

*“The innate part of the failure that determines a collective enterprise like the avant-garde is its incapacity to make a world. All the splendors, all the actions, all the discourses of the avant-garde unceasingly fail to give it a body; it all happens in the head of the few, where the unity, the organic content of the ensemble flourish, but only for thinking, that is to say, externally.”*

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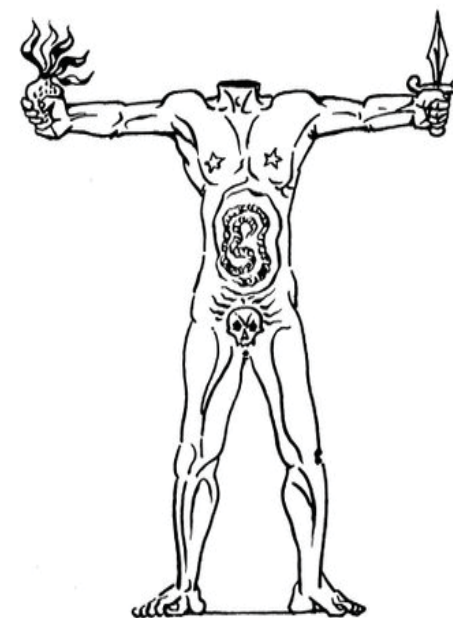
The  
problem  
of the  
head



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# The problem of the head

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so that the watchword of community, of secret society, finally will absorb the reality of these terms. Acephale was almost exclusively, and more reasonably than Surrealism for example, an affair of men. Acephale did not know, to crown it all, how to pass by the head and how to not be, from one end to the other, the community of only Bataille: as he alone wrote the genealogy, the “internal journal” which gave birth to Acephale, as he alone defined the rites of this order, he finished alone, imploring his pale companions to sacrifice at the foot of his scared tree: “It was very beautiful. But we all had the sentiment of participating in something that happened on the part of Bataille, in the head of Bataille.” (Klossowski).

It would not seem opportune to take a conclusion, even less a program, from what is going to be said.

Following from what I know, a certain relation must be able to be established with the Invisible Committee; be it only in the sense of a generalization of insinuation.

*It must be said in passing: there is not a problem of the head, there is but a paralysis of the body, of the act.*

zensberger was not all wrong to see in the Bild-Zeitung the achieved realization of the avant-garde, as much from the point of view of formal transgression as from collective elaboration. A certain dose of Situationism also seems demanded for all well-paid work, at present. The particular appropriately incisive tone of this intervention meets here its content: it is only a matter of liberating ethical signification from the avant-garde.

## Epilogue

As epilogue to this, it does not seem superfluous to evoke a point of reversal for the avant-garde. Acephale, symbol of the crowd without a leader, names one of its extreme points. Acephale tends to liberate itself from the problem of the head. All the agitation, all the gesticulation of the avant-garde, be it artistic or political, Acephale would like to erase this in erasing itself, in renouncing a form of action “that is but the placing of existence for later.” Acephale would like to be this secret existential society, this elective community that would assemble “the individuals truly decided to undertake the struggle, at a small scale to the need, but on the efficacious path where their attempt risks becoming epidemic, to the end of measuring itself with society on its own terrain and to attack it with its own arms, that is to say to constitute themselves in a community, more still, in ceasing to make the values that they defend the perquisite of rebels and insurgents, regarding them in the inverse as the first values of the society that they would like to see installed and that as the most social of all they must be somewhat implacable... To the constitution in groups presides the desire to combat society in so much as society, the plan to confront it as the most dense and solid structure tending to install itself as a cancer in the heart of a structure more unstable and loose, although incomparably more voluminous.” (Caillois, *Le Vent d'Hiver*). The papers of Henri Dussat, member of Acephale, contains a note dated March 25, 1938 “To tend to ethics, there is the resolution that one recognizes, or of that which is wicked to recognize the Christian as the supreme value. Another thing is to move oneself in ethics.” Looking explicitly to constitute itself as a world, Acephale did not only break with the avant-garde, it retook also that which, in the avant-garde, had been something other than the avant-garde, that is to say precisely the desire that was aborted there: “Since the end of the dada period the project of a secret society charged with giving a sort of active reality to the aspirations that were defined in part under the name of surrealism has always rested an object of preoccupation, at least in the background.” Recalled Bataille in the conference of the College of Sociology on March 19, 1938. Acephale, however, would not come to exist so much as to contaminate. Although being full of rites, of habits, of sacred texts and ceremonies, the proclamatory politics that, externally, had disappeared remained internally; so much

*Democracy reposes upon a neutralization of antagonisms relatively weak and free; it excludes all explosive condensation...the only free society full of life and force, the sole free society is the bi or polycephal society that gives to the fundamental antagonisms of life a constant explosive outlet, but limited to the richest forms. The duality or the multiplicity of heads tends to realize in the same movement the acephalous character of existence, for the principle even of the head is reduction to unity, reduction of the world to God.*

**Acephale, January 1937**

I consider all the acts of the “avant-gardes” in their supposed succession. They all come out with an injunction, with a commandment: a commandment regarding how to understand them. The “avant-gardes” demand to be treated in a certain fashion; I do not believe that they ever were anything else, all told, than this demand, and the submission to this demand.

