

## Play and Transformation (Constant Nieuwenhuys and the Situationists)

*By Jan Bryant for Drain magazine, 2006*

*The world of plenty is New Babylon, the world in which man no longer toils, but plays; poetry as a way of life for the masses.*

Constant Nieuwenhuys

This article pays homage to Constant Nieuwenhuys, the Dutch painter turned architect and former member of the *Situationist International*, who died on August 1 last year. It looks at the way play was used to realize the Situationists' revolutionary desires (1957-72) and how it formed the foundation for Constant's architectural work, in particular his *New Babylon* project (1956-74), which he worked on long after his resignation from the group in 1960. I will argue that the attraction of play was not simply in its resistance to work or, in following Johan Huizinga, the belief that it was the foundation of life, central as these beliefs were to the group. It was also in its capacity for unlimited transformation; in the way intense feelings of hopefulness punctuate the life of the gambler, or, in the Nietzschean sense, the way being is undermined by becoming. It may seem rash to invoke Nietzsche in the midst of a group so strongly devoted to Hegelian-Marxism, but it is at the level of play that the totalizing ambitions of the group were continually undermined. Their appeal to the energy of the Hegelian dialectic to repair the alienating divisions in contemporary existence is suppressed, I will argue, during these central moments of becoming.

For Constant and the Situationists, in their opposition to an escalating post-war commodity culture, which they believed condemned existence to a seamless series of relentless boredoms, play should be thought of as a guiding ideal. An important influence on the group's appreciation of play was Johan Huizinga's text, *Homo Ludens*, written in 1938, in which he argued that life without play sacrificed the wellbeing of humanity. They were especially attracted by Huizinga's fusion of poetry and play:

The function of the poet still remains fixed in the play-sphere where it was born. *Poesis*, in fact, is a play-function. It proceeds within the playground of the mind, in a world of its own which the mind has created for it. There things have a very different physiognomy from the one they wear in 'ordinary life,' and are bound by ties other than those of logic and causality. If a serious statement be defined as one that may be made in terms of waking life, poetry will never rise to the level of seriousness. It lies beyond seriousness, on that more primitive and original level where the child, the animal, the savage, and the seer belong, in the region of dream, enchantment, ecstasy, laughter.<sup>[1]</sup>

Huizinga argued that play, for all its posturing to frivolity and light-heartedness, is an intensely serious pursuit. It is bounded by rules, fervently imposed and guarded and must be consciously entered into. It creates groupings and rivals, enemies and compatriots, structures

and forms and yet it is also free flowing and utterly absorbing. "It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner."<sup>[2]</sup> This is its unsettling aspect, for play contains an intrinsic paradox that teases us simultaneously with seriousness and playfulness, flow and structure, liberty and order. Such is its undoing, for according to Huizinga, as soon as we enter the play-mood, respect for the rules of play, for its order and form must be zealously maintained or else we risk being brutally thrust from its sphere. Thus, for all its distracting qualities – the way it subsumes totally and completely– the sphere of play, for which Huizinga believed sat outside "everyday" life and beyond all economic determination, is for him a very fragile thing.

And its fragility is most clearly invoked by the spoilsport who, in Huizinga's theory, is the one who shatters the play-world:

By withdrawing from the game, he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs the play of its *illusion*.<sup>[3]</sup>

The play-mood is quickly destroyed when awareness of the arbitrary nature of the game, its rules for instance, surface as illusion during play. The spoilsport is not the one who destroys the playful mood of the players by refusing to be playful, but the opposite, the one who refuses to take the game or its rules seriously enough. The spoilsport (the killjoy, the State, the adult) is, thus, more insidious than the cheat. At least the cheat, in trying to get around the rules, takes the rules seriously enough to disobey them. Where the spoilsport mocks the game, the cheat venerates it.

As seductive as Huizinga's conception of play was for the Situationists – located in a realm beyond the economic and experienced as something 'intensely and utterly' absorbing – there was a problem for them in the way the play-mood was thought to be fragile and in the way it sat in a separate sphere to the everyday. Huizinga's thesis perpetuated the division of life in contemporary society, which the situationists were focused on eradicating. Instead, for the Situationists, play was to flow spontaneously from the desires of each individual so that finally there would be no sense of boredom and no rupture between moments of play and non-play. Rather, play and the everyday would move from one to the other in such a way that their separateness would finally disappear in a rich and poetic stream.

