Partial, Incoherent and Divided Imbeciles: The Situationist International and the Action in Belgium Against the International Assembly of Art Critics

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Disperse, fragments of art critics, critics of fragments of art. The Situationist International is now organizing the integral artistic activity of the future. You have nothing more to say.

— Internationale Situationniste 1, June 1958

In approximately 400 scathing words, the Situationists’ tract against the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), published and distributed two days before the organization’s tenth General Assembly in Brussels, denounced their opponents as “mediocrities” and “loyal watchdogs” of a “completely outmoded but still materially dominant society.” ¹ A cultural product of the postwar reconstruction effort, AICA was established in 1949 as a specialist organization of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Animated by a fustian humanist rhetoric, AICA shared with its parent organization a faith in the palliative role of art and culture, which, in its appeal to universal human essences, would transcend rivaling ideologies and repair a world torn apart by the catastrophes of the Second World War. Convening at the 1958 Brussels World’s Fair, the first universal exposition since the Second World War, AICA hoped to identify the discipline of art criticism with the fair’s redemptive program of international humanism and spiritual uplift. For the Situationist International, a politico-aesthetic avant-garde lead by French filmmaker and theoretician Guy Debord, however, the professionalization of art criticism was emblematic of the decomposition of bourgeois culture, the failed promise of modernism, and the alienated division of labor under capitalism. Their statement against AICA, later published in the first issue of the Situationists’ official organ, the Internationale Situationniste, was the polemical centerpiece of the group’s planned offensive against AICA during the opening of the World’s Fair.

In spite of the Situationists’ antipathy towards disciplinary atomization, several theories and practices associated with the Situationist International—particularly Debord’s theory of “the spectacle,” the derive, or detournement—are ensconced in the discourse of postwar art history, having attained a reverent aura of untouchability. In the history of countercultural rebellion, Situationists are remembered as the catalysts of the May 1968 insurrections in France, iconized by a famous, quixotic fragment of Situationist-inspired graffiti: “Under the cobblestones, the beach.” But the SI’s intervention against AICA, carried out less than a year after the group’s founding conference at Cosio d’Arroschia in
Northwest Italy in July of 1957, has received less than cursory mention in art historical literature. In attempting to disinter this hazy event, my aim is less to turn over a rare untouched stone in the SI bibliography than to locate Situationist theory in the aesthetic debates and exigencies of the postwar “free world,” the feverish stakes of midcentury cultural criticism, the vicissitudes of artistic intervention in the public sphere.

While the Situationists’ desire to dismantle the division of artistic labor clashed with the professional discourse of AICA, a historically situated investigation of this polemic reveals some surprising parallels between the SI and their cultural enemies. Namely, both AICA and the SI viewed modern life as constitutively alienated and regarded their organizational activities as a means to redress this problem. Moreover, both groups sought to align themselves with structures beyond the narrow confines of individual artistic creation, turning to collective organization and its attendant program of congresses, meetings, and in-house memos and resolutions in order to legitimize their operations.

Established in 1957 from the splinters of several postwar avant-garde groups including CoBrA, the Letterist International, and the Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, the Situationist International launched a rigorous and obstinate critique of the commodification and banality of everyday life under capitalism. Drawing on an anti-Stalinist Libertarian Marxism steeped in the humanism of Marx’s early writings, the council communism of Anton Pannekoek and the young Gerog Lukács, and a tradition of libertine avant-gardism inherited from Dada and Surrealism, the Situationists vehemently rejected the separation of art and politics, aspiring to dialectically supersede and sublate both categories.
into a new form of aesthetic-revolutionary consciousness that would merge the affective potential of former with the agency of the latter.²

The Action Against the Art Critics succeeded a number of the Letterists’ aggressive, Dada-inflected provocations targeting the art world establishment. In June 1956, the Letterist International, with Debord’s involvement, issued a manifesto against a Royal Dutch Shell sponsored exhibition entitled “The Petroleum Industry Seen By Artists” at the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels. In November 1957, the group issued a boycott of scenographer Jacques Polieri’s Avant-garde Arts Festival at Le Corbusier’s Cité Radieuse in Marseille, featuring well-known abstract painters including Jean-Michel Atlan, Michel Fautrier, Hans Hartung, and Pierre Soulages. For Debord, French lyrical abstraction associated with the aforementioned artists represented a “false modernism linked to all of the reactionary enterprises.”³ Debord would find belated agreement from Benjamin Buchloh, who critiqued the artists and critics affiliated with Parisian postwar abstraction for their engagement in a futile and “desperate project to restore prewar modernist pictorial aesthetics and establish a credible continuity within the present.” Like its New York counterpart, Parisian abstraction was heralded by its liberal apparatchiks as a “moral and artistic expression of liberation.” While the perceived individualism and freewheeling formal experimentation of American Abstract Expressionism gestured towards a liberal alternative to totalitarianism on the left and right, France’s art informel promised freedom from “the fascist yoke of German occupation” and “the reactionary Nationalist culture of the collaborating French Vichy regime,” as well as “from the Stalinist threat which had emerged from within the ranks of the French intellectual and artistic Left.”⁴

The Situationists’ pamphlet against AICA—signed by members Abdelhafid Khatib, Walter Korun, Guy Debord, Hans Platschek, Giuseppe Pinot-Gallizio and Asger Jorn—attacked the critics as agents of art’s cooption and institutionalization. “Inasmuch as modern cultural thought has proved itself completely stagnant for over twenty-five years,” the Situationists wrote, “its spokesmen are striving to transform their activities into institutions.” The gathering of art critics, “assembling to exchange the crumbs of their ignorance and doubts,” was “laughable” in its timid self-importance, but also “significant,” in that it testified to the reification of culture through professional organization.⁵ The tract went on to indict the critics on the grounds of myopic formalism—their inability to consider or critique “culture as a whole”—as well as their commodification of critical discourse, which peddled “confused and empty babble about a decomposed culture.”⁶ “Vanish, art critics,” the authors declared with the journal’s typical ferocity, “partial, incoherent and divided imbeciles! In vain do you stage the spectacle of a fake encounter.”⁷ If the professional art critics represented the intellectual fossils of the past, the Situationist International would organize “the integral artistic activity of the future.”⁸ The verso of the broadsheet proclaimed, “The classless society has found its artists.”⁹

According to Debord’s original plan, 2,000 copies of the tract were printed in Paris. Debord entrusted the Belgian Air Force pilot Piet de Groof, who engaged in avant-garde activities under the pseudonym Walter Korun, to lead the Situationist’s Belgian faction in distributing the text during AICA’s conference. De Groof and his comrades would storm the press hall during the reception of the art
critics on April 13, throwing copies of the polemic and taking the floor to read the text aloud. The intervention was to take place on three fronts—in the incendiary language of Situationist propaganda, in the performed text, and, finally, in its journalistic documentation in the international press, which, Debord hoped, would become a succès de scandale and give the Situationist International visibility in the mainstream media. What actually occurred, however, was less a spectacular intervention than a protracted series of irritating disruptions.