I listen to the history of the Red Brigades, of the Situationist International, of Futurism, of Bolshevism or Surrealism. I refuse to grasp them cerebrally, I raise my finger to search for a contact: I feel nothing. Or rather I do feel something: the sensation of an empty intensity.

I observe the defile of avant-gardes: they never cease to exhaust themselves in tension against themselves. The scandalous actions, purges, grand dates, noisy ruptures, orientation debates, campaigns of agitation, and splits are milestones on the road to their termination. Torn between the present state of the world and the final state toward which the avant-garde must guide the human herd, ripped apart in the suffocating tension between that which is and that which must be, waylaid in the organizational auto-theatricalization of itself, in the verbal contemplation of its own power projected into the heavens of the masses and of History, failing, without stop, to live nothing if it is not by the mediation of the always already historical representation of each of its movements, the avant-garde turns round in the ignorance of self that consumes it. Then it collapses on this side of

birth, yet without even coming to its proper beginning. The most ingenuous question on the subject of avant-gardes—that of knowing as the avant-garde of what, exactly, they regard themselves—finds there its response: the avant-gardes are first in the avant-garde of pursuing themselves.

I speak here in so much as a participant in the chaos that develops at present around *Tiqqun*. I do not say “us”; no one can, without usurpation, speak in the name of a collective adventure. The best that I can do is to speak anonymously, not of but in the experience I take part in. The avant-garde, at all costs, will not be treated as an exterior demon that one must always guard against.

There is therefore an avant-garde comprehension of “avant-gardes”, an act of “avant-gardes” that is in no manner distinct from the avant-garde itself. One could not explain without this, as the articles, studies, essays and hagiographies of which they are still the object can invariably leave even the impression of second hand work, of supplemental speculation. For one only does the history of a history, that upon which one discourses is in already a kind of discourse.

Whoever was one day seduced by one among the avant-gardes, whoever let themselves be filled by their autarchic legend had not missed experiencing, in contact with one or the other layman, this vertigo: the degree of indifference of the mass of humans to their good work, the impenetrable character of this indifference and beneath all this the insolent happiness that the laity dare, all the same, to manifest in their ignorance. The vertigo of which I speak is not that which separates two divergent consciousnesses of reality, but two distinct structures of presence— the one that reposes on itself, the other that is suspended in an infinite projection behind itself. Thenceforth one understands that the avant-garde is a subjective regime, and not a substantial reality.

Useless to specify as to characterize this regime of subjectivation, it would be necessary at first to extract it; and what consents to this division exposes itself to the loss of a great number of enchantments, and is rarely long in being taken with a permanent melancholy. In effect, seen from this angle, the brilliant, virtuous universe of avant-gardes offers rather the aspect of a ghostly idealization of a noisome heap of wrinkled corpses. Those who would like to find something palatable in this vision must therefore place themselves in sort of a calculated naivety, done well, so as to dissipate such a compact haze of nothingness. To this reasonable understanding of avant-gardes corresponds an abrupt sentiment of our common humanity.

such constellations, to liberate each aesthetic from its ethical content. Those of our days who move closer, in the same cavalier fashion, to the punk of certain para-existential circles of the after-war years, then those of the Gnostic effervescence of the first centuries of our era, do nothing else as well. Beyond the temporal spacing which separates them from the points of illusion, each of these constellations understands gestures, rituals, enunciations, uses, practical arts, determined forms of life, in brief: a proper Stimmung. It assembles by attraction all the details of a world, which advertises being animated, being inhabited. In the context where the avant-gardes affirmed themselves and a fortiori today, the question has, for a long time, not been to make a novelty, but to make a world. Each thing, each being, that coming into presence brings with it an economy given by presence configures a world. Going from that, it is a question solely of inhabiting the determinity of the constellation which deploys itself always-already in our presence, to follow our derisory, contingent, and finite taste. All revolt that goes from self, of the hic et nunc where it reposes, of the inclinations that traverse it, goes in this sense. The movement of 77 in Italy remains, as such, a promising failure.

