

Constant and the Path of Unitary Urbanism

by Guy Debord¹

The crisis of today's society is indivisible. The dominant social relations cannot adapt to the accelerated development of the productive forces, and this antagonism reigns over culture as well as politics and the economy. The efforts expended at every moment, and not ineffectively, to hide this banal truth, oblige us to recall it at the outset. It is on this basis that an activity of our time can be understood. Everywhere, the creation of a higher level of life opposes its necessities to the habits of thought and behavior. Since we have taken our stand with those who promote this creation, we cannot naively use any of the forms of the superseded cultural totality. We must regard the most widely used practices with astonishment, and see how they converge to form the general meaning of an established way of life. For example, what is called art criticism. We agree with that which tended, in the extremist movements whose succession has shaped modern art, to throw a framework of life into question, to replace it. More precisely, we are now partisans of the program defined by the Situationist International. Considering that it is time to begin constructing complete situations, rejecting the fragmentary, worn-out means of artistic expression, we can be agitators; never judges or lawyers at the comical tribunals of contemporary taste. This commentary for the photographs of a few objects built by Constant will therefore differentiate itself first of all from art criticism.

Art criticism, whose appearance is directly linked to the bourgeois conditions of artistic commerce, clearly must continue in our day, along with these conditions. But the same process that, by degrees, pushed the various traditional aesthetic branches to their destruction has equally reduced the grasp on reality that art criticism can have in and of itself, that is, independently of work on art history: a judgment of the present and a recognition of the future. All real critique fundamentally questions the decomposition of cultural superstructures, and the world of decomposition does not need critique. Thus at once the *raison d'être* and the arsenal of means employed by the art criticism of so-called modernism now boils down to the confused exposition of an incommunicable enthusiasm. The professional rule is to employ, to this end, an obscure derivative of the poetic language of forty years ago, served with personal anecdotes, equally impoverished but which humanize it.

After rehearsing these few salient features of today's art criticism, I must say on the contrary that for our Situationist comrades, for Constant and myself, the three-dimensional explorations in questions here can in no way be an object of enthusiasm, as they are but scattered elements on the path toward a future construction of ambiances, a unitary urbanism. It is easy to understand the meaning of Constant's work, not through the lyrical expression of a spectator's

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preferences, but by considering what he has written himself on his own positions and perspectives, which are also our own. And we will obviously not encourage a personality cult by way of the customary confidences, for we seek to go beyond the division of artistic labor.

The central point of our enterprise, in this moment of its constitution, is the obligation to break – with no intention to return – from all of the vanguardist fashions with which we are familiar, or which we ourselves might have spread. The half-success of certain innovations, and indeed, the half-successes of our youth – I am not thinking here of successes of a social, that is to say, economic, order – risk binding us to a freedom of ideas and a freedom of gestures which remain insufficient. A diminishing boredom is not yet our game. We must not restrict the scope of our desires to the already-seen that coaxes us back emotionally, thus letting our generally difficult and incomplete approach to the known desires contribute to their further embellishment. Against such defeatism, Constant wrote in 1949 in the journal *COBRA* that “When we say desire in the twentieth century, we mean the unknown.” He designated the universal weapon of permanent experimentation: “For those of us whose artistic, sexual, social, and other desires are farsighted, experiment is a necessary tool for the knowledge of our ambitions – their sources, goals, possibilities, and limitations.”² We know that the later development of one of the major currents that would compose our present grouping (the International of Experimental Artists, and then, after its dissolution in 1951, the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus) was, at each stage, dominated by this debate over the watchword of experimentation. Some made it an unreal label covering any normal personal production. Others sought to give it verifiable application. Constant, who demanded in his intervention at the Alba Congress in 1956 that the new architecture be a poetry for lodging, showed that by making use of the latest technologies and materials, “for the first time in history, architecture has been able to become a veritable art of construction.” In 1958, in a discussion of the orientation of the SI, he declared: “For my part, I consider that the shocking character demanded by the construction of ambiances excludes all traditional arts. . . . We must therefore invent new techniques in all of the domains . . . to unify them later in the complex activity that will be engendered by unitary urbanism.”³

These stances mark the advance of the experimental conception beyond abandoned artistic forms, toward collective work, toward new modes of cultural intervention, and in its supreme phase, toward an uninterrupted and conscious transformation of the entire material environment; that is a transformation of the very terrain offered to the experimental methods by the powers to which humanity is now gaining access. Even before this progressive radicalization of the means, the general line had clearly come into view, as the above-quoted text by Constant bears witness: “Freedom appears only in creation or in strife – and these have the same goal at heart – fulfillment of life.”⁴

We have thus become aware that we are at a turning point in the history of social practice. In everyday life, in the cultural totality that is produced by this life and that reacts creatively upon it, the near future will belong to the overthrow of the separated and durable arts/spectacles, in favor of unitary and transitory techniques of intervention. In the perspective of

² “It is our desire that makes the revolution,” *COBRA* (organ of the International Front of the Experimental Artists of the Avant-Garde), no. 4 (November 1949). [Translator: English translation by Lucy Lippard in Hershel B. Chipp: *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 601-602.]

³ “On our means and our perspectives,” *Internationale Situationniste* #2, December 1958.

⁴ “It is our desire . . .” op. cit.

this change of terrain, of this qualitative rupture, many have left the artistic domains that they had spontaneously embraced but in which they experienced the exhaustion of aesthetics. Constant long ago abandoned painting, to construct objects susceptible of integration into a habitat responding to new concerns of play; and then, finally, scale models for a unitary urbanism.