Shunning traditional models of artistic “commitment”—the social realist imperative to represent or ennoble the proletariat, illustrate social discontents, or align oneself with a revolutionary party—the Situationists argued that the role of the revolutionary artist was to negate the specialized activity of art itself. “A creative intellectual,” Debord wrote in one of the movement’s foundational texts, “cannot be revolutionary simply by supporting the politics of a given party, even if he does so by original means, but must rather work, outside of parties, for the necessary change of all cultural superstructures.”\(^{10}\) Under Western capitalism, art, even in its most formally experimental or socially engagé varieties, functioned as a safety valve for revolutionary impulses, an illusory vision of freedom in an unfree society. “At one pole,” Debord and Pierre Canjeur wrote in “Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program,” “art is purely and simply coopted by capitalism as a means of conditioning the population. At the other pole, capitalism grants art a perpetual privileged concession: that of pure creative activity—an isolated creativity which serves as an alibi for the alienation of all other activities.”\(^{11}\) Through the rarefied disciplines of art and criticism, bourgeois society maintains a “sense of critique and research among a minority,” while at the same time compartmentalizing this activity in “strictly separated utilitarian disciplines” and deterring “all comprehensive critique and research.”\(^{12}\) Echoing Marx’s well-known prophecy in “The German Ideology” that, under communism, an individual might “hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner…without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic,”\(^{13}\) Debord prognosticated that, “in a classless society…there will be no more painters, only situationists who, among other things, make paintings.”\(^{14}\) Hypostatizing Marx’s vision of a post-capitalist world liberated from the alienating specialization and division of labor, the Situationists sought the liquidation of art as a privileged sphere of production in order for art’s creative potential to be redistributed in and through everyday life.

The Situationists were hardly alone in advancing an “end of art thesis” around the midcentury. Postwar anxieties over art’s obsolescence are pitifully encapsulated in the opening statement of Theodor Adorno’s posthumously published Aesthetic Theory: “It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist.”\(^{15}\) As Anselm Jappe has shown, both Adorno and Debord understood the foreclosure of art’s emancipatory capacities as a result of exchange value’s total abstraction of social life, conceived in the former’s terms as the “culture industry,” in the latter’s as “spectacle.” But while Debord and his Situationist comrades demanded the negation of art in service of direct intervention in reality, Adorno arrived at the opposite conclusion, identifying the critical potential of “art” precisely in its removal from “life.” “There is nothing pure,” Adorno writes in Aesthetic Theory, “nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize…a situation evolving in the direction of a total
exchange society.”

“For Adorno,” Jappe explains, “art always embodies a social critique, even hermetic art, even art for art’s sake—precisely because of its autonomy and its ‘asocial’ character.”

Despite Debord’s hostility towards such practices, a diverse array of neo-dada artistic movements—among them Fluxus, Happenings, and the Cagean avant-garde—deserve mention in postwar “refusal of art” problematic in their attempt to diminish the boundary between “art” and “life,” although largely in non-Marxist terms.

“History has depreciated you”

This Situationists’ ambition to dismantle both professional hierarchies and the privileged sphere of cultural activity designated by the term “art” contradicted the aspirations of the International Association of Art Critics, which sought to define the professional activities of the art critic at a time when, according to Henry Hughes, author of “AICA in the Age of Globalization,” the “separate identity of the art critic still stood in need of clarification.”

Although the European dealer-critic system had been operative since the emergence of the modern art market and the periodical press in the nineteenth century, the field of art criticism still lacked disciplinary coherence. As is still the case today, no institutionalized training was required for the profession and few critics made their living through its practice.

AICA’s inaugural meeting convened in Paris from June 21 to 28, 1948, bringing together representatives from 34 nations, with financial support provided by UNESCO, the French government, the city of Paris, and a private donation from art dealer Georges Wildenstein.

During the organization’s inaugural meeting, several critics voiced now-familiar complaints about the discipline’s social and economic devaluation. Belgian representative Leon Degrand, for example, lamented “the off-hand way in which art critics are treated, morally and materially.”

Critics, he said, deserved “the material support that will enable them to exercise their profession, at a time when the first thing the newspaper does, when it has to make economies, is to cut back on its art critic.”

Under the aegis of UNESCO, AICA would lend legitimacy to the profession and “affirm the reality of the critics’ new profession and their right to an autonomous material and intellectual existence.”

Emphasizing the ennobling power of criticism and “the primacy of the artist’s integrity and the spirituality of his message,” AICA’s first congress sought to assuage professional anxieties and establish consensus among a coalition of professionals united by their common practice and ethical imperative. Interlocutors repeatedly stressed the critic’s pedagogical mandate to inform and elevate a “profane” and “uninitiated” public.

In his presentation on the “Social and Educative Mission of the Art Press,” the critic Michel Stoffel, representing Luxembourg, affirmed art criticism’s capacity “to rally all men of good will to a common ideal” and demanded that the discipline receive “recognized status.”

In a similar vein, the French critic Gaston Diehl insisted on the social responsibility of the profession. “The first service the art critic can offer,” he maintained, “is on the social level, not only in evaluating works of art and communicating with the public, but in guiding the public and helping it to reach a deeper understanding.”
AICA, Hughes writes, established in a “brief period of international idealism between the end of the Second World War and the onset of the Cold War,” prized “the power of art to transcend the barriers of political expediency.” To this end, AICA sought to guarantee the integrity and authority of the independent art critic, which, the organization held, had to be affirmed and defended in the face of Stalinist and Fascist policing of aesthetics. As the French critic Raymond Cogniat put it during his introductory speech at AICA’s preliminary meeting in 1948, “In proscribing art criticism, the Nazi and fascist regimes inflicted on art an injury, from which it has yet to recover.”

The autonomous, apolitical power of art and its dispassionate contemplation by the enlightened critic offered a pacific antidote to the cultural and political antagonisms that gave rise to World War II. As Hughes explains, AICA, from its inception, “always nurtured universalist ambitions inspired by the Enlightenment ideals of its parent organization and a desire to pour balm on the wounds caused by the War that had just ended, to rebuild the damaged fabric of the old world, and to plan a better future for humanity on the basis of material progress, peace, justice, and liberty.”

In keeping with UNESCO’s mission to “establish the intellectual and moral solidarity of mankind,” AICA’s founding members affirmed art criticism’s relevance in a restorative project to salvage a humanist tradition. Political debate was eschewed and no mention was made of the contemporary polemics over Socialist Realism, the conflict between abstraction and figuration, the question of political commitment among artists or intellectuals, or the Marshall Plan’s influence on European culture.