## Realization of the avant-garde

One of the most feeble books on the avant-gardes of the second half of the twentieth century certified, in 1980, *The Auto-Dissolution of the Avant-Gardes*. The author, Rene Lourau, the founder of the totally laughable “institutional analysis”, omits, needless to say, the essential: to say in what the avant-gardes were dissolved. The most recent progress of the occidental neurosis has long since been confirmed: the avant-garde was dissolved in the totality of social relations. The henceforth banal characterization of our times as “post-modern” evokes nothing else, even if it is only another way to purge modernity of all its trimmings to save the fundamental act: that of surpassing—it is not fortuitous, in this, that even the term “post modernism” made its first appearance in 1934 in the circles of the Spanish avant-garde. Equally well, the best definition that Debord gave to the Spectacle—“a social relation between persons, mediated by images”—and that today defines the dominant social relation, only takes note of the generalization of the mode of avant-gardist being. The Bloom is thus those for whom all the relations, to self as to others, are entirely mediated by autonomous representations. It is the careerist who organizes his permanent auto-promotion, the cynic who menaces at each instant to let themselves be absorbed by one of their discursive excrescences or to disappear in a chasm of bathmological irony. The paranoia of the avant-garde has also been diffused, with this diffuse manner of carrying itself as the exception to itself at each instant of life; with this general disposition to build itself its own personal, remote-controlled little legend. En-

already posthumous, that the historicism of the avant-gardes condemns itself. In this way one periodically observes this curious phenomenon: an avant-garde occupies in its own time a more-than-marginal position even if it occupies it with the pretension of being the center of history; its time past, all the actuality of this retires as well; and it is while the avant-garde comes to be uncovered that it emerges from its epoch as the most pure substratum. In this manner operates a sort of resurrection of the avant-garde—Debord and the Situationists offer an illustration of this, almost too exemplary, and so foreseeable—which makes itself pass for the heart, for the key of its epoch, if not for its epoch itself. At the base of the avant-gardist regime of subjectivation, there is therefore this confusion between history and the philosophy of history, a confusion that permits the avant-garde to take itself for history. In fact, everything happens as if the avant-garde had, in sheltering itself in its own times, made an investment and that it sees itself accordingly, posthumously, remunerated in terms of historical consideration.

## The museumification of the world

In 1931 in *Le Travailleur*, Junger noted: “We live in a world that on one side exactly resembles a workshop and on the other looks exactly like a museum”. A dozen years later, Heidegger exposed in his course on Nietzsche the hypothesis of the achievement of metaphysics: “The end of metaphysics that must be thought of here is the debut of its ‘resurrection’ in derived forms: these are no longer left to history, properly speaking, and now they complete fundamental metaphysical positions as the economic role of furnishing the materials of construction with which, transformed in a corresponding fashion, the world of ‘knowing’ will be reconstructed anew...According to all appearance, we are at the equalizing of different fundamental positions, of their elements and their doctrinal concepts.” Our time is the general recapitulation of all past history. The imperial project to finish with history concordantly takes the form of an historical appropriation of all past events, and hopes with that to neutralize them. The institution of the museum does but sectorally realize the project of a general museumification of the world. All the attempts of the avant-garde have taken place in this, at the same time, real and imaginary theatre. But this recapitulation is equally well the dissipation of the historicist illusion in which the avant-garde lives, with its pretension to novelty, to uniqueness, to originality without replica. In such a movement where the element of time reabsorbs itself into the element of meaning, where all past history gathers itself in a topology of positions amongst which, for lack of these being known to everyone, we must learn to orient ourselves, we assist in the progressive accretion of constellations. Men like Aby Warburg with his drawing boards, or Georges Duthuit, in his Unimaginable Museum, began to sketch

## Three watchwords

In all domains, the avant-gardist regime of subjectivation signals itself by the recourse to a “watchword”. The watchword is the discourse of which the avant-garde is the subject. “Transform the world”, “change life”, and “create situations” form a trinity, the most popular trinity of watchwords launched by the avant-garde in a century. One could remark with some ill-wishing that in the same interval nothing has transformed the world, changed life or created situations save commodity domination, that is to say the declared enemy of avant-gardes, as it becomes imperial; and that this permanent revolution Empire has most often led without phrases; but in resting there, one deludes oneself as to the target. What must be remarked is rather the unequalled power of inhibition of these watchwords, their terrible power of sideration. In each of them, the dynamic effect expected rebounds according to an identical principle. The avant-garde exhorts the massman, the Bloom, to take for its object something always already understood- the situation, life, the world- and to place in front of him that which is by essence all around him, to affirm themselves in so much as subject against that which is precisely neither subject nor object, but rather the indiscernability of the one and the other. It is curious that this avant-garde never sounded the injunction to be a subject as violently as between the 1910’s and 1970’s, that is to say in the historic moment where the material conditions of the illusion of the subject tended to disappear the most drastically. At the same time, this evidences well enough the reactive character of the avant-garde. This paradoxical injunction thus must not have had the effect of throwing Occidental Man into the assault of the diffuse Bastilles of Empire, but more rather obtained in him a split, a rupture, a schizoid destruction of me in the confine of myself, a confine where the world, life, and situations, in brief his proper existence, would be henceforth apprehended as estranged, as purely objective. This precise constitution of subject, reduced to contemplate itself in the midst of that which surrounded it, could be characterized as aesthetic, in the sense where the arrival of the Bloom also corresponds to a generalized aestheticization of experience.