But Constant and the Situationists were not interested in merely securing an existence beyond boredom, as though play were simply a distraction to modern life. If this were their ambition it could have been achieved within the terms already defined by a commodity culture– through "leisure" (sometimes euphemistically called recreation) or "shopping": both are pseudo-play, nothing to do with the satisfaction of a ludic nature described by Huizinga. This was a kind of play that is simulated, predetermined and commodified, inseparable from what the group had defined as the "spectacle"– the concept under which all the alienating causes and effects of modern capitalism had been placed. Instead of merely wanting to challenge boredom they shared a more ambitious desire to actually change the world, to disentangle a world trapped by its obsession with capital and consumerism. This meant

radically remaking the world in the image of the poet rather than the industrialist. Schooled as they were in the seditious bite of Lautréamont, they regarded play as a tool belonging to the poet in the way information belongs to the capitalist: but where the first is productive and unpredictable (resistant), the latter is stagnant and knowable (compliant). One is formed on the logic of multiplicity and flow, of becoming, while the other belongs to the deep cavern of fixed forms. In its complicity with existing conditions of capitalism, Constant and the situationists considered information to be one of the causes of alienation. Poetry or play, on the other hand, offered revolutionary possibility, outside the spectacle.

At the same time as alienation was palpable in feelings like boredom and passivity, its physical manifestation was to be found in the modern city, in its architecture and in its streets, especially any urban form fashioned around the functionalist ideologies of, for instance, an early Le Corbusier or the Bauhaus. By the late 1950s, in their determination to transform contemporary life, Constant and the Situationists had moved their efforts away from art (which was considered too hopelessly dependent upon commodity relations and the spectacle) to concentrate their efforts instead at the level of the physical city, its streets and buildings, developing various practices that were meant to lead to revolution (this would be revolution as play). The group insisted that, "it would be futile to find any other motive behind our theories on architecture or drifting than a passion for play."<sup>[4]</sup> As Guy Debord, the most vocal of the French faction of the group wrote in 1971, on the eve of the demise of the group, "It is known that initially the situationists wanted at the very least to build cities, the environment suitable to the unlimited deployment of new passions. But of course this was not easy and so we found ourselves forced to do much more."<sup>[5]</sup>

The apotheosis of Situationist intent, therefore, was the Paris uprising of May 1968, for it enabled the Situationists to become *provocateurs* of festival and play in the kind of urban streets that had first nurtured their revolutionary desire. Written across the walls at the time was the graffiti, "Under the Cobblestones, the beach," which attempts to re-conceptualize city spaces outside the ordered spaces prescribed by commerce, while pointing to the revolutionary possibilities embedded in its form. These are new spaces (imaginings): they mock the city's serious intent by refusing to privilege commercial activities; they liberate working spaces by converting them into spaces for play; and, in the service of pleasure and play, these new spaces encourage resistance and foster desires. No longer restrained by the concerns of capital, the beach under the cobblestones becomes an expansive space of possibility.

Nonetheless, how might the physical world be *permanently* re-arranged so as to stimulate a positive and active life, a life given over to play and poetry, rather than commerce and spectacular leisure? Constant and the Situationists developed tactics that doubled both as game and sedition, such as the *dérive*, which is aimless drifting through urban streets, preferably in groups, employing the 'psycho-geographical' method to understand the psychological affect the buildings and built forms have on the *dérive*, while hunting for environments that issue suitably exciting and passionate atmospheres. This was the discovery

of 'situations' that were conceptualized as a way to reinvigorate urban and architectural space. As Debord wrote: "our central idea is that of the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality."<sup>[6]</sup> Contemporary life may be one of seamless and relentless alienation, but it nevertheless, contains the potential to create certain moods, which can be enlivened in a process leading to the realization of a fuller existence:

The life of a person is a succession of fortuitous situations, and even if none of them is exactly the same as another the immense majority of them are so undifferentiated and so dull that they give a perfect impression of similitude. The corollary of this state of things is that the rare intensely engaging situations found in life strictly confine and limit this life. We must try to construct situations, that is to say, collective ambiances, ensembles of impressions determining the quality of a moment.<sup>[7]</sup>

Situations had to be brought into being from the potential lying dormant within "ambiances." It was never a matter of mere discovery. This would be too passive. Situations were always actively encouraged, transitory and ephemeral tools in a game of continual renewal, realized at the level of the city itself.