AICA’s humanist rhetoric can be located with a large body literature cultural critic Mark Grief has named “the discourse of the crisis of Man.” “In the middle decades of the twentieth century,” he writes, “American intellectuals of manifold types, from disparate and even hostile groups, converged on a perception of danger...Man became at midcentury the figure everyone insisted must be addressed, recognized, helped, rescued, made the center, the measure, the ‘root...’ Characterized by a perception of moral emergency and an unproblematic essentialism, “modern man” discourse in the United States, according to Grief’s periodization, “gained urgency in the debate over intervention, expanded once the United States entered the war, reached an intellectual peak by 1951, and, at that point, was popularized and banalized. A child of the United Nations—itself a compromised outcome of the utopian “world government” movement—UNESCO was a “central ‘official’ avenue for the ‘crisis of man discourse. Adopted in 1945, the organization’s constitution declares that, “since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defenses of peace must be constructed.” The document goes on to articulate UNESCO’s mission in ambitious, quasi-messianic terms: “[T]he wide diffusion of culture, and the education of humanity for justice and liberty and peace are indispensable to the dignity of man and constitute a sacred duty which all the nations must fulfill in a spirit of mutual assistance and concern.”

AICA’s international congress of art critics was ludicrous to the Situationists, who ridiculed the figure of the art critic as the very reification of passive spectatorship. In a world organized and overdetermined by social
stratification, alienated consumption, and psychic and intellectual immiseration, the SI—despite several artists’ membership in the group before the 1962 “split” between its artistic and theoretical factions—advocated an abandonment of object production in favor of “immediate participation in a passionate abundance of life.” Staging a dialectic between unmediated engagement on one hand and connoisseurial detachment on the other, the Situationists propped up the figure of the art critic as a cipher of non-participation. “The critic is someone who makes a spectacle out of his very condition as a spectator—a specialized and therefore ideal spectator, expressing his ideas and feelings about a work in which he does not really participate,” Debord would write in 1961’s “For a Revolutionary Judgment of Art;” “he re-presents, restages, his own nonintervention in the spectacle.” While art can be recuperated to serve the ruling ideology as spectacle, “art criticism,” insofar as it reifies and displaces the act of spectatorship, is a “second-degree spectacle,” and is thus even more impassive and removed from the immediacy of life. According to the Situationists, even progressive or radically-minded art critics were courtiers of haute-bourgeois reaction: “The point,” they maintained with adamantine negativity, “is not to engage in some sort of revolutionary art-criticism, but to make a revolutionary critique of all art.”

Nevertheless, the Situationists’ original, unrealized intervention at the World’s Fair sounds ironically artistic: an enormous labyrinth in the Parc de Bruxelles, dubbed the Labyrinth Educative. Composed of several identical corridors filled with consciousness-altering amusements including alcoholic beverages, ambient music, graffiti, and fake windows, this immersive environment was to be populated with Situationist “comrade-geographers,” who were to periodically confuse and disturb visitors by soliciting money and handing them notecards containing upsetting messages. After unsuccessfully petitioning restaurateur Albert Neils to finance this funhouse labyrinth, the Belgian faction of the Situationist International, in collusion with Debord, opted instead to stage the intervention against AICA.

**Enjoy your alienation**

Organized under the leitmotif “a review of the world for a more humane world,” Expo 58 sought to reaffirm the positivist values of international collaboration, technological innovation, and human creativity that had been shattered by the war. The official program of Expo 58 made recourse to universalizing notions of spirituality and human fraternity in order to assuage technophobic anxieties and lend an altruistic gloss to the machinations of big business and industry. “When we devised this exhibition…we wanted to place it under the banner of the spirit,” the fair’s General Commissioner Baron George Moens de Fernig affirmed in his inaugural speech. According to cultural historian Tom Verschaffel, the fair’s organizers saw “the alienating and problematic nature of scientific and technological progress [as] a consequence of the fact that the spiritual dimension had been either neglected or totally abandoned.” In its insistence on “the defense of spiritual values in the contemporary world,” Expo 58 “implied a new hierarchy of the material and the spiritual: science and technology ought, as had been said, to serve mankind.”

Held between April and October of 1958 on the Heysel plateau, a
purpose-built exhibition park less than five miles north of central Brussels, Expo 58 presented a sweeping “inventory of scientific, technological, and cultural achievement developed by mankind in response to the needs of civilization.” The Belgian, international, and colonial pavilions sprawled out underneath the newly-built Automium, a gigantic steel and aluminum scale model of an iron atom enlarged over 160 billion times. A monument to “the bright future of atomic energy,” this architectural trophy for a peaceful and prosperous new world order, historian Gonzague Pluvinage notes, was erected in the wake of the development of “new institutions of international diplomacy.” Signed the year before the Expo’s opening, the Treaty of Rome consolidated European markets and made provisions for the peaceful development of atomic energy. Though intended to evangelize the peaceful applications of nuclear technology, the Automium—the Expo 58’s “Eiffel Tower”—spoke perhaps too well to contemporary anxieties between humanity and technics, with the balance tipping towards the latter. “There is much gossip here of transcendental matters; and nice, round words, like humanism, progress, and the pursuit of happiness, fill the moist Belgian air,” wrote the *Saturday Evening Post’s* Ernest O. Hauser. “While man himself serves as a general theme, the atom-symbol of our age—will cast its eerie shadow on the fair.”

Figure 2. *Poster for Expo 58, 1958.* Brussels City Archives.

Expo 58’s official copy echoes the by-now belated and reified “crisis of man” discourse. By the 1950s, Grief writes, “we can begin to feel even a sentimentalism of man, plucking at the string of mobilizing pity customarily felt for children, the family, and the hearth. Debates about philosophical anthropology,
the shape of history, the justification for any faith, and the distortions of technology could be flattened in favor of man’s characteristics as inflected by publicists for Cold Warriors: natural individualism, natural freedom, even natural American-style capitalism.”50 Under the ethos of rehumanization, the “universality of man” functions “as a sentimental antidote to the worries of a nuclear-armed world of US–USSR bipolarity.”51 In fact, despite the fair’s spirit of international détente, both the United States and the Soviet Union viewed Expo 58 as an ideological battleground. The Office of Research and Intelligence of the USIA published a detailed report for the US Congress on “Communist Propaganda and the Brussels Fair.” Citing the report, New Jersey Democrat Frank Thompson urged congress to increase US spending on the fair, fearing being upstaged by the Russians (who were rumored to have spent approximately $60 million). “The Soviet exhibits appear designed to convince visitors that the U.S.S.R. is now the fountainhead of human progress....” the report claimed, “The U.S.S.R. appears to be taking full advantage of the exceptional show window offered by the Brussels Fair to sell the world on the superiority of the Communist social-political-economic system.”52