## Going to the masses rather than starting from self

In June 1935, Surrealism came to the last supportable limits of its project of forming the total avant-garde. After eight years passed trying to hold itself in the service of the French Communist Party, a too-thick flood of camouflets made it take note of its definitive disaccord with Stalinism. A discourse written by Breton, but read by Eluard at the



“Congress of writers in defense of culture” must thus mark the last contact of importance between Surrealism and the PCF, between the artistic avant-garde and the political avant-garde. Its conclusion has remained famous: “ ‘Transform the world’ said Marx; ‘change life’ said Rimbaud: for us these two watchwords are one”. Breton did not only formulate the frustrated hope of a rapprochement, he also expressed the intimate connection between artistic and political avant-gardism, their common aesthetic nature. Ergo, in the same manner as Surrealism held itself towards the PCF, the PCF held itself towards the proletariat. In *The Militants*, written in 1949, Arthur Koestler delivers precious evidence of this form of schizophrenia, of the ventriloquism of class that is so remarkable in the discourse of Surrealism, but less often recognized in the delinquent KPD of the start of the 30’s: “A particular trait of the life of the Party, in this era, was the ‘cult of the proletariat’ and the hatred of intellectuals. That was the distress and obsession of all the Communist intellectuals who had issued from the middle class. We were tolerated in the Movement, but we did not have full rights: we had to convince them day and night... an intellectual could never become a veritable proletarian, but his duty was to approximate this as much as possible. Certain attempted to renounce ties, wearing working-class sweaters and keeping their nails black. But such a snobbish imposture was not officially encouraged.” He adds for its own sake: “In as much as I had only suffered from hunger, I considered myself as a provisional offshoot of the déclassé bourgeoisie. But since in 1931 I finally assured myself of a satisfactory situation, I felt that the hour had come to expand the ranks of the proletariat.” Therefore, if there is a watchword, certainly unformulated, that the avant-garde never failed, it is this: go to the masses rather than start from self. It is also relevant that the man of the avant-garde, after having gone to the masses for a whole life without ever finding them –at least where he waited for them- consecrates his old age to deriding them. The man of the avant-garde could be the sort, advancing in years, to take the advantageous pose of the man of the Ancien Regime and to make of his rancor a profitable business. In this manner he will always live under certainly changing ideological latitudes, but always in the shadow of the masses that he himself invented.

## To be totally clear

Our time is a battle. This begins to be known. At stake is the bypassing of metaphysics, or more exactly the *Verwindung* of this, a bypassing that will in the first place remain close at hand. Empire designates the ensemble of forces that work to conjure this *Verwindung* to indefinitely prolong the suspension of the epoch. The wiliest strategy put in the service of this project, that which must be suspected everywhere there is a question of “post-modernity”, is to push for a so-called aesthetic surpassing of the metaphysical.

## The world that is no longer a world

The innate part of the failure that determines a collective enterprise like the avant-garde is its incapacity to make a world. All the splendors, all the actions, all the discourses of the avant-garde unceasingly fail to give it a body; it all happens in the head of the few, where the unity, the organic content of the ensemble flourish, but only for thinking, that is to say externally. Common ties, weapons, a unique temporality, a shared elaboration of everyday life, all sorts of determined things are necessary so that a world can arrive. Ergo it is justice if all the manifestations of the avant-garde finish up in the museum, because they are already there before being exposed as such. Their experimental pretension designates nothing else: the fact that an ensemble of gestures, practices, and relations—as transgressive as they may be—does not make a world; Weiner Aktionismus knew something. The museum is the most striking form of the world-that-is-no-longer-a-world. All that rests in a museum results from the tearing away of a fragment, of a detail from its organic milieu. He might have suggested it, but he never understood it—what Heidegger was so heavily fooled by in *The Origin of the Work of Art* in placing the work of art at the origin of itself: to be a work of art does not signify “creating a world” but rather to carry on mourning; the work, to the difference of the thing, is but the melancholy refuse of something that once lived. But the museum only collects “works of art” and one sees here in what manner the “work of art” is right away the death of art: a thing right away produced as a work brings with it its lack of the world, and by that its insignificant destiny—it pretends also, through the history of art, to reconstruct for them an abstract dwelling, to make a world fit for them, where they will find themselves in good company among those who have succeeded, like all the nouveaux riches meet one another in their clubs on Friday night. But between the “works of art” there is nothing, nothing but the pedantic discourse of the most frigid of the philosophies of history: the history of art. I say frigid because it is on all points identical to capitalist valorization.

