

Letter from Guy Debord to Thomas Levin November 1989

The Hamburg Theses of September 1961 (Note to serve in the history of the Situationist International)¹

The “Hamburg Theses” surely constitute the most mysterious of all the documents that emanated from the SI, many of which have been widely distributed and some of which have been distributed discretely.

The “Hamburg Theses” were evoked several times in situationist publications, but a single quotation from it was never given. For example, in *Internationale situationniste* #7, pages 20, 31 and 47; more indirectly in *I.S.* #9, page 3 (with the title of the editorial note “Now, the SI”); and also in the still unpublished contributions of Attila Kotányi and Michèle Bernstein to the debate concerning A. Kotányi’s programmatic propositions in 1963. The “Theses” are mentioned without commentary in the “table of works cited” (page 99) of Raspaud and Voyer’s *Situationist International (Protagonists, Chronology, Bibliography)*.

Here we in fact have conclusions (voluntarily kept secret) from a theoretical and strategic discussion that concerned the totality of the conduct of the SI. This discussion took place during two or three days at the beginning of September 1961, in a series of haphazardly chosen bars in Hamburg, between G. Debord, A. Kotányi and R. Vaneigem, who were then returning from the Vth Conference of the SI, which was held in Goteborg between 28 and 30 August. Alexander Trocchi, who wasn’t present in Hamburg, subsequently contributed to the “Theses.” With the intention of not leaving any trace that could be observed or analyzed from outside of the SI, nothing concerning this discussion and what conclusions it reached was ever written down. It was found that the simplest summary of its rich and complex conclusions could be expressed in a single phrase: “The SI must now realize philosophy.” Even this very phrase wasn’t written down. Thus, the conclusions were so well hidden that they have remained secret until now.

The “Hamburg Theses” have had a considerable importance in at least two regards. First because they mark the most important choice in the history of the SI. But also as an instance of experimental practice: from this point of view, the “Theses” were a striking innovation in the succession of artistic avant-gardes, which until then had given the impression of being keen to explain themselves.

The summarized conclusion evoked a celebrated formula of Marx (in his 1844 text “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right”). At that moment, this summary signified that one must no longer give the least importance to the conceptions of any of the revolutionary groups that still existed as inheritors of the old social emancipation movement, which was destroyed in the first half of our century; and that it would no longer be necessary to count on the SI alone to launch a new era of contestation by renewing all of the starting points of the movement that was constituted in the 1840s. These points did not involve the forthcoming

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break with the artistic “right” of the SI (which weakly wanted to continue or merely repeat modern art), but rendered it extremely probable. One can thus recognize that, for the SI, the “Hamburg Theses” marked the end of its first era – research into a truly new artistic terrain (1957-61) – and also fixed the departure point for the operation that led to the movement of May 1968 and subsequent events.

On the other hand, if one only considers the experimental originality – that is to say, the absence of any redaction of the “Theses” – then the subsequent socio-historical applications of its formal innovations (after they had been subjected to a complete reversal, of course) are also quite remarkable. Hardly more than twenty years later, one could in fact see that the procedure had encountered a bizarre success at the highest levels of several States. One knows since then that several truly vital conclusions – which some were loathe to record in computer networks, magnetic tapes or telexes, and even refused to use typewriters and photocopiers – were simply learned by heart. The original notes, sketched out in handwriting, were soon after destroyed.

This note was written specially for Thomas Y. Levin, who has indefatigably traversed the world to find the traces of the effaced art and the diverse historical crimes of the Situationist International.²

Guy Debord³

² *Translator*: note that when this text was published in *Internationale situationniste : Édition augmentée* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 1997), this sentence was deleted, Levin having by then been “fired” as Debord’s official historian. In a letter to Levin dated 23 October 1989, Debord had said: “I desire that, beyond the cinema, you also become the definitive authority on the entirety of the situationist adventure, of which [Greil] Marcus only treated the beginnings, or even of my complete works, if the teaching of Plato does not detain you for too long.” As Debord explained in a letter to Anita Blanc dated 12 January 1990, in which he reacted to the recent catalogue and exhibition devoted to the Situationist International at the Institute for Contemporary Arts in Boston, Massachusetts: “it is possible that he [Levin] conceived the plan to participate in various exploitations of the event, against us, and by associating himself with various American scammers.”

³ *Alice Debord*: signature followed by Guy Debord’s Chinese seal.