Introducing the pillars of what would become known as the Marshall Plan at Harvard University’s Commencement on June 5, 1947, George Marshall, Secretary of State under president Harry Truman, had packaged his program of financial credits and large-scale economic assistance to Western Europe in terms resonant with the “crisis of man” discourse. “There are concerted efforts to change the whole face of Europe as we know it, contrary to the interests of free mankind and free civilization,” he said in an allusion to the Communist threat.53 Operating above and beyond the framework of the United Nations, the Marshall program would rebuild Europe and secure US power through economic and infrastructural development, liberalization of trade, modernization of industries, and anti-Communist ideological warfare that recruited modern art and culture as banners of the “free world” liberalism. As the Marshall Plan’s deputy director Richard Bissel has freely admitted, “even before the outbreak of the Korean war, it was well understood that the Marshall Plan was never meant to be a wholly altruistic affair. The hope was that strengthening their [European] economies would enhance the value of the alliance, eventually enabling them to assume a defense responsibility in support of Cold War efforts.”54 As historian Frances Stone Saunders aptly puts it, the Marshall Plan—“a package of economic assistance coupled with a doctrinal imperative”— “delivered an unambiguous message: the future of Western Europe, if Western Europe was to have a future at all, must now be harnessed to a pax Americana.”55

Under the Marshall Plan, the United States’ postwar investment in Belgium consolidated the influence of capitalism, “with consumer society as its most visible corollary.”56 Expo 58’s ethos of spiritual humanism didn’t occasion a rejection of commerce. In fact, business was announced as an agent of benevolence and social well-being. National industries including construction and civil engineering, agriculture, food, electricity and hydraulics, forestry, hunting and fisheries, metallurgy, and banking were not only obliged to represent their trades in thematic pavilions, but to “demonstrate how the achievements of their industry can liberate humanity…and contribute to the great Forward March of Progress.”57 To this end, businesses used the platform of the World Fair to rebrand themselves with moralizing slogans that lent an ethical imperative to
their activities. The electrical energy pavilion, for example, labeled electricity as “a vital aid to life,” while—more perversely—Belgium’s diamond purveyors marketed their product with the slogan, “Diamonds lighten the toil of human beings.”

The positivism trumpeted by Expo 58 and its nuclear mascot, however, was accompanied by doubts that the fair organizers couldn’t ignore. World War II had undermined the technological utopianism that had underpinned every World’s Fair since their origins in the mid-nineteenth century. By 1958, the universal exposition felt—to some, at least—like a naïve anachronism. “Are world’s fairs obsolescent?” Hauser begins his article. “The people now preparing the Brussels Universal and International Exposition of 1958 have no illusions on this score. Their fair, they know, may well be the last of its kind.”

Science and industry—the supposed engines of social well-being—had not created a better world, and the material comforts secured through technological progress were unequally distributed. While “the great majority of the world,” as the Expo’s organizing committee conceded, “[was] still living in poverty, in advanced capitalist economies with higher standards of living, technology had not necessarily made people happier.” In addition to the threat of nuclear annihilation, technology, Verschaffel writes, gave rise to feelings of “anxiety, alienation, and impotence,” all hallmarks of postwar European literature and philosophy.

In a surprisingly candid statement, Expo 58’s general secretary Charles Everarts de Velp, citing the Russian Christian existentialist philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, admitted that technological innovation had led to the “dehumanisation” of life, as “man is not yet master of the machine he has invented.”

The dehumanization of everyday life was, of course, also a concern for the Situationists. Extending Marx’s critique of the division of labor in production to the superstructural spheres of art and leisure, the Situationists sought the “extension of leisure” into all areas of life as well as its corollary: the abolition of specialized work. For the young Marx, the division of labor demanded by capitalist relations of production found its most potent expression in the soul-crushing monotony of the factory, which alienates and abstracts the worker from the means of production, the products of his labor, and ultimately, from his own person. Capitalist manufacture “converts the worker into a crippled monstrosity…through the suppression of the whole world of productive drives and inclinations…. Not only is the specialized work distributed among the different individuals, but the individual himself is divided up, and transformed into the automatic motor of a detail operation.”

In his 1923 “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” Georg Lukács expanded Marx’s critique of the industrial workplace, arguing that the “natural laws of capitalist production have been extended to cover every manifestation of life in society.” The atomizing logic of scientific management had expanded into all facets of work, including white-collar labor. “The better we are able to close our minds to the bourgeois legends of the ‘creativity’ of the exponents of the capitalist age,” he wrote, “the more obvious it becomes that we are witnessing in all behavior of this sort the structural analogue to the behavior of the worker vis-à-vis the machine he serves and observes.” For Lukács, the
inversion of subject-object relations that Marx had identified in the commodity form had, under capitalism, come to characterize consciousness in general.

Published in French in the independent Marxist journal *Arguments* in December 1958, Lukács’s essay would prove formative for Situationist theory. By the mid-twentieth century, the Situationists argued, social alienation had colonized not only production but all facets of an everyday life increasingly organized around administrated leisure and consumption. The first world “new proletariat”—the metastasizing class of pencil pushers and middle managers under midcentury corporate capitalism—might have access to consumer goods and services, but their non-working hours were overdetermined by “a vast industrial sector of leisure activities” and the imperative consumption of the “by-products of mystifying ideology and bourgeois tastes.” Even in Western capitalist economies marked by relative affluence and the accessibility of consumer goods, “everyday life,” the Situationists could argue, was “organized within the limits of a scandalous poverty.”

During the Marshall plan years, however, the leitmotif of man’s alienation was discursively inverted as a positive sign of liberation. Under the theorists of New Liberalism, alienation—alienated from its Marxist provenance—stood for the high drama of Western Democracy, a healthy symptom of free consciousness. “Anxiety is the official emotion of our time,” wrote Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., whose influential book “The Vital Center: The Politics of Freedom” argued for liberal democracy as a middle way between the totalitarianisms of communism and fascism. “Against totalitarian certitude,” he wrote, “free society can only offer modern man devoted by alienation and fallibility.” Modern Man’s Sturm und Drang—encoded in expressionist modern art—served as a foil to the robotic, unfeeling compliance of “totalitarianism” whose “final triumph has been the creation of man without anxiety—of ‘totalitarian man…’” The totalitarian man denies the testimony of his private nerves and conscience until they wither away before the authority of the Party and of history.

**Cold War Modern**

A decade after AICA’s inaugural meeting, the organization’s 10th General Assembly at the Brussels World Fair remained committed to the same humanist anti-ideology, emphasizing the educative role of the critic and the palliative potential of art. The meeting’s program dictated that the debates would “be inspired by the general theme of the exhibition: ‘Man in the present world.’ Political and religious discussions,” it dictated, “are forbidden.”