## Try to be present!

One has had the custom, for several years, to give the avant-garde grief for a too-visible complicity with “modernity”; one reproaches it for sharing with this modernity a too shallow idea of history, a new cult that is at bottom a faith in Progress. And it is certain, in effect, that the avant-garde is in its essence teleological—that one could represent the synoptic history of the different artistic movement and that of the radical political groupuscules by the same type of diagram is here more shocking than this or that common Hegelian hobby-horse, the death of Art or the end of History. But it is first of all because it determines by the mode of being perceptible, and by the fashion of living as always-



## The question of how

Since the famous “Poetry must be made by all, not by one” of Lautremont until its interpretation of the “creative” wing of the movement of 77—“the mass avant-garde”—everything attests to the curious propensity of the avant-garde artist to recognize in the O.S. their look-alike, their brother, their veritable addressee. The constancy of this propensity is all the more curious in that it has almost never paid in return. As if this constancy expressed nothing else than a bad conscience, of the “head” for its supposed body, for example. Really, it is that there is effectively a solidarity in existence, of art as separated sphere from the rest of social activity, and the inauguration of work as the common lot of humanity. The modern invention of work as abstract work, without qualifications, as indifferentiation of all the activities under this category affects itself according to a myth: that of the pure act, of the act without a how, that reabsorbs itself entirely in its result, and of which the accomplishment exhausts all signification. Still today, where the term remains employed, “work” designates all that is lived in the imperative degeneration of how. Everywhere the question of how acts, things, or words, is suspended, derealized, displaced, there is work. Now there is also a modern invention of art, simultaneous and symmetrical to that of work, which is an invention of art in so much as special activity, producing oeuvres and not simple commodities. And it is in this sector that will concentrate itself henceforth all attention previously denied to the how, that will be as a collection of all the lost signification of productive acts. The art will be this activity that, as the inverse of work, will never exhaust itself in its own accomplishment. It will be the sphere of the enchanted gesture, where the exceptional personality of the artist will give, under the form of Spectacle, to the rest of humanity the example of forms of life that it is henceforth forbidden to them to undertake. To Art will be thus confided, for the price of its complicity and silence, the monopoly of the how of acts. The inauguration of an autonomous sphere where the how of each act is without end weighed, analyzed, commented upon, has since then not ceased to nourish proscription in the rest of the alienated social rapports of all evocation of the hows of existence. There, in everyday life, productive, normal, there must not be but pure acts, without hows, without any other reality than their raw result. The world in its desolation can only be peopled by objects that never return to themselves, never come to presence other than as the title of products, not configuring anything other than a constellation of the presence of this kingdom that has used them as tools. So that the how of certain acts can become artistic, it necessarily follows that the hows of all the other acts cease to be real, and inversely as well. The figure of the avant-garde artist and that of the O.S. are polar figures of modern alienation, as ghostly as they are interdependent. The offensive return of the question of how finds them facing self as that from which they must equally protect themselves.

Naturally, one who knows to what aporetic metaphysics this logic of surpassing would lead us, and who thus perceives in what deceitful manner aesthetics can serve from now on as refuge for the same metaphysics -the “modern” metaphysics of subjectivity- will guess without trouble exactly where Empire would like to arrive by this maneuver. But what is this menace, this *Verwindung* that Empire concentrates so many apparatuses to conjure? This *Verwindung* is nothing other than the ethical assumption of the metaphysical, and by that as well of the aesthetic, in so much as it is the ultimate form of aesthetics. The avant-garde appears precisely at this point as center of confusion. On one side, the avant-garde is led to produce the illusion of a possible aesthetical surpassing of the metaphysical, but on another side there is always, in the avant-garde, something that exceeds it and is of an ethical order; which, thus, tends to the configuration of a world, to the constitution of an ethos of a shared life. This element is the essential repressed of the avant-garde, in measuring all the distance that, in the first Surrealism for example, separated the Rue Fontaine from the Rue du Chateau . It is in this manner that since the death of Breton, those who have not renounced laying claim to Surrealism tend to define it as a “civilization” (Bounoure) or more soberly as a “style” in the manner of baroque, classicism, or romanticism. The word constellation is perhaps the most just. And in fact, it is incontestable that Surrealism did not stop subsisting, in so much as it was living, on the repression of its propensity to make itself the world, to give itself a positivity.

