

On Our Means and Our Perspectives

The following three documents are the notes of a debate begun by Constant in the SI in September 1958. The second text sets out, in response, the position of the editorial committee of this review, followed by a discussion with Asger Jorn

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1

Re-reading Jorn's writings ("Against Functionalism," "Structure and Change," etc.), it's obvious to me that some of the ideas expressed therein must be attacked directly. To me, these ideas as well as his pictorial activity seem indefensible vis-a-vis the conception of what unitary urbanism can become. As for the history of modern art, Jorn underestimates the *positive* importance of Dadaism and overestimates the role of the romantics (Klee) played in the first Bauhaus. His attitude towards industrial culture is naive, and according to him imagination is the prerogative of the isolated individual.

I have as little taste for individual primitivism in painting as for so-called cold abstraction in architecture, even though one likes to stress an antagonism between these two tendencies that is both false and artificial.

Industrial and machinic culture is an indisputable fact and artisanal techniques, including the painting of both tendencies (the idea of a 'free' art is an error), are finished.

The machine is an indispensable model for all of us, even artists, and industry is the sole means of providing today for the needs, even aesthetic ones, of humanity on a worldwide scale.

These are no longer 'problems' for artists, this is a reality they cannot afford to ignore.

Those who scorn the machine and those who glorify it display the same inability to utilize it.

Machine work and mass production offer unheard-of possibilities for creation, and those who know how to put these possibilities at the service of an audacious imagination will be the creators of tomorrow.

The artist's task is to invent new techniques and to utilize light, sound, movement, and any invention whatsoever that might influence ambience.

Without this, the integration of art in the construction of the human habitat remains as chimerical as the proposals of Gilles Ivain.

Ten years separate us from COBRA and the subsequent history of so-called experimental art shows us its errors.

I drew the inference from this six years ago in abandoning painting and launching myself into more effective experimentation, and this in relation to the idea of a unitary habitat.

I believe discussion should go in this direction, which seems decisive to me for the development of the SI.

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No painting is defensible from the Situationist point of view. This kind of problem no longer poses itself, i.e., applicable to a particular construction. We must look beyond divisive expressions, beyond, even, the whole spectacle (as complex as the latter may become).

Only being able to proceed from the reality of present culture, we obviously run the risk of confusion, compromise and failure. If current artistic practice managed to impose certain of its values on the SI, then the authentic cultural experiments of our time would be undertaken elsewhere.

All art that seeks to cling to a bygone artisanal freedom is lost in advance. (Jorn has underlined somewhere this reactionary aspect of the Bauhaus.) A free art of the future is an art that would master and use all the new conditioning techniques. Beyond this perspective, there is only enslavement to the past, kept alive artificially, and commerce.

We are all, it seems, in agreement on the positive role of industry. It is the material development of the epoch that has created both the general crisis of culture and the possibility of its overthrow in a unitary construction of everyday life.

We approve of the formula: 'those who scorn the machine and those who glorify it display the same inability to utilize it.' But we would add: 'and to transform it.' Account must be taken of the dialectical relation. The construction of ambiances is not only the application to everyday existence of an artistic standard permitted by technical progress. It is also a qualitative changing of life, susceptible to producing a permanent reconversion of technical means.

Gilles Ivain's proposals are not opposed on any point to these considerations on modern industrial production. On the contrary, they are built upon this historical base. If they are chimerical it is to the extent that, concretely, we do not have at our disposal the technical means of today (or put another way, to the extent that no form of social organization is yet capable of making 'artistic' experimental use of these means); not because these means do not exist or that we are unaware of them. In this sense, we believe in the revolutionary value of such monetarily utopian demands.

The failure of the COBRA movement, as well as the posthumous favour it has found among a certain public, can be explained by the term 'so-called experimental art.' COBRA believed that it sufficed to have good intentions, the slogan of experimental art. But in fact it is the moment when such slogans are coined that the difficulties begin: what can be the experimental art of our time be, and how is it made?

The most effective experiments will lead in the direction of a unitary habitat, not isolated and static, but linked to transitory unities of behavior.[1]

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The culminating point in our discussion seems to me to rest on the use being proposed for present culture.

For my part, I consider that the shocking character the construction of ambiances calls for excludes traditional arts like painting and literature, which are threadbare and incapable of any revelation. These arts, which are linked to a mystical and individualist attitude, are useless to us.

We must, then, invent new techniques in every domain, visual, oral, psychological, in order to unite them later in the complex activity unitary urbanism will engender.

The idea of replacing the traditional arts by a larger and freer activity has marked all the artistic movements of this century. Since Duchamp's 'readymades' (beginning in 1913), a succession of gratuitous objects, whose creation was directly linked to an experimental attitude, has intersected the history of artistic schools. Dada, Surrealism, de Stijl, Constructivism, COBRA, the Lettrist International -- all have searched for techniques that go beyond the artwork. Over and above the apparent opposition of the diverse movements of this century, it is that which they have in common. And that is the true development of present culture, suffocated by the noise of pseudo-successes in the domains of painting and literature, which drag out their agony down to our own day.

The history of modern art has been falsified to an incredible degree, out of commercial interest. We can no longer be tolerant. As for present culture, even if we must reject it in its entirety, one must distinguish strictly between the true and the false, between what is usable for the moment, and what is compromising.

I believe that purely formal researches, if they are appropriated and transformed to our own ends, are highly usable.

Let us leave to the official gravediggers the sad task of burying the corpses of pictorial and literary expression. The devalorization of what no longer serves us is not our affair; let others take care of it.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCE

Constant et Asger Jorn, 'Sur nos moyens et nos perspectives', in : *Internationale situationniste* no. 2 (December 1958) 23-26. Translated in English and put online on [Situationist International Online](#).

[1] NOT BORED!: we present here Paul Hammond's translation of these texts. For a different (and better) translation of this second portion of the Constant/Jorn debate, see our translation of Guy Debord's letter to Constant, dated 25 September 1958.