[W]e have to multiply poetic subjects and objects -- which are now unfortunately so rare that the slightest ones take on an exaggerated emotional importance -- and we have to organize games of these poetic objects among those poetic subjects. This is our entire program, which is essentially transitory. Our situations will be ephemeral, without a future; passageways. The permanence of art or anything else does not enter into our consideration, which are serious. Eternity is the grossest idea a person can conceive of in connection with his acts.<sup>[8]</sup>

Even though public space was hopelessly corrupted under the present conditions of capitalism, this could be reversed in the future through *urbanisme unitaire* (unitary urbanism); a theory and practice, according to Constant and other members from the Dutch section of the group, capable of responding "to the exigencies of dynamic creativity, the creativity of life."<sup>[9]</sup> Unitary urbanism, for which the construction of situations formed a part, was conceptualized by them as a way of reuniting the fragmentary (in the Hegelian-Marxist sense), which manifested in different guises. It could be experienced in the compartmentalized spaces of the spectacular city, those spaces given over to functionalism and utility, or in the dispirited condition of contemporary subjectivity, with its unrealized desires and continual sense of boredom, or even in the divided condition of modern art in bourgeois society, with its continual experimentation and its ersatz avant-garde.

Whatever prestige the bourgeoisie may today be willing to accord fragmentary or deliberately retrograde artistic tentatives [sic], creation may now be nothing less than a synthesis aiming at an integral construction of an atmosphere, of a style of life ... A unitary urbanism – the synthesis that we call for, incorporating arts and technology – must be created in

accordance with the new values of life, values which it is henceforth necessary to distinguish and disseminate.[\[10\]](#)

By 1958, "unitary urbanism" had been defined more precisely as the "theory of the combined use of arts and techniques for the integral construction of a milieu in dynamic relation with experiments in behavior."[\[11\]](#) This meant that the construction of situations is prior to the creation of new forms and conditions reached through the strategy of unitary urbanism. And unitary urbanism was more than just a critical confrontation with the effects of the spectacle's aura and power (although critique was a necessary starting point). Unitary urbanism was also an intervention targeted at both the material and atmospheric environment, a means for discovering and activating the positive and revolutionary potential suspended in what the situationists called "urban ambiances."

Our conception of a 'constructed situation' is not limited to a unitary use of artistic means to create an ambience, however great the force of spatio-temporal extension of this ambience may be. The situation is also a unitary ensemble of behavior in time. It is composed of gestures contained in a transitory decor. These gestures are the product of the decor and of themselves. And they in their turn produce other forms of decor and other gestures. How can these forces be orientated? We are not going to limit ourselves to merely empirical experimentation with environments in quest of mechanistically provoked surprises. The really experimental direction of situationist activity consists in setting up, on the basis of more or less clearly recognized desires, a temporary field of activity favorable to these desires. This alone can lead to the further clarification of these primitive desires, and to the confused emergence of new desires whose material roots will be precisely the *new reality* engendered by the situationist constructions.[\[12\]](#)

*Ambiances* are atmospheres or force fields produced by the city's *décor* and described for simplicity sake as "quarters" by the group. Quarters exude certain kinds of harmonies or feelings that are quite distinct. Some quarters are clearly divided off from neighboring harmonies; others actually work to maximize the breaking up of internal harmony.