## Mummies

Since the start of the century, one cannot miss recognizing in France, notably in Paris, a rich terrain of study in the manner of auto-suggestion of the avant-garde. Each generation seems to need to give birth to new conjurers who wait their turn to perform sleight-of-hand tricks so that they can make themselves believe in magic. But naturally, from generation to generation, the candidates for the role of Grand Charlatan only end by tarnishing their reputation, covering themselves each season with new layers of dust and pallor from miming the mimes. It has happened, to me and my friends, to cross paths with these people who distinguish themselves in the literary market as the most laughable pretenders to avant-gardism. In truth, we have no more business with this corpse: it was already for specters, for mummies. In a past era, they had launched a Manifesto for a Literary Revolution; which was only judicious: their brain—all avant-gardes have a brain—published his first novel. The novel was titled *My Head in Freedom*. It was very bad. It commenced by these words: “They want to know where I have put my body”. We say that the problem of the avant-garde is the problem of the head.

## The reasons for the operation and those of its defeat

With the end of the Hundred Years' War there was posed the question of founding a modern theory of the State, a theory of the conciliations of civil rights and royal sovereignty. Lord Fortescue was one of the first thinkers to attempt such a foundation, notably in his *De Laudibus Legum Anglie*. The celebrated 13th chapter of this treatise contests the Augustinian definition of the people—*populus est cetus hominum iurus consensu et utilitatis communion sociatus*—A people is a body made by men that reunites assenting to laws and a community of interests: “Such a people does not merit being called a body because it is acephalous, that is to say without a head. Because the same as a natural body after a decapitation does not remain a body, but what we call a trunk, so in the body-politic a community without a head is in no case a body.” The head, after Fortescue, is the king. The problem of the head is the problem of representation, the problem of the existence of a body that represents society in so much as a body, of a subject that represents society in so much as subject—no need to distinguish here between existential representation as it is performed by the monarch or fascist leader and the formal representation of the “democratically” elected president. The avant-garde hence does not solely come to accuse the artistic crisis of representation—in refusing that “the image be the semblance of another thing that it represents in its absence” (Torquemada), but that it be itself a thing—the avant-garde comes also to precipitate the crisis of the instituted political representation, that it puts on trial in the name of instituting avant-gardist representation of the masses. So doing, the avant-garde effectively surpasses politics or classical aesthetics, but it surpasses them on their own terrain. The exclusive rapport of negation in which it places itself vis-a-vis representation is the same that it retains inside itself. All the currents in advertising their direct democracy, notably councilist avant-gardism, take from it their stumbling block; opposing themselves to representation, and by this opposition place representation in their heart, no longer as principal but this time as problem. Imperative mandates, delegates revocable at any instant, autonomous assemblies, etc., there is a whole councilist formalism that results from the fact that it is still the classical question of better government that they wish to answer, and by that answer to the problem of the head. It may be that these currents will always arrive at overcoming their congenital anemia by favor of exceptional historic circumstances; it will be thus for representing the departure of representation. After all, politics also has a right to its own *Las Meninas*. In all things, it is in the operation that it completes whereby one recognizes the avant-garde: putting its body far away, facing itself, then attempting vainly to rejoin it. While the avant-gardes go to the masses or deign to mix themselves in the affairs of their times,

## “The obscure privacy in the hollow of the shoe”

(Heidegger, *Holzwege*)

On September 1, 1957, that is to say a little before the foundation of the Situationist International, Guy Debord sent Asger Jorn, his favorite alter ego of those days, a letter where he affirms the necessity of forging around this grouping a “new legend”. The “avant-garde” never designates a determined positivity, but always the fact of a pretend positivity: first, to maintain itself durably in negativity, and second to award itself its own character of negativity, of “radicality”, its own revolutionary essence. In this way the avant-garde has never had a substantial enemy, despite that it makes a great show of its diverse enmity in regard to this or that; the avant-garde only proclaims itself the enemy of this or that. Such is the projection that it operates behind itself to earn the place that it intends for itself in the system of representation. Naturally, for this the avant-garde commences to spectralize itself, that is to say represent itself in all its aspects, therefore discouraging the enemy from doing so. Its mode of being positive is hence always a pure paranoiac negativity, at the mercy of any trivial appreciation on its account, upon the curiosity of the first imbecile to arrive; a Bourseiller, for example. It is why the avant-gardes so often have the sentiment of a failed encounter, of a rickety assemblage, ill-at-ease, of monads waiting to discover, through this or that shock, their lack of affinity, their intimate dereliction. And this is why in all avant-gardes the sole moment of truth is that of their dissolution. There is always at the base of avant-gardist relations this substratum of contempt, this unshakeable hostility that characterizes the terrible community. The suicide of Crevel, the resignation letter of Vaneigem, the circular for the auto-dissolution of Socialisme ou Barbarie, the end of the Red Brigades, always the same knot of icy hatred. In the injunction, in the scarlet letters of “one must...”, in the manifesto, identically resounds the hope of a pure negation that could give birth to a determination, that a discourse could miraculously make a world. But the actions of the avant-garde are not very good. None can ever hold themselves towards “practice”, “life”, or the “community” for the simple reason that each one is always already present, and it is merely a question of taking responsibility for what practice, what life, what community there is; and to make oneself the bearer of the proper techniques to modify these. But what is there is precisely unassumable in the avant gardist regime of subjectivation.

