

Letter from Guy Debord to Asger Jorn

17 June 1971¹

Dear Asger:

Here is the text that I proposed to you. Modify it or add other things as you see fit. If you need me to correct the French, send me the new text.

To consider the question well, and especially to see the beginning and the end of *Pour la forme*, there's no doubt that the principal problem that must be treated in this note is that of the relations between this book and the SI.

Thus, I believe that it is good that, against the enthusiastic sectarianism that has developed around the SI, the end of this note expounds the most recent positions that the SI has affirmed (in the next issue of its journal).²

So *On Form* has had a strange destiny: it appeared just before the SI was founded and it is being reprinted at the moment when this form of organization – which had been very necessary – begins to supersede itself in a more vast movement, because, fortunately, conditions have changed. The two editions of this book open and close this organizational parenthesis!

It seems quite good to me, right from the start, to put one's foot in one's mouth by recalling that this book has had few readers since 1958. These readers were a well-hidden elite. Thus, the new readers will find quite surprising and instructive that this book can go from total obscurity to a *pocket book*!³

You can see from the attached clipping⁴ that Conil-Lacoste⁵ now says “Jorn and Appel,” though Appel has seniority in the page columns and the alphabetical order in his favor.

Concerning the typographical mistakes in *On Form*, it is necessary to note that the M.I.B.I.⁶ wasn't founded in 1933 but [19]53. There are surely several other mistakes. I will gladly reread the proofs.

Cordially yours.
We embrace Nanna,

Guy

¹ Published in *Guy Debord, Correspondance*, Volume 4, Janvier 1969 - Décembre 1972 (Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2004). Translated by Bill Brown and uploaded to the *NOT BORED!* website (notbored.org) in 2005. Footnotes by Alice Debord, except where noted.

² *Translator*: a 13th issue of *Internationale situationniste* was planned but never came out.

³ *Translator*: English in original.

⁴ *Translator*: Not included in the Fayard edition.

⁵ Michel Conil-Lacoste, chronicler of contemporary art for *World of the Arts* from 1953 to 1975.

⁶ International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, founded in 1953 (in reaction to the new Ulm Bauhaus, founded by the architect Max Bill).

*Note for the edition of 1971*⁷

At the moment that this book is being re-published in a widely accessible edition, it is fitting to provide several specifications concerning the date and the conditions of its first edition, which appeared completely unnoticed. Very few people, several hundred at most, read it back then; and its possible influence remained purely subterranean.

On Form was published in Paris in July 1958 by the Situationist International, which had then existed for a year⁸ and of which the author is honored to have been one of its founders. Nevertheless, with the exception of an article on automation, simultaneously published in the first issue of *Internationale Situationniste*, the texts that compose this book belong to the preceding period, starting from the dissolution of the Cobra movement. Nothing has been modified in the current edition, except several typographic mistakes.

Precisely because the experiment that developed since the end of the 1950s involved a considerable transformation of ideas, today the public has difficulty remembering the impoverished ideas that dominated the cultural and social conceptions of that era and the youth of today have great difficulty imagining them. One will comprehend the meaning of this book by considering what it combated: functionalism, for example, and the aesthetic and moral conventions that corresponded to the general market of a society that tended towards the reduction of all creative autonomy. Since then, one has seen this process in its results. And in its contestation.

In the last few years, an opinion has often been stated, according to which the Situationist International has forsaken the field of its first preoccupations so as to become a political revolutionary movement. This seems inexact if one considers, on the one hand, that the bases and the problematic on which the SI was formed (and this book can testify to several of these aspects) were immediately social and expressed the necessity of a profound upheaval; on the other hand, that which one previously called revolutionary politics is no longer the same thing that it once was, that is, after the situationists got through with it. If the SI had normally been obliged to struggle on the most central terrain, against the conditions of censorship and incomprehension that obviously did not allow it any other possibility of affirmation than revolution, one must estimate that it did not at all abandon the general radicalism that was at its origin and that alone provides an explanation for its success. Moreover, one hasn't remarked enough until now the efficacy of the SI's language. It is certainly the situationists' reflection on form and language (in the most general sense of the word) – and quite far from the reductive reflections that have been in fashion for twenty years among the professionals of exhausted

⁷ This unpublished text was intended for publication in a new edition of Asger Jorn's *Pour la Forme: Ébauche d'une méthodologie des arts* (Concerning Form: Rough Outline of an Arts Methodology), originally published by the Situationist International (Paris, June 1958). [Translator: Debord wrote this new preface for Jorn because the latter's French wasn't good enough.] A pirate facsimile edition of it appeared in 1979 with no indication of its publisher, before being reprinted in *Documents relatifs à la fondation de l'Internationale situationniste: 1948–1957*, edited by Gérard Bérreby (Editions Allia, 1985).

⁸ *Translator*: in point of fact, the SI was founded in July 1957, a year before this book was published.

expression – that culminated in the SI's use of language with a new force, from which it has drawn its capacity to attain the practical consequences.

Although the author hasn't been a member of the organized situationist movement since 1962, he remains in permanent sympathy for all that the SI has done. Without doubt, situationist ideas will go well beyond this delimited organization, however indispensable its role has been, and precisely because it has always spoken for the autonomy of all. These ideas are already mixed up in and will not cease to develop themselves in the new game that now insists upon the total détournement of existing conditions.

A.J.