People are quite aware that some neighborhoods are sad and others pleasant. But they generally simply assume that elegant streets cause a feeling of satisfaction and that poor streets are depressing, and let it go at that. In fact, the variety of possible combinations of ambiances, analogous to the blending of pure chemicals in an infinite number of mixtures, gives rise to feelings as differentiated and complex as any other form of spectacle can evoke.[\[13\]](#)

Although *ambiances* may be external and street-bound, "the most elementary unit," as Guy Debord noted, was the "architectural complex, which combines all the factors conditioning an ambience, or a series of clashing ambiances on the scale of the constructed situation."[\[14\]](#) It is in the slippage from ambience to architecture, however, that 'unitary urbanism' is its most demanding and elusive, for in describing a method of intervention into the *material* and *behavioral* environment through the combined use of art and technology, it also incorporates

a sense of that which could radically transform the subjective and communal quality of life (in terms of their Hegelian legacy, a conversion from fragmentation to unity). And this includes, as well, the creation and rebuilding of a new and dynamic material environment which has the capacity to sustain an on-going enthusiasm for life; a material world capable of producing "emotionally moving situations, rather than emotionally moving forms."<sup>[15]</sup> Thus, at a simple level, unitary urbanism is about participation rather than passivity and an architectural method critically concerned with the emotional effect it exerts on its inhabitants. To appreciate the difference between urbanism and unitary urbanism, therefore, is to come to terms with a central tenet of situationist practice, reminiscent of the distinction they would also draw between information (the language of the spectacle) and poetry (the language of revolution and resistance).

Urbanism doesn't exist; it is only an 'ideology' in Marx's sense of the word. Architecture does really exist, like Coca-Cola: though coated with ideology, it is a real production, falsely satisfying a falsified need. Urbanism is comparable to the advertising propagated around Coca-Cola – pure spectacular ideology. Modern capitalism, which organizes the reduction of all social life to a spectacle, is incapable of presenting any spectacle other than that of our own alienation. Its urbanistic dream is its masterpieces.<sup>[16]</sup>

While urbanism is a tool for capitalism, unitary urbanism is a spatio-temporal strategy capable of creating new and passionate states of being through the capturing of dynamic and variable ambiances ripe with revolutionary potential. The Situationists stressed that unitary urbanism – as a living critique fuelled by all the tensions of daily life – sets up bases for an experimental life, the coming together of those who are capable of creating and directing their own lives on terrains equipped to meet these ends. <sup>[17]</sup> In other words, where capitalism creates infantile subservience, they believed a future structured around Situationist doctrine would deliver a life of independence and autonomy.

Transposed onto architecture, Situationist doctrine insisted that architecture be primarily concerned with the emotional affect the material space has on its inhabitants. Therefore, architectural space would no longer correspond to traditional aesthetic categories. It must be dynamic with impermanent and metamorphosing forms and all boundaries between public and private, work and leisure must be removed. And based on notions of play, and in homage to the ludic, it was the labyrinth, with its spirit of movement and negotiation that became the ideal architectural model. The form or idea of the labyrinth encourages spatial disorientation and confusion (complexity), and thus opposes the kind of openness and transparency favored by early modernists (Le Corbusier was the group's main target here). In the labyrinth, each space, each passageway, each thoroughfare, is directed as much to action and progress as it is to chance and surprise. The opposite of the labyrinth is an architectural and urban model based on static, sedentary and utilitarian principals, dedicated to the isolation of separate and disparate practices, which are ordered, knowing and controlling. Founded on notions of fluidity, creativity, disorientation and play, ideal space exists in a state of permanent transformation.

To sum up, unitary urbanism (integral art) had a dual objective: to transform the experiential nature of modern life, from one of boredom to one of play; and, to restructure modern aesthetic experience by rejecting functionalism (that which privileges transparency, the static and the "rational" separation of spaces into domestic, commercial, traffic, etc.), for forms favoring complexity and opacity (the labyrinth). Within this was the prudent selection of what would constitute *the quality of a moment*. These *moments* (situations) are necessarily impermanent and transient, ephemeral. They can also be mere passageways from one state to another. Thus, unitary urbanism at this level may be no more than experimental research doubling as a game, to be collectively followed and then discarded, only to be raised again somewhere else once the moment presents itself.