avant-garde is largely negative, it is the retreat in advance, the forced march of classical virility, in peril, towards a final blindness, towards an ignorance of self more sophisticated still than that which had for so long distinguished the occidental male. The need of mediating his rapport with self by a representation—that of his place in the History of politics or art, in the “revolutionary movement” or more commonly in the avant-gardist group itself—corresponds solely to the incapacity of the man of the avant-garde to LIVE IN DETERMINITY, to his real acosmism. In his empty affirmation of self, the profession of a personal originality advantageously substitutes itself for the assumption of his derisory singularity. By singularity, I understand here a presence that does not concern itself only with space and time, but of a signifying constellation and of the happenings in its heart. And this is well because this singularity finds nowhere access to its proper determinity, to its body, because as the avant-garde pretends to the most exact, to the most magisterial representation of life, that is to say to strike this singularity, absurdly, of its name—one is therefore right to question oneself, outside of the managerial hypothesis of a collective exercise in auto-persuasion, on the meaning of the Situationist conclusion that “our ideas are in everyone’s heads”: in what proportion can an idea in everyone’s head belong to anyone? But happily for us, number 7 of the Situationist International has the last word on this enigma: “We are the representatives of the overpowering idea of the great majority.” As we know, all of this admirably accommodates a Hegelianism that is merely the puffed-up expression of an inaptitude for assuming its own singularity of its normal character—one opportunely remembers above all on this subject the start of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, of which the inaugural gesture, a veritable trick of a one-armed juggler, is to disqualify determinity: “The universal is thus in fact the true of sensible certitude...since I say me, this singular me here, I say in general all the me’s” That the implosion and dissolution of the SI coincided exactly with the historic possibility to lose itself in its time, to participate in a determining fashion, is the foreseeable lot of those who hurried themselves to write on the subject of May 1968: “The Situationists...had for many years very exactly foreseen the current explosion and its results...Radical theory has been confirmed.” (*Situationists and Enrages in the Occupations Movement*). We see it there: the avant-gardist utopia has never been anything else than this final annulling of life in discourse, of the appropriation of an event by its representation. If thus one must characterize the avant-gardist regime of subjectivation, one could say it is that of the petrifying proclamation, that of an agitated impotence.

it is always in taking care, at first, to distinguish themselves. It thus sufficed that the Situationists began to have a semblance of what they called “a practice” in Strasbourg, in the student milieu, in 1966, so that they could tend brutally towards workerism, thirty years after the historic collapse of the workers’ movement.

## The avant-garde as subject and representation

It is curious, but in all very natural, that those who have the profession of glossing over the avant-garde, and who have never been short of an anecdote upon the least gesture of those who, in the Occident, have lived for them, I would like to say upon the thin handful of avant-gardists of the century; it is curious, therefore, that these people here, hold themselves back on this point, on the destiny of the avant-garde in Russia in between the two wars, that is to say the only historic realization of the avant-garde. The fable says that after an embarrassed period of toleration in the 20’s, the Bolsheviks being metamorphosed into terrifying Stalinists, the political avant-garde liquidated the free and creative proliferation of the artistic avant-garde, and tyrannically imposed the reactionary, retrograde, and to sum up vulgar doctrine of “socialist realism”. Naturally this is a little short. From the top, then: in 1914 collapsed the liberal hypothesis, in so much as an answer to the problem of the head. As regards the cybernetic hypothesis, it will be necessary to wait until the end of the Second World War for it to impose itself completely. This interregnum, which thus must be understood as 1914 to 1945, will be the golden age for the avant-garde, of the avant-garde as the project of differently answering the problem of the head. This project will be that of the total re-creation of the world by the artist of the avant-garde; what one has called more modestly, later, “the realization of art”. It will be notably carried, and in an ever more mystical manner, by the successive currents of the Russian avant-garde, from the LEF to Opoaiz, from suprematism to productionism in passing by constructivism. It was thus a question of the radical modification of the conditions of existence, to forge a new humanity, “the blank humanity” of which Malevitch spoke. But the avant-garde, being tied by a rapport of negation of traditional culture and thus with the past, could not realize this program. Like Moses, it could carry its dream, but not accomplish it. The role of the “architect of the new life”, of “engineer of the human soul” never came back to it, precisely because it was attached, even be it by rejection, to ancient art. Its project, which only the Party could realize, of which the avant-garde never stopped to advertise was that it would put to work, that it would utilize, that it would make it serve the construction of the new socialist society. Mayakovsky demanded