“It is our duty,” AICA president and Guggenheim director James Johnson Sweeney proclaimed in his inaugural speech, “and at the same time the most exciting task which can be imposed on a conscientious critic or observer, to keep constantly abreast the always changing and always fundamentally the same Heracleitian river of aesthetic expression.” In a statement, Belgium’s Minister of Education Leo Collard likened the figure of the critic to a “priest of a religion reserved for initiates,” claiming it was the critic’s mission “to help the public see.” “Plastic forms,” he wrote, “reflected the dreams of mankind and gave body to his myths,” and the critic, by “making art accessible though his
comments,” “strengthened the bonds between life and art.” The Belgian critic Rene Dekkers likewise described the role of the critic as one of “great responsibility.” “The success of a form of art was in his hands,” he claimed, “for it [is] not enough for art to exist, it must be brought to the knowledge of every man through the medium of criticism, which also had to mold his taste.”

Musing that the Expo would not only offer pleasures for the eye, but have “a soul of its own,” Dekkers maintained that AICA’s spirit was reflected in the Expo’s theme, “Man—The Prospects for a Better World,” “for if there was an intellectual activity which served mankind in many ways, it was certainly that of art criticism…due to its influence on the public on one hand, and the role it played in the life of the artist on the other.” Sweeney also identified the humanist ideology underpinning AICA with that of the Brussels Exposition. “Superimposing the face of a new world on the ruins of the old,” the fair was “destined to lay the foundations of a character of humanism regenerated by progress, something which always had been a major concern of the Belgian people and which formed the very core of AICA’s being.”

Housed in the Palais de Beaux-Arts, Expo 58’s central art exhibition, “50 Years of Modern Art,” was conceived as a universal tableau of the art of first half of the twentieth century, presenting a triumphalist narrative of modernist painting beginning with post-impressionism and culminating in the “universal language” of international abstraction. AICA’s congress was timed to coincide with this important exhibition, which, according to Sweeney, would bear witness to a “new humanism” that found its “most tragic but also most faithful reflection” in the plastic arts. If the nineteenth century was an era of Cartesian certainty—in which “science can explain everything”—the twentieth century, he claimed, was marked by crisis and epistemological uncertainty in which “there are no more fundamental truths, only fundamental errors.” In its “supra-rational” nature, modernist painting “gave a concrete demonstration of this confusion in the minds of men by replacing its representation of the objects of nature by that of the
deep-seated nature of things.” However, rather than give in to “the philosophy of despair” espoused by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the survey of the last fifty years of modern art would provide a corrective to the “absurdity and nausea” Sweeney associated with Existentialist theory, renewing “faith in the human being about whom the poet Lucan long ago had said that he should not believe he was born for himself alone, but for all mankind.”

The transcendent, apolitical spirit of cultural modernism endorsed by AICA doctrine and Sweeney’s personal tastes, however, wasn’t as apolitical as its pundits claimed. Once derided by the American political establishment as formally inscrutable and intrinsically communistic (“it is a pleasure to look at the perfection [of the old masters] and then think of the lazy, nutty moderns,” president Harry Truman wrote in his diary in 1948. “It is like comparing Christ with Lenin”), modern art was instrumentalized during the Cold War as a cipher of liberal “freedom of expression” as against the dogmatism of Soviet social realism. As Serge Guilbaut has argued in his classic study on the “political apoliticism” of midcentury Abstract Expressionism, the de-Marxization of America’s leftist artists and intellectuals after 1939 paved the way for nonrepresentational American-style painting to become assimilated as a jingoistic symbol of Schlesinger’s “New Liberalism.” Eschewing the ideological extremities of the left and right, Schlesinger’s “vital center” would challenge totalitarianism with a “politics of freedom” grounded in the “value of the individual.”

Clement Greenberg, the philosopher-king of American Abstract Expression, formulated this narrative in triumphalist terms: “Some day, it will have to be told how anti-Stalinism which started out more or less as Trotskyism turned into art for art’s sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come.”

In its exaltation of idiosyncratic artistic vision and formal self-reliance over naturalistic conventions and sociological content, American Modernism became weaponized as a vital expression of “free world” individualism. As Geberault has argued, the US establishment’s acceptance, even promotion, of modern art was
an example of enlightened liberal tolerance. “The avant-garde,” he writes, “even became a protégé of the new liberalism, a symbol of the fragility of freedom in the battle waged by the liberals to protect the vital center from the authoritarianism of the left and the right.”

“A free society must dedicate itself to the protection of the unpopular view,” Schlesinger wrote. “We need courageous men to help us recapture a sense of indispensability of dissent.”

Schlesinger’s “new radicalism,” he wrote, “derives its power from an acceptance of conflict—an acceptance of combined with a determination to create social framework where conflict issues, not in excessive anxiety, but in creativity.”

As historian Frances Stoner Saunders has argued, the association between Modernist abstraction and free enterprise liberalism was exploited by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, the CIA’s anti-Communist soft power cartel financed by a secret $200 million per year slush fund provided under the Marshall plan. Run by CIA agent Michael Josselson from 1950 until 1967, the CCF promoted “free culture” by covertly bankrolling an international network of journals, books, conferences, seminars, concerts, and awards, as well as a blitzkrieg of traveling modern art exhibitions advocating a socio-economic consensus model in accordance with American liberal democracy.

In 1952, the CCF orchestrated its first major propaganda tour, the “Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century” festival in Paris. Organized by Nicolas Nabokov, Secretary General of the organization and first cousin to the famous novelist, the month-long agenda of modern music, ballets, theatre, art, and literary events was intended, in Nabokov’s somewhat clunky assessment, to “have an extremely beneficial all-round effect upon the cultural life of the free world by showing the cultural solidarity and interdependence of European and American civilization,” offering “a challenge of the culture of the free world to the un-culture of the totalitarian world.”

Curated by Sweeney and contracted to the Museum of Modern Art, the “Masterpieces” fine art exhibition showcased works by European painters culled from prominent American collections, among them Matisse, Cezanne, Chagall, Kandinsky, Seraut, and Derain. A member of both the Committee for Cultural Freedom and MoMA’s advisory committee, Sweeney wasn’t embarrassed by the show’s propagandistic implications. The artworks, he wrote in the press release, were created “in many lands under free world conditions” and would therefore reveal the “desirability for contemporary artists of living and working in an atmosphere of freedom. On display will be masterpieces that could not have been created nor whose exhibition would be allowed by the totalitarian regimes as Nazi Germany or present day Soviet Russia and her satellites.” While many later exhibitions organized under the CCF’s auspices tended to evangelize the virtues of American nonrepresentational painting, Sweeney’s “Masterpieces” gave Europe a taste of its own Modernism. As Saunders notes, “the fact that all the works in the show were owned by American collectors and museums delivered another clear message: modernism owed its survival—and its future—to America.”