“During the transition period, creative art finds itself in permanent conflict with the existing culture, while at the same time it heralds a future culture. . . . The bourgeois spirit still dominates life as a whole, it even goes so far as to supply prefabricated popular culture to the masses. Never has the cultural void been so manifest as it is since the war,” we read in the manifesto of the Dutch experimental group, drafted by Constant in 1948.⁵ The ten years following this declaration have demonstrated, to the point of derision, the regular ooze of this cultural void, whipped up by circus attractions, and its incapacity for self-renewal; the poverty of a dominant thinking that no longer controls and no longer understands its epoch; the poverty and resignation of the masses who have assimilated the derivatives of their bosses’ idea of happiness. Why then do we wish to overthrow the existing culture, to leave behind the plane where it has always unfolded with alternate moments of success and relative void, rather than betting on the transitional nature of the crisis, rather than helping to reform it? This culture has produced its own gravediggers with the more-or-less conscious vanguards that preceded us. It will necessarily disappear, along with the framework of life that is collapsing everywhere, whatever is to follow. “In fact,” writes Constant, “this culture has never been capable of satisfying anyone, neither a slave nor a master who has every reason to believe himself happy in a luxury, a lust, where all the individual’s creative potential is centered.”⁶ And that is the primary motive that obliges us, when the personal choice is left to us, to choose our camp, to scorn the dominant society: even the masters are incapable of finding any way to please themselves in it. Their freedom is static, bounded by the limits of their own reign. Freedom can only be theoretical for the enemies of freedom. In the same text, Constant rejects the rigged trial of comprehensibility – “a popular art cannot now match the conceptions of the people, because as long as the people do not actively participate in artistic creation they can only conceive of the historically imposed formalisms”⁷ – and expresses on the contrary the essential of our interests: “We do not want to be ‘understood’ either, but to be freed. . . .”

Constant’s work, in its unfinished, “scale model” aspect, like all the tendencies of situationist activity in general, perfectly illustrates the falsity of bourgeois artistic freedom. The artist has, at best, the freedom to ply his trade as an artist, that is, to carry out normalized production, matching the needs of a given stratum of the dominant culture’s highly differentiated public. A truly vanguard project today poses the problem of the new trades, which can hardly be exercised within the frame of bourgeois society, and whose predictable development, given the far greater means it would demand, is not even reconcilable with the capitalist economy. These trades are no longer, strictly speaking, trades. They are involved in the transition to the universe of leisure. The unused, anarchic technologies that our epoch has thus far invented, and their future developments, will have to be made available for them. I have already said that “There is

⁵ *Reflex* #1, 1948.

⁶ “It is our desire . . .” op. cit.

⁷ “Manifesto of the experimental group,” *Reflex* #1, 1948. [Translator: English translation in K. Stiles and P. Selz, ed., *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art: A Sourcebook of Artists Writings* (Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 204-208.]

no freedom in the employment of time without the possession of modern tools for the construction of everyday life. The use of such tools will mark the leap from a utopian revolutionary art to an experimental revolutionary art.”⁸ Thus we are linked to the revolutionary enterprise by an inner necessity: “We are condemned to experiment by the same causes that drive the world into war.”⁹

Clearly our position is not easy. And uncertainty reigns as to the positive results that we may achieve. Will we move all the way to the higher games ahead? Will we at least know how to work usefully in that direction? If not, the intermediary constructions will be worthless, commodities remaining simple commodities, memories remaining trivial memories.

We are separated from the dominant society. We are also obliged to separate ourselves from the dominant artistic circles, meaning not only those that dominate classical bourgeois consumption, but also those that, in the same frame, are reputed to be modernist. The individuals who make up this artistic stratum are naturally in a state of competition between each other. But if our task is pursued as it demands, we will find ourselves in total contradiction with their economic interests as a group. “A new freedom will be born,” as already announced by the manifesto of the Dutch group, “which will allow men to satisfy their desire to create. Through this development the professional artist will lose his privileged position: which explains the current resistance of artists.”¹⁰ Artistic repetitions are a noble trait. Yet the human need for the new has never been so strong as in our epoch, and never so objectively valued.

We are separated from the degenerated workers’ movement, and from the intellectuals who serve it with the class weapons of bourgeois culture. Nowhere is revolutionary thinking, taste, or ethics being spread. But the current balance cannot indefinitely contain the forces unleashed by technological progress, which is now reaching a new and decisive turning point. No more than it will be able to fully employ these available forces, capitalism and its variants, despite its ruses for the training of a consumer proletariat, will not be able to abolish the reality of exploitation. The revolutionary movement will form again, and we believe that our positions will be part of it.

We are separated from the consolations felt by the old culture, for example from the glory of the avant-garde, and radically from the esteem of our elders who did so much for revolt and fine language. But what did Constant have to say? “We have found friends without losing enemies. Are enemies indispensable? They are, and they will be until our problems are vanquished: our enemies make us conscious of our strength and of our weakness.”¹¹

The methods for the conscious transformation of our environment are still young. In culture and everyday life they have just appeared. The situationists call upon the most advanced individuals in all the concerned sectors to unite themselves through such a project.

⁸ [Guy Debord’s] “Theses on the Cultural Revolution,” *Internationale Situationniste* #1, June 1958.

⁹ “It is our desire . . .” op. cit.

¹⁰ *Reflex* #1.

¹¹ In the first issue of *COBRA* (April-June 1949).