And perhaps this is where the group is at its most utopian for despite their remonstrations to the contrary, it is such thinking – thinking that pegs a future existence on the most intoxicating moments of play and desire – that brands Constant and the Situationists as utopian thinkers: the kind of utopianism proffered by Louis Marin when he says that utopias are formed out of contradictions between social reality (such as the numbing effects of a rapidly expanding postwar commodity culture), and a projected model of social existence (a world structured harmoniously around the collective passions and desires of the individual).[18] Nonetheless, Constant insisted that his *New Babylon* project, which he worked on for nearly twenty years, was not utopian at all but practical and achievable. Designed as a fluid physical space that would encourage (nay, demand!) an enriched and active life, the dreams of his New Babylonians were to move freely and unencumbered from the foggy world of unfulfilled desire to one fixed in a new reality.

*New Babylon* had been underwritten by the principles guiding the group's earlier proposal for the Stedelijk Museum, *Die Welt als Labyrinth* (1960). At that time, both the interconnecting element of the *dérive* and the necessary movement through the labyrinth had been an attempt to contest the restrictions (and passivity) usually faced by the museum visitor. However, the troubling nature of the museum – as a containing, controlling institution, embroiled in the machinations of the art-system – was not threatened. This was reason enough to abandon the project. Constant attempted to overcome the contradictions embedded in his "ideal" labyrinth by eviscerating it from the cosseted space of the museum.

Planned as a global network of mega-structures, divided into sectors, *New Babylon* is a wholly constructed and hence, artificial world, supported by computerized-technology. A covered city, suspended high above the ground, where all forms of mobility are fostered: even the structure itself is a mobile entity, continuously transforming to the desires of its occupants. Importantly, the satisfaction of inhabitants' collective desires is a creative act, so that New Babylonians will be supplied with "powerful," "ambience-creating" devices. As Mark Wigley emphasizes, all atmospheric tools (light, acoustics, color, texture, temperature) and structures (floors, partitions, ramps, ladders, bridges and stairs) are infinitely variable, heterogeneous, and in permanent sympathy with inhabitants' individual desires.[19] *New Babylon* is founded on an unrestrained confidence in the transformative possibilities of

technology; its potential to create new states of being, which Constant believed had been inadequately imagined in contemporary society:

The technical inventions that humanity has at its disposal today will play a major role in the construction of the ambience-cities. It is worth noting that significantly, to date, these inventions have in no way contributed to existing cultural activities and creative artists have not known what to do with them. The potential offered by cinema, television, radio and high-speed travel and communication has not been exploited and their effect on cultural life has been deplorable. The investigation of technology and its exploitation for recreational ends on a higher plane is one of the most pressing tasks required to facilitate creation of a unitary urbanism on the scale demanded by the society of the future.[\[20\]](#)

Combining pieces from earlier visionary projects *New Babylon* is also a work of *détournement* (the critical bringing together of pre-existing visual and textual elements). As Anthony Vidler has identified:

We recognize the 'détourned' elements of the Ville Radieuse, of Chernikov's or Leonidov's constructivist ideal cities, of Merzbau, and of more down-to-earth propositions from Team 10's own re-writing of CIAM— the mats, nets, and megastructures of van Eyck, Bakema, Woods, and even the megastructures of Yona Friedman. All utopias have done this to a degree, of course, from the Renaissance to the present – no place could be understood as a potential good place if we did not in some way find our own place in its habitat.[\[21\]](#)

This fulfils the Situationists' desires – when they first pondered the problems of architecture and mused over the meaning and purpose of unitary urbanism -- to release the potential atmospheres locked in existing forms of architecture.

The new architecture shall undertake its first practical exercises with the *détournement* of once well-defined *affective blocks of ambience* (the castle, for example). The use of *détournement*, in architecture as in the constructing of situations, signifies the reinvestment of products abstracted from the ends contemporary socio-economic organization gives them, and a break with the formalist wish to abstractly create the unknown. This means liberating existing desires at once and deploying them within the new dimensions of an unknown actualization.[\[22\]](#)

Through his many drawings, paintings, models, photographs, texts and films for *New Babylon* comes the persistent call for movement and immediacy, or as Thomas McDonough writes; "mobility is figured as the very support of freedom, and the inhabitants' ability to alter their surroundings is the guarantor of an immediacy."[\[23\]](#)