Often referring to the museum as a “secular temple of art,” Sweeney’s writings laced the experience of modern art with a universal mysticism, arguing that the mission of the museum was to give the public “a richer spiritual life,” and
Championing the centrality of the visionary artist and the “restorative role of modernist aesthetics,” he considered the ludic effervescence and aesthetic autonomy of Modernist painting as a means of transcending the nulling conformity of midcentury bourgeois society, arguing that “the work of a painter, as the work of a poet, is not to find a formal equivalent to the emotions everyday life, but to transform and enrich them, in an imaginative order.”

Ironically, both Sweeney and Debord would adopt Dutch historian Johan Huizinga’s theory of play, elaborated in his 1938 book *Homo Ludens*, or “Playing Man.” Huizinga proposed that the autonomous, non-purposive, and extra-moral activity of play is a fundamental precondition of culture. Lying outside “the sphere of necessity or material utility,” pure play, he wrote, “knows no propaganda; its aim is in itself, and its familiar spirit is happy inspiration.” Having reached an apotheosis in the Romanticism of the eighteenth century, the play element in culture, Huizinga believed, was sadly on the wane. Man’s noble, enchanting capacity for play had, in the twentieth century, degenerated into adolescent “puerilism,” manifested in “an insatiable thirst for trivial recreation and crude sensationalism.”

Taking up Huizinga’s theory in his 1959 article “Contemporary Art and the Generative Role of Play,” Sweeney proposed that the play element’s most vital contemporary expression was to be found in abstract art and poetry. “Civilization,” he argued, citing Huizinga, “arises and unfolds in play,” which “continually confirms the supralogical nature of the human situation.” According to Sweeney, a spirit of childlike playfulness was crucial to the modern art’s creation and appreciation. Without it, creativity is stunted and art ossifies into a “solemn, long-faced exercise.” From Mallarmé’s nonrepresentational poetry to Calder’s effervescent kinetic sculpture, it is in the autonomous realm of Modernist abstraction—the arena “beyond the mirror of reflected nature”—that *homo ludens* can thrive. For Sweeney, the self-referential quality of modern art—its capacity to...
play in and through its medium, unbound from any mimetic imperative—revived the ludic impulse precious to human expression.

While Sweeney’s reading of Huizinga ends in a celebration of the unfettered expression and free experimentation of Modernist painting—particularly in the American Abstract Expressionism of Motherwell, Rothko, Pollock, de Kooning, and Kline—the Situationist theory of play demanded the dismantling of the “division between play and ordinary life” that posits the former as an “isolated and provisory exception.” Published in the first issue of the *Internationale Situationniste* along with the invective against AICA, the essay “Contribution to a Situationist Definition of Play” also cites Huizinga: “Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life, [play] brings a temporary, a limited perfection.” According to the Situationists, play, rather than becoming reified in objects of aesthetic delectation, must be “radically broken from a confined ludic time and space” in order to “invade the whole of life.” The liberating potential of play would never be realized in the Modernist varieties of painting, sculpture, or poetry, but in the creation of “ludic ambiances” and “experimental forms of a game of revolution.” The overall project, simply put, was to “broaden the nonmediocre part of life, to reduce the empty moments of life as much as possible.”

“In vain do you stage the spectacle of a fake encounter”

Hovering between activism and performance, the Situationists’ mischievous intervention in the normative functions of the International Association of Art Critics instantiates their call to redefine the practice of both art and politics as playful action. The SI’s chosen method of troublesome interruption materialized their desire to replace “the spectacle of art” and the attendant passivity of spectatorship with an aesthetics of “direct intervention.” Indeed, due to its ephemeral nature, the Situationists’ action against the art critics is a rather slippery cultural artifact, surviving only in murky and sometimes contradictory written accounts. The slim art historical literature on the action relies on a brief postmortem published alongside the tract in the first issue of the *Internationale Situationniste*, which describes the event as follows:

Our Belgian section carried out the necessary direct attack. Beginning April 13, on the eve of the opening of the proceedings, when the art critics from two hemispheres, led by the American Sweeney, were being welcomed to Brussels, the text of the situationist proclamation was brought to their attention in several ways. Copies were mailed to a large number of critics or given to them personally. Others were telephoned and read all or part of the text. A group forced its way into the Press Club where the critics were being received and threw the leaflets among the audience. Others were tossed onto the sidewalks from upstairs windows or from a car. (After the Press Club incident, art critics were seen coming out in the street to pick up the leaflets so as to remove them from the curiosity of passersby.) In short, all steps were taken to leave the critics no chance of being unaware of the text. These art critics did not shrink from calling the police, and used their World Exposition influence in order to block the
reprinting in the press of a text harmful to the prestige of their convention and their specialization. Our comrade Korun is now being threatened with prosecution for his role in the intervention.

Published almost fifty years after the event, De Groof’s account of the Situationists’ activities on the day of the inaugural meeting dampens this narrative of romantic insubordination. His recollections, as told in the 2005 memoir *Le General Situationniste*, reveal the scandal to be a much more disorganized and tepid affair than art historians—and perhaps even Debord himself—had believed.

The night before the inaugural meeting, artist and SI member Robert Wyckaert and de Groof’s fiancée Wilma spent the night prank-calling the art critics and reading the tract. Meanwhile, de Groof and his younger brother Wilfred climbed a building to scatter flyers onto the street below. However, their attempt was met with limited success, as an uncooperative wind blew the flyers right back into their faces.

While the postmortem of the action against AICA published in the first *Internationale Situationniste* claimed that “a group forced its way into the Press Club” during their reception on April 13, it appears that only one infiltrator gained entry. Reluctant to risk the punishment of throwing the leaflets himself, De Groof, in fact, delegated the task to his younger brother, Wilfred. While Piet waited in the get-away car, his brother entered the press hall, tossed a bundle of leaflets on the table of honor and two other bundles into the crowd, and then immediately escaped, pursued by gallery owner and art critic Robert Delevoy and two policemen. Wilfred, a student at the Royal Military School, outran them and escaped to the car. The action culminated in a low-speed car chase through a Brussels traffic jam, which gave the police the opportunity to record de Groof’s license plate number.

That evening, de Groof impersonated an art journalist and infiltrated the Stedelijk Museum before the opening of its “Belgian Painters Today” exhibition, which was to be attended by the same cadre of art critics. He flyered the gallery with leaflets, and—in an act of misguided iconoclasm he would later regret—glued the flyers to a number of canvases, including works by Wyckaert and his friend Serge Vandercam. De Groof’s attempts at subversion didn’t end there: The next day, the critics convened at the Theatre de la Monnaie, where he and Wyckaert bribed the ushers to insert copies of the pamphlet into the opera programs.