without malice that “the pen be assimilated as the bayonet and that the writer be able to, like no other soviet enterprise, balance accounts with the Party in raising ‘a hundred volumes of Party cards’”. Nothing shocking here, as the resolution of the Central Committee of the Party on April 23, 1932, that pronounced the dissolution of all the artistic groupings had been saluted by a large part of the Russian avant-gardists. The Party, in its first Five Year Plan, did it not take up with its watchword “transformation of all life” the maximum aesthetic project of the avant-garde? In consenting to repress and thus to recognize the activities and aesthetic deviations of the avant-garde as political, did not the Party endorse the role of the collective artist, for which the entire country would be hereafter nothing more than the material with which it was to impose the shape of its general plan of organization? In fact, that which one interprets most often as the authoritarian liquidation of the avant-garde, and that one must consider more exactly as its suicide, was instead the debut of the realization of its program. “The aestheticization of politics was only, for the leadership of the Party, a reaction to the politicization of aesthetics by the avant-garde” (Boris Groys, *Staline Oeuvre d’Art Totale*). Hence, with this resolution, the Party explicitly became the head, the head which, lacking a body, would come itself to form a new one, ex nihilo. The immanent circularity of Marxian causality, which would have it that the conditions of existence determine human consciousness and that humans themselves make, though unconsciously, their conditions of existence, only left to the Party the point of view, for justifying its demiurgic pretension for a total reconstruction of reality, of a sovereign Creator, of an absolute aesthetic subject. Socialist Realism, in which one feigns to see a return to folkloric figuration, to classicism in artistic matters, and as Groys observes more generally, “Stalinist culture, if we consider it in the perspective of a theoretical reflection of the avant-garde upon itself, appears rather as its radicalization and formal surpassing”. The recourse to classical elements, condemned by the avant-garde, did but mark the sovereignty of this surpassing, of the great leap forward of post-historical times, where all the aesthetic elements of the past can be equally borrowed, put to profit, at the whims of a utility that finds a totally new society, without connections, and by that without hate, towards past history. All the posterior avant-gardism will never renounce this promethean perspective, this project of a total remaking of the world; and by that to envisage itself as a sovereign subject, at the same time contemporaneous with its time and separated from it by a necessary aesthetic distance. The growing comedy of the matter certainly holds for the aspiring avant-gardists who have not understood that since 1945 the cybernetic hypothesis, in decapitating the liberal hypothesis, has suppressed the problem of the head, and therefore it is each day more vain to flatter oneself to respond to it. The ultimate goals of the avant-garde were thus to be all uniformly marked by the same stamp of grotesque unreality, of a failed

remake. This is without doubt what the authors of the sole internal critique of the Situationist International to appear in its time wanted to say, since they wrote in *L’unique et sa Propriete* “All the avant-gardes are dependent on the old world of which they mask the decrepitude under their illusory youthfulness...The Situationist International is the conjunction of the avant-gardes in avant-gardism. It has mixed the amalgam of all the avant-gardes with the synthesis and reprise of all the radical currents of the past.” The brochure, published in Strasbourg in 1967, was subtitled *For a critique of avant-gardism*. It denounced the ideology of coherence, of communication, of internal democracy and of transparency by which a spectral groupuscule maintained itself, surviving artificially with the help of voluntarism.

## The avant-garde as reaction

No doubt Futurism has contributed in a considerable manner to the contemporary definition of the avant-garde. Consequently it is not bad to resume the lecture at a point where the avant-garde can no longer be more than an object of raillery or nostalgia: “We dictate our first wishes to all the men living on the earth...Poetry must be a violent assault against unknown forces, to summon them to bow down before man. We are at the extreme promontory of centuries! What good to regard behind us, in the moment when we must smash the mysterious windows of the Impossible? Time and Space were dead yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have created the eternal omnipresent speed. We want to glorify war—sole hygiene of the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive acts of the anarchists, beautiful Ideas that kill, and disdain of women... We will sing of the great crowds agitated by work, pleasure, or revolt.” It is nowhere here a question of irony, even less of morality, but solely of comprehension. Of understanding, as a type, that the avant-garde was born as a masculine reaction to the inhabitable character of the world such that the Imperial Machine had commenced to develop, as the wish to re-appropriate the non-world of autonomous technique. The avant-garde was born as a reaction to the fact that all determination had become ridiculous in the midst of universal commodity equivalency. To the intolerable human marginality in the Spectacle, the avant-garde responded by proclamation, by the proclamation of the self as center; a proclamation besides which only illusorily abolished its peripheral character. From thence comes the frenzied competition, the syndrome of chronic obsolescing, and the tragi-comic fetishism of tiny differences which agitates the miniscule universe of the avant-gardes, and which also finally offers a spectacle as painful as those terrible fights of the hobos in the Metro at the hour of the last train. That the avant-garde was essentially an affair of men must be comprehended in close relation to that. The movement of the