For us, the inhabitants of the twentieth-century, to speak of desire is to speak of the unknown, because all we know about the realm of our desires is that they come down to this: an overwhelming desire for freedom. [And only] unlimited freedom can lead us to discover the laws of a new creativity.[\[24\]](#)

*New Babylon* confounds traditional map-making practices by covering the natural landscape with a multi-leveled lay-out that opens to an unbroken sequence of terrace roofs; "an impermanent network of units, linked one to the other, and so forming chains that can develop or be extended in every direction."<sup>[25]</sup> Although the sectors exist autonomously, they also inter-communicate so that the perception from within is one of continuous space—without restrictions, without frontiers, without national economies. "The flexibility of internal space in the sectors admits ... multiple variations in environment and ambience across relatively constrained surfaces."<sup>[26]</sup> Thus, like nomadic cultures, *New Babylon* is planned to function in a permanent state of transformation so that life is "an endless journey across a world that is changing so rapidly that it seems forever other."<sup>[27]</sup>

"Unmapable," "forever Other" – this is the texture of Constant's utopian project, an attempt to trap the dynamism of modernity (especially the excitement born from new technologies), while continuously reaching out to uncharted regions. An imperative of the project is to avoid the sedentary and habitual nature that defines the character of a "neighborhood" or the tendency that one has to stagnate in the suffocating narrowness of parochialism. Instead, Constant inscribed the spirit of the restless nomad (the gypsy) into the project, she who remains forever other to the fixed dweller of the town or the city.<sup>[28]</sup> This is not simply another call for cosmopolitanism, however, even though it rests on a plan that is without borders or closures. It is about reaching deeply into the crevices that form between hegemonic structures, so as to discover the uncharted – and hence unknown – desires of the New Babylonians. For Constant, the happiness of the future world rests on such transcendence.

To sum up, by attempting to capture the spirit of the labyrinth and the nomad, Constant wanted to inscribe playfulness, adventure, and the unpredictable into the nucleus of the physical environment, while marking it reverentially with the signs of earlier, unrealized revolutionary projects. Constant's vision for a non-landowning, classless and nomadic culture (a gypsy culture) would be a "playground" founded on the "genuine" desires of each of its inhabitants; produced, nonetheless, with respect to collective ideals. The reconstruction of being, however, still had to be realized through the creation of *situations*, those exhilarating moments of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of "unitary ambience." As spatio-temporal moments, *situations* are conceptualized to flow sympathetically with a malleable and dynamic physical space ( *New Babylon* ) so that life could be transformed from one marked by boredom to one structured around the idea of play.

As play was the proper mood to adopt during Situationist activity, how then should we evaluate its lucidity as a concept for opposing (overturning) capitalist "subjectivity"? For Constant and the Situationists, play was placed in unyielding opposition to boredom, resisting the more measured pace of someone like Walter Benjamin when he contemplated, "Now, it would be important to know: what is the dialectical antithesis to boredom?" Benjamin considered boredom to be an essential part of modernity, its grayness, the

condition of waiting, and so on (those moments of indeterminacy where the certainty of dialectical opposites are unknown). Benjamin wrote, "Boredom is the threshold to great deeds."<sup>[29]</sup> George Bataille would have agreed with Benjamin, for it was only at that obscure boundary between nothingness and intensity, between boredom and excitement that an authentic sense of modernity might be found. Flushed against these thoughts, two difficulties become evident with the way the Situationists opposed boredom to play: firstly they were blind, not only to boredom's intrinsic potential, but also to its conceptual complexity, seeing it simply as an effect of alienation, something to be defeated; secondly, they supposed that boredom could be suspended in the very instant before the dice fall back to the earth and they set about trying to entrap that intensely absorbing moment of the game. They thought that being could be permanently enriched with the kind of hopefulness and excitement that normally belongs only to the gambler. Attempting to overcome the sense of nothingness that sits so precariously at the edge of being (or at the fall of the dice), they tried to arrest the movement of the game.