The Situationists’ attack on AICA was both a critique of the spectacle economy of the contemporary art world, and—in its performance—an instantiation of the type of ephemeral para-artistic practice that, they believed, should supersede the production and consumption of commodified art objects. “Our central purpose,” Debord wrote, “is the construction of situations, that is, the concrete construction of temporary settings of life and their transformation into a higher, passionate nature.” In place of luxury products and cultural treasures, Debord wrote, “our situations will be ephemeral, without a future…. Our only concern is real life; we care nothing about the permanence of art or of anything else.”
This invocation of ephemerality, immediacy, and dematerialized experience grinds against Debord’s ambition to create a scandal through the press. In his memos to the Belgian faction during the intervention’s planning stages, Debord repeatedly entreated his comrades to prioritize media attention. Initially, the conspirators even discussed using a group of thirty “pretty girls,” or “Situationist hostesses,” to invade the press hall and distribute the text.111 “What will send to the entire world an account of the day in Brussels is the success of a gesture of propaganda to the international press,” he wrote to de Groof on April 8. “It is necessary to be the subject of one of these news chronicles.”112 In the same communiqué, Debord instructed his comrades to take pains to respond to press requests and “send the largest possible number of press clippings” to the Situationist headquarters in Paris.113

In its failure to ignite a significant controversy or engage with a wider audience beyond a gathering of nonplussed art critics, the SI’s action against AICA was something of a non-event. Though Debord’s letter to de Groof after the event strikes a conciliatory tone (“We are,” he wrote, “in summary, very happy with the AICA affair”), he conceded that the intervention’s failure to garner media attention should prompt them to reconsider their “methods of scandal” in the future.114 In fact, it seems that the intervention against AICA caused the Situationists to retreat from the theater of public insubordination and rely on the printed page as their chosen site of political intervention.

As a media stunt, the Action Against the International Associations of Art Critics would prove to be a disappointment. The Situationists’ activities at the Brussels Expo received no attention in any mainstream news outlets, causing Debord to complain of “a conspiracy of silence” plotted by the art critics.115 Still, Debord hoped that de Groof’s trial might be the source of a belated scandal. In a letter from May 6, Debord implored de Groof to attempt to stall his hearing as long as possible to make time for another intervention that could “unmask the ridiculous pettiness of the critics who have filed this complaint, denounce them before the artistic opinion in their respective countries, and maybe cause some critics to disassociate themselves from those responsible in Brussels.”116 Unfortunately for Debord, however, de Groof’s case would never go to trial. He was quietly investigated and eventually acquitted of any involvement. A few months later, he was expelled from the SI on account of his involvement in the Belgian military, deemed incompatible with the objectives of a revolutionary cell. In fact, de Groof’s career as soldier would be much more successful than that as an avant-gardist. He went on to enjoy an illustrious career in the Belgian Air Force and retired as a general and attaché to NATO operations before passing away in July 2014.117

Though limited and provisional in its execution, the Situationists’ Action against AICA provides a hazy glimpse the hyperbolic stakes of cultural criticism in postwar Europe. While the international umbrella of UNESCO offered AICA a heightened sense of moral consequence, the Situationists’ tightly knit cabal, mirroring the structure of a dissident guerilla organization, lent an air of militancy to the group’s armchair radicalism. Taken together, AICA’s moralizing claims for art criticism’s social relevance and the Situationists’ dyspeptic denunciation of the discipline reveal an urgent need to reconcile theory and practice, art and life.
In the more than a half century since the Situationists’ intervention against AICA, it seems that the twin crises the event indicates—that of art criticism and of critical art—have become even more entrenched and tormented. AICA’s bumptious assertions of art criticism’s ethico-social imperative have given way to a twenty-first century discourse of its perpetual crisis and irrelevance. As Hal Foster has recently charged, postmodern challenges to the authority, judgment, and social positioning of the art critic have flattened into a lamentably “post-critical” situation of moral indifference and political nihilism. “Art criticism is in worldwide crisis,” James Elkins declared in the first sentence of his 2003 pamphlet “What Happened to Art Criticism.” “Its voice has become very weak, and it is dissolving into the background clutter of ephemeral cultural criticism.” With the social function of critique broadly dismissed and the market crowned as the adjudicator of artistic value, art critics, hardly the great panjandrums of the elite cultural establishment, often struggle to piece together precarious livelihoods, supplementing criticism with adjunct lecturing, curating, and other professional activities.

Neither modern art nor its self-immolating negation would dismantle the institutions of bourgeois culture. Far from ontologically oppositional, the Situationist tropes of direct intervention, “momentary ambiances,” and dematerialized performance have coalesced into privileged strategies of contemporary art. Neither art nor its self-immolating negation would dismantle the institutions of bourgeois culture. Instead, an increasingly elastic postwar culture would expand to accommodate the Situationist critique. In fact, Debord’s anxieties over recuperation seem to find belated confirmation in the work of sociologists Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski, who have argued that May ’68’s “artistic critique” of capitalism’s oppressive bureaucracy and buttoned conformity was absorbed into a “new spirit” of capitalist development. Not unlike Schlesinger’s New Liberalism, which “not only made room for avant-garde dissidence but accorded to such dissidence a position of paramount importance,” the New Spirit of Capitalism consolidated its hegemony by effectively incorporating the values of creative expression, autonomy, and fluid identity in a perverse realization of Situationist polemics.
Here, we seem trapped in a failed dialectic between the Art Critics’ fetishistic affirmations and the totalizing, programmatic negativity of the Situationists. Grief’s remarks on the debates in twentieth century intellectual culture are worth quoting here: “Universalism or difference, human rights or political liberation, law or critique, normativity or the struggle for power and representation—between these poles the thinker is often asked to choose a whole temperament and style of life...these antinomies turn round and round, until they resemble a pinwheel, exerting a hypnotic attraction.”

One way out of this infinite regress might be to question the very terms of the “refusal of art” problematic by adopting critical skepticism towards the rule of social abstraction hypostatized by the negative triumvirate of Adorno, Debord, and Buchloh, the last of whom methodologically situates his intellectual project between the first’s “Dialectic of Enlightenment” and the second’s “Society of the Spectacle.”

Although Buchloh critiqued the “latent authoritarianism of Debord’s prohibitive doubt about even the slightest historical possibility of any cultural production whatsoever,” he has more generally embraced Debordian pessimism, characterizing the postwar situation “as a negative teleology: a steady dismantling of the autonomous practices, spaces and spheres of culture, and a perpetual intensification of assimilation and homogenization, to the point today where we witness what Debord called ‘the integrated spectacle.’” Elsewhere he writes, “inasmuch as any work of art becomes increasingly superfluous under the conditions of total reification because it has lost its function as a model of critical reflection of social reality, it approaches a state of either mere objecthood or of mere aesthetic voluntarism, i.e., decoration.”

