I felt there had been a re-functioning of painting, not simply as architecture, but even as nature, as the cavern walls sagged and seemed to be covered with some strange deposit, about to crumble or drip.

14

Constant's New Babylon project, on the other hand—the most ambitious attempt to envisage the possible implications of Unitary Urbanism—seemed completely futuristic and even rationalist, if I dare use the term. The title was taken from Kozintsev and Trauberg's 1929 film, made in the USSR, about the Paris Commune. Thus Constant's name for his utopian city invoked two revolutions, one in Petersburg, the other in Paris. Constant's visionary city was essentially linear and seemed to be designed primarily for a nomadic population. Helicopters and aircraft of the future could arrive at landing pads and travellers could stay as long as they liked, before proceeding on what, I suppose, was a kind of futuristic, inter-urban, aerial *dérive*. While in New Babylon, however,

they could democratically decide how to allocate the structure's space, since all the walls were movable at the touch of a switch. Similarly, the internal climate was completely controlled—anything could be ordered up, from sauna to snowstorm. New Babylon in fact combined features of Council Communism or Workers' Control (only with travellers rather than workers, since everything was automated) with a commitment to transience and a confident vision of the power of technology. Constant's project actually seems much more plausible now, as we read about intelligent heating systems and so on, than it did back at the time when it was first conceived, forty or so years ago.

Of all the futurist cities devised at that period—and there were a great many—I still find Constant's the most fascinating. Aware, of course, of the critique of architecture made by his colleagues, he took care to build the inhabitants into his project as democratic controllers of its practical form, changing it day by day to suit their needs or, I suppose, in psychogeographical terms, their desire to experience new emotional states. He even allowed for the programming of coloured light and perfumes. At the same time, following Pinot Gallizio's lead, he envisaged a society of gypsies, nomads who moved whenever and wherever their fancy took them, travelling, I presume for free, as if futuristic aircraft were like the white bicycles Constant later promoted. The plastic models were also designed to be both architectural and sculptural, to work as aesthetic objects in their own right, as well as intimations of future constructions.

15

Constant, however, seems to have abandoned altogether the wish to retain the already existing cities we have today, or even elements of them. He worked with a *tabula rasa*. Perhaps he imagined that the cities we live in now had all been destroyed in some kind of catastrophe—or perhaps they had been burned to the ground in a mass uprising, a kind of global Watts riots. The Situationists, of course, welcomed the Watts riots when they occurred, in mid-sixties Los Angeles. They were evoked again recently by two expelled ex-Situationists, T. J. Clark and Donald Nicholson Smith, as a welcome revolutionary model. But there seems to be a difference between destroying your environment and transforming it, however great the pressure under which you act. There is something eerie about the absence of the past in New Babylon, a sense somehow

that the concept of the new has been taken too far as polar opposite of the old, a long way further than Debord was willing to take it. Debord identified himself with Lacenaire, the assassin in Marcel Carné's great film *Les Enfants du Paradis*. Leaving aside Debord's identification with a figure which Mary Joyce has described as that of the 'dandy/outlaw', I was struck once again by the nostalgia for a vanished Paris, one in which an unalienated crowd thronged the streets and enjoyed a spectacle which spoke both from and to their condition.

16

Recently, thinking about what kind of architecture the Situationists might be interested in today, I found myself faced with a problem. Hadn't architecture definitively become part of the spectacle, at least in its most recognized forms? Spectacular office blocks in London or Kuala Lumpur, spectacular museums in Los Angeles or Bilbao, spectacular new airports in Tokyo or Hong Kong. Perhaps it should all be razed to the ground? Only the classics should be preserved. On the other hand, there were new types of architecture that had emerged elsewhere in the same society. I thought of Margaret Morton's project, *The Architecture of Despair*, sections of which have been published in Diana Balmori and Margaret Morton's book, *Transitory Gardens, Uprooted Lives*.² This is a book about the gardens created and nurtured by homeless people on the desolate ground where they have built their makeshift huts. Or there is another, similar project, Anthony Hernandez's *Landscapes of Despair*, another photographic record of the abject and transitory dwellings of the homeless, this time in Los Angeles, mainly in the wilderness running alongside the freeways.³ These are the outsider architects of today.

17

As for Debord's own attitude, I was struck how in his last film, he quotes from Nicholas Ray's movie, *Johnny Guitar*—specifically the scene where the outlaw figure, a travelling musician, a nomad, Johnny Guitar himself (played by Sterling Hayden) shows up unexpectedly at Vienna's Place, a saloon and gambling house in the middle of nowhere, owned and run by a former lover, Vienna (played by Joan Crawford). It is as if the nomad has to stop wandering in the end, to try and come home

² New Haven, CT 1993.

³ Hannover 1995.

at last, however alien it may seem. Of course, it is a doomed hope. Vienna's Place is burned to the ground by an angry lynch mob. There's no option—the nomadic life is the only one there is. Perhaps in the end, Debord's view of architecture was a tragic view, that there was no grand solution, that you were fated to play the role of the wandering outlaw, but this was, after all, the most honourable role there was. Vienna's Place was the dreamed-of home but, in the end, it had to go up in flames, just as the May Events had to end in failure. Still, there was little to regret and much, in elegiac mood, to be proud of.

18

I want to end, however, on a more optimistic note. In 1974, a book was published in Turin on Asger Jorn's garden at Albisola.⁴ Basically, Jorn, before his death, had transposed a group of vernacular buildings overlooking the sea by turning them into a kind of ceramic garden, with painted sculptures, mosaic tiles, murals of found materials and so on, together, of course, with beds and pots of flowers. Guy Debord wrote an essay for the book, titled 'On Wild Architecture'. He began by reminding us that the Situationists had called for the construction of new types of city, environments favourable to the expression of countless new passions. Naturally, he continues, this wasn't easy to achieve and, as a result, the Situationists felt compelled to try and achieve another goal, one even harder to carry through. As a result, all their projects had to be abandoned and their great capacities were wasted, as happens to many hundreds of millions of others.

Debord then turns to consider Jorn's Outsider Garden. He reminisces about Jorn and about the importance of his role in the history of the Situationist International. He recollects how Jorn, as is often forgotten, was one of the very first to develop 'a modern critique of the most recent forms of repressive architecture'. In Albisola, he continues, Jorn showed that, whatever our failures on the grand scale, each of us can appropriate our own space, make the world in a small way what we desire it to be. Out of what might seem at first to be a chaos of debris and odds and ends, Jorn had succeeded in making a complex and unified work. For those who remember the passionate conflict there had been between Situationists and architecture, Debord suggests, Albisola can be seen

⁴ Alberico Sala and Guy Debord, *Le jardin d'Albisola*.

as a kind of inverse Pompeii: the outlines of a city which has not yet been born. It had been a collaborative work, which provided at least an insight into the forms of 'collective play' which alone could put an end to the separation between culture and everyday life, typical of our society. Debord went on to invoke—once again, after so many years—the example of the Postman Cheval, who built a monumental architecture entirely on his own; and the king of Bavaria, who had done the same with much greater means. Jorn had shown what could be done with 'just a little time, a little luck, enough good health, enough money, some thought, and also, some good humour.'

The Situationists, he notes, had badly needed reserves of good humour, given the scandal they created. To those who ask pointlessly whether it wouldn't have been better for everyone if the Situationists had never existed, he suggests another kind of question: wouldn't it have been better to give them two or three towns to reconstruct, instead of frustrating them to the point where they tried to overthrow society? But then others might explain that the result would have been just the same. Trying to buy them off would simply have whetted their insatiable appetite for change. And so my *dérive*, from minaret to outsider garden, reaches its end.