However, it is hard to see where the dialectic actually fits in here, for in their search for a conceptual framework that would encourage movement and energy, rather than ideas that tended to fix and immobilize thought, the situationists were committed to the Hegelian dialectic. But the excitement that marks the moment of intoxication for the player, gambler, or, to introduce another correlate, the child is restrained by the *aufgehoben*, as it impatiently looks forward to the continual resolution of the negative before moving on to a higher plane of synthesis. Subsumed under the movement of the dialectic, therefore, for there can be, as the Situationists wrote, "no supercession without realization,"<sup>[30]</sup> is that liberating sense of becoming, which destroys fixed notions of being, that moment when the dice are still in the air."

In Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche, in particular the idea of the dicethrow, there are always two moments in the game: "the dice that is thrown and the dice that falls back." These occur on two tables (the sky and the earth), or two tables of life, "which are also the moments of the player or the artist" – that is, life or action and the contemplation on life. In other words, the two moments of the single dicethrow introduces the idea of chance (multiplicity, chaos) and necessity (destiny) as analogous to becoming and being. "The dicethrow affirms," as Deleuze notes, "becoming and it affirms the being of becoming."<sup>[31]</sup>

The dice which are thrown once are the affirmation of *chance*, the combination which they form on falling is the affirmation of *necessity*. Necessity is affirmed of chance in exactly the sense that being is affirmed of becoming and unity is affirmed of multiplicity. It will be replied, in vain, that thrown to chance, the dice do not necessarily produce the winning combination, the double six which brings back the dicethrow. This is true, but only insofar as the player did not know how to *affirm* chance from the outset. For, just as unity does not suppress or deny multiplicity, necessity does not suppress or abolish chance. Nietzsche identifies chance with multiplicity, with fragments, with parts, with chaos: the chaos of the

dice that are shaken and then thrown [...] What Nietzsche calls *necessity* (destiny) is thus never the abolition but rather the combination of chance itself.[\[32\]](#)

The bad player, entrenched in reason – and let me volunteer here the playful Situationist – tries to anticipate chance by counting on repetition (multiple throws) to predict or resolve the infinity of being, "a final, desired, willed combination." This attempt to put an end to chance, to instill instead a conviction in the certainty of being, is "bad conscience" in the belief in a purpose. The good player, conversely, "sees that the universe has no purpose, that it has no end to hope for any more than it has cause to be known – this is the certainty necessary to play well."[\[33\]](#)

Nietzsche proposes as the second moment of the dicethrow, the concept of eternal return. "Return is the being of becoming itself, the being which is affirmed in becoming."[\[34\]](#) Chaos is multiplicity and it belongs to the limitlessness of becoming; eternal return or cycle is not its opposite, or how chaos is resolved but what affirms chance. As Deleuze notes:

When the dice are thrown on the table of the earth it 'trembles and is broken.' For the dicethrow is multiple affirmation, the affirmation of the many. But all the parts, all the parts, all the fragments, are cast in one throw; all of chance, all at once. This power, not of suppression of multiplicity but of affirmation of it all at once, is like fire. Fire is the element which plays, the element of transformation which has no opposite.[\[35\]](#)

For Deleuze, Nietzsche's ontology sat comfortably with his own concern for difference (difference as repetition), and supported his criticism of Hegel. Where Hegel's dialectic was structured around opposites, overwhelming chance and affirming the negative, Nietzsche showed, through his example of eternal return, how difference affirms itself by ceaselessly differing from itself (Deleuze is careful to show that eternal return is never the return of the same). Where Hegel's dialectic logically moves upon one plane, chance and multiplicity, the stuff of difference, move in many directions and on many planes. It is the stuff of play, of becoming, of transformation, and it drives the theory of situations, the discovery of the quality of moments.

The aim of this article has been to unearth the tension that I believe sits at the heart of the Situationist project, the stand off, if you like, between order (resolution) and multiplicity (surprise and complexity). This is perhaps where the core of the group's most interesting philosophical legacy is to be unearthed. For this also marks the tension between redemption and loss, between the urge to revolution (the messianic moment) and the persistent bleakness of alienation (the emptiness of infinity), which the group tried to resist in the most absorbing moment of play. Submerged under their commitment to the Hegelian dialectic, are ideas that appeal to fluid and less totalizing understandings of modern life, ideas that lie uneasily with totalizing or teleological visions.