As written by theorists of total reification, the alienated conditions of labor under capital have hardened into a metaphysical ontology that takes for granted the total colonization of reality by abstraction, use by exchange value, being into appearances. To question this nihilist ontology isn’t to make excuses for capitalism or to succumb to midcentury Parnassianism. Rather, according to Gail Day’s helpful critique, “describing an epochal change in which social relations and experience are seen as increasingly abstract...implicitly proposes a socioaesthetic and political destiny—and one which has become part of the problem facing radical thought.” Insofar far as they “address social contradictions that they cannot resolve,” avant-garde practices, as Foster and Buchloh have acknowledged, “are structurally doomed to failure.” Or, as Randall Halle and Reinhild Steingrover more dialectically put it, “aesthetic practices cannot resolve social contradictions, and yet artists continue produce in response to alienation.” Rather than hypostatize a seamless capitalism without limits (a position that contributes to the flatness of our “post-critical” moment), it’s helpful to keep in mind Marx’s admonition in the Grundrisse, which Day uses as an epigraph: “It is as ridiculous to yearn for a return to that original fullness as it is to believe that with this complete emptiness history has come to a standstill. The bourgeois viewpoint has never advanced beyond this antithesis between itself and this romantic viewpoint, and therefore the latter will accompany it as legitimate antithesis up to its blessed end.”
NOTES


2 As Debord would make clear in the 1963 text, “The Situationists and New Forms of Action in Politics or Art,” the Situationist position did not recommend the subordination of art to politics. Rather, they believed that only by negating and combining the two could the emancipatory potential of each be realized: “[W]hen we speak of a unified vision of art and politics this absolutely does not mean that we recommend any sort of subordination of art to politics whatsoever. For us and for all those who are beginning to view this epoch in a demystified manner, there has been no more modern art anywhere at all—in precisely the same way that there has been no further formation of revolutionary politics anywhere at all—since the end of the 1930s. The current revival of both modern art and revolutionary politics can only be their surpassing, which is to say precisely the realization of what was their most fundamental demand.” Debord, “The Situationists and New Forms of Action in Politics or Art,” 1963. The Situationist International Archive. http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/newforms.html

3 Debord to Gallizio, January 13, 1958.


5 Action in Belgium Against the International Assembly of Art Critics.”

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.


Ibid.

Hughes, 9.


Lassale, 21.

Ibid.

Lassale, 20.

Lassale, 20, 22.

Lassale, 20.

Hughes, 9.


Henry Meyric Hughes, forward to AICA in the Age of Globalization, 8.

Hughes, 8.

In fact, two years before the Situationists’ action against AICA, Debord would identify UNESCO’s commitment to post-ideological consensus with an insidious political quietism. “A ‘free artist,’” he wrote to the art critic Stéphane Rey in 1956, “would not work for the dollars of the pro-McCarthy and pro-Franco UNESCO,” referring to Spain’s entry into the organization in 1952.


Grief, 18.

Grief, 85.


Ibid.

41 Ibid.


44 Verschaffel, 84.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid. 11.


48 Gonzague Pluvinage, Introduction to *Expo 58: Between Utopia and Reality*. 11.

49 Ernest O. Hauser’s article “We’ll Go on Trial at the Fair” (Jan 25, 1958) was included in the Congressional House Hearing on February 26, 1958 along with an official report prepared by the Office of Research and Intelligence of the USIA on the "Communist Propaganda and the Brussels Fair."

50 Grief, 256-257.

51 Grief, 96.


54 Saunders, 26.

55 Saunders, 46.


58 Moreau and Brion, 131.


60 Verschaffel, 74.

61 Verschaffel, 79.

62 Ibid.


65 ibid.


70 10th General Assembly of the A.I.C.A Program: Brussels, April 14-18, Archives of the International Association of Art Critics, Archives de la critique d’art (Rennes, France).

71 Discours de James Johnson Sweeny, Archives of the International Association of Art Critics, Archives de la critique d’art (Rennes, France).

72 Report on the Inaugural Meeting of the 10th General Assembly of AICA, 6, 5.


76 Report on the Inaugural Meeting of the 10th General Assembly of AICA, 2.

77 Hespel, 31.

78 Report on the Inaugural Meeting of the 10th General Assembly of AICA, April 14 Archives of the International Association of Art Critics, Archives de la critique d’art (Rennes, France), 4.

79 Ibid.

80 Guilbaut, 4.

81 Guilbaut, 2.

82 Guilbaut, 191

83 Guilbaut, 17.

84 Guilbaut, 202.

85 Ibid.

86 Guilbaut, 203.

87 Saunders, 106.

88 Saunders, 113.

89 Other traveling exhibitions affiliated the Cultural wing of the Marshall plan included “Young Painters,” devoted to American abstract artists under 35, organized by MoMA in direct collusion with the CCF in 1954. “Twelve Contemporary American Painters and Sculptors,” the first MoMa show devoted exclusively to the New York School opened at the Musee National d’Art Moderne in Paris in 1954. (see Saunders, 269-270)

90 Saunders, 119

91 Ibid.

Brennan, 11.

In fact, Debord’s interest in Huizinga predates the Situationist International. In 1955, Debord cited Huizinga in an article in the proto-Situationist journal Potlatch: “The provisional [and] free realm of playful activity, seen by Huizinga as opposed, as such, to ‘ordinary life’ characterized by a sense of duty, is the only possible field of action held back fraudulently by taboos with pretensions of endurance, of true life.”


Huizinga, 132, 211.

Huizinga, 205.


Sweeney, 389.


ibid.


De Groof, 255.

De Groof, 257.

De Groof, 256.


ibid.


ibid.

ibid.

Debord to Korun, May 6, 1958, in De Groof, 261 (author’s translation)

Guy Debord to Guiseppe Pinot Gallizio, April 15, 1958, excerpted in De Groof, 260. (my translation)
Guy Debord to Walter Korun- May 6, 1958, excerpted in De Groof, 261 (my translation)

De Groof, 262.

Guilbaut, 3.

Grief, 317.


Benjamin Buchloh, “From Yves Klein’s La Vide to Arman’s Le Plein” Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry (MIT Press, 2003), 259.

Roundtable: The Predicament of Contemporary Art,” 673.


Day, 184.


Randall Halle and Reinhold Steingrover, After the Avant-garde: Contemporary German and Austrian Experimental Film (Rochester: Camden House, 2008) 11.

Quoted in Day, 182.