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## Endnotes

[1] Huizinga, Johann, *Homo Ludens: A study of the Play Element in Culture*, (London: Temple Smith, 1970) 141.

[2] Huizinga, 1970, 26.

[3] Huizinga, 1970, 30.

[4] Unsigned, "Architecture and Play," *Potlatch* #16, January 26, 1955, Andreotti, Libero and Xavier Costa (eds.) *Theory of the Dérive and Other Situationist Writings on the City*, (Barcelona, Museu D'art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1996 ) 53.

[5] Debord, Guy, "On Wild Architecture," September 1971, Andreotti and Costa, 1996a 152.

[6] Debord, Guy, "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions or Organization and Action," Knabb, Kenneth (ed.+trans.), *Situationist Anthology*, (Berkeley, Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981) 22.

[7] Guy Debord, "Report on the Construction of Situations," Knabb, 1981, 24.

[8] Ibid., 25.

[9] A. Alberts, Armando, Constant, Har Ouedejans, "First Proclamation of the Dutch Section of the SI," *IS* #2, December 1959, Andreotti and Costa, 1996a, 90.

[10] Quote by Gil Wolman in his address to the Alba Platform just before the formation of the Situationists in 1957, first published in *Potlatch* #27, 2 November 1956, Knabb, 1981, 15.

[11] Uncredited, "Definitions," *Internationale Situationniste* #1, June 1958, Knabb, 1981, 45-46.

[12] Uncredited, "Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation," *Internationale Situationniste* #1, 1958, Knabb, 1981, 43.

[13] Guy Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," *Les Lèvres Nues* #6, September, 1955, Andreotti and Costa, 1996a, 18.

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[17] Ibid., 66.

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[19] Wigley, Mark, *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire*, (Rotterdam, Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, 1998), 165.

[20] Constant, "Great Game to Come," *Potlatch* #30, 15 July 1959, reprinted in Andreotti and Costa, 1996a, 63.

[21] Anthony Vidler, "Diagrams of Utopia," de Zegher, Catherine and Mark Wigley, *The Activist Drawing: Retracing Situationist Architecture from Constant's New Babylon to Beyond*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, The MIT Press, 1999), 83.

[22] Uncredited, "The Situationist Frontier," *Internationale Situationniste*, #5, December 1960, Andreotti and Costa, 1996a, 107.

[23] Thomas McDonough, "Fluid Spaces: Constant and the Situationist Critique of Architecture," de Zegher, Catherine and Mark Wigley, 94.

[24] Quoted in Lambert, Jean-Clarence, "Constant and the Labyrinth," Andreotti, Libero and Xavier Costa (eds.) *Situationists, Art, Politics, Urbanism*, (Barcelona, Museu D'art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1996), 96.

[25] Constant, "New Babylon," reprinted in Andreotti and Costa, 1996a, p.158.

[26] Ibid., 159.

[27] Ibid., 158.

[28] New Babylon is prefaced by the story of Pinot Gallizio giving refuge to gypsies who were being harassed as they passed through the town of Alba. Observing their temporary enclosure of planks and petrol cans on Gallizio's land, Constant remarked, "That was the day I conceived the scheme for a permanent encampment for the gypsies of Alba and that project is the origin of the series of maquettes of New Babylon. Of a New Babylon where under

one roof, with the aid of moveable elements, a shared residence is built; a temporary, constantly remodeled living area; a camp for nomads on a planetary scale." Constant, "New Babylon," Andreotti + Costa, 1996a, 154.

[29] Benjamin, Walter, *The Arcades Project*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, The Belknap Press, Harvard University Press, 1999), 105.

[30] Khayati, Mustapha, "Captive Words: Preface to a Situationist Dictionary," Knabb, 1981, 172.

[31] Deleuze, Gilles, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, (trans. Hugh Tomlinson), (New York, Columbia Press, 1983), 25.

[32] Ibid., 26.

[33] Ibid., 27

[34] Ibid., 24.

[35] Ibid., 29

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