

## The Problem of the Head\*

*Democracy rests on the neutralization of what are relatively weak and free antagonisms; it excludes any explosive condensation... The only society full of life and strength, the only free society, is the bi or polycephalic society, which gives the fundamental antagonisms of life a explosive outlet which is constant but limited to the richest of its forms. The duality or multiplicity of heads tends to realize in one fell swoop the acephalic character of existence, since the very principle of the head is reduction to unity, the reduction of the world to God.*

*Acephale*, no. 2-3, January 1937.

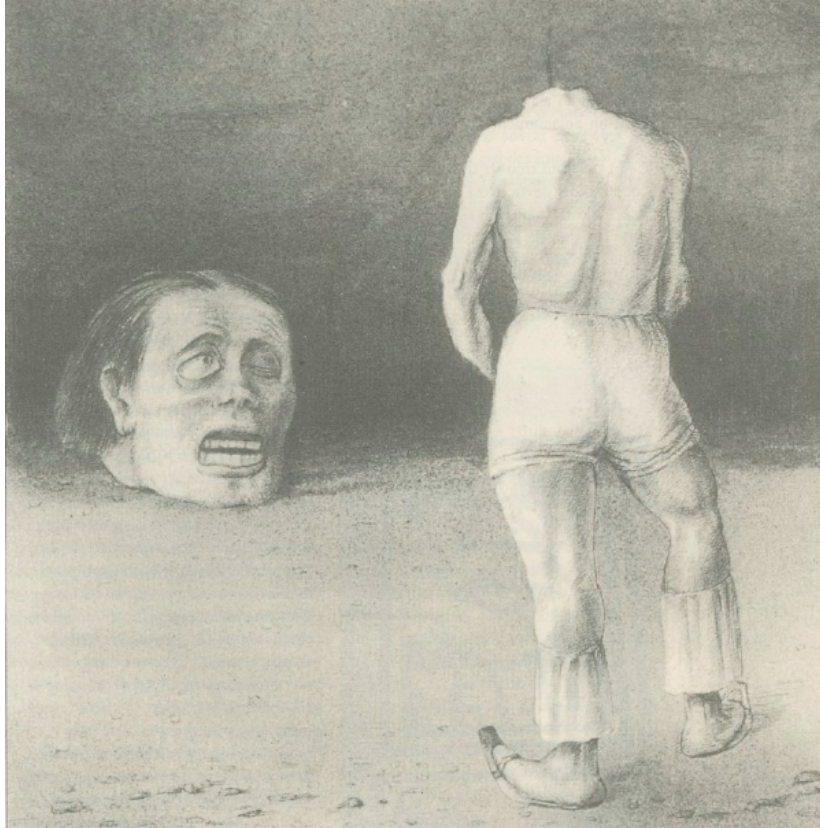
Looking at the whole of the gesture made by the “avant-gardes” in their supposed succession, one can see a kind of imperative emerge, like a kind of commandment. A commandment about how they should be grasped. The “avant-gardes” demand to be handled *in a particular manner*; and I don’t really think they’ve ever been anything else but that demand, and the *submission* to that demand.

I’ve listened to the story of the Red Brigades, of the Situationist International, of futurism, of Bolshevism, of surrealism, and I refuse to grasp them cerebrally – I try to reach out and touch something, and I feel nothing. Or rather, yes; I do feel something – the feeling of an *empty intensity*.

I’ve observed the parade of avant-gardes; they’ve never ceased exhausting themselves in their tension towards themselves. The scandalous acts, the purges, the big days, the stunning break-ups, the debates about orientations, the agitation campaigns, the splits – all just the groundwork for their great self-abortion. Torn between the present state of the world and the final state of the world towards which the avant-gardes wanted so badly to shepherd the human flock, drawn and quartered by the suffocating tension between what they are and what they were *supposed to be*, led astray into their organizational auto-theatricalization, with their verbal contemplation of their own power projected into the heavens of the masses and History, ceaselessly failing to live or experience anything except as a mediation of the always already *historical* representation of each of their little movements, the avant-gardes spin in place in the self-ignorance that consumes them. And at last they collapse, before ever really being born, without ever really managing even to get started. And that’s the answer to the most naïve question about the avant-gardes, which asks what exactly it is that they’re the avant-garde of, what it is they’re heralding: the avant-gardes are above all the heralds of themselves alone - chasing after themselves.

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\* In June 2000, the Bassano del Grappa museum (Venice) organized a kind of hysterical retrospective on the muddled avant-gardism of the second half of the twentieth century, from nuclear poetry to Luther Blissett by way of lettrism and Fluxus. Preceding it, a colloquium was held, enigmatically called “The Facticity of Art,” which was supposed to give their little demo some kind of ideological justification. A young woman showed up down there and anonymously read out the text reproduced here. In the middle of the reading, two old Italian avant-gardists tried to protest against such insolence being thrown in the museum’s face and theirs, and finally left in a big fuss, announcing that they were removing their work from the whole inconceivable exposition.



I am speaking here as a participant in the chaos that is developing at present around *Tiqqun*. I won't say "we," since no one could speak in the name of a collective adventure without coming off as a usurper. The most I can do is to speak anonymously, not *about* but from *within* the experiment I'm involved with. In any case, the avant-garde/vanguard isn't going to be handled here like some external demon that we will remain always protected / "guarded" from.

So there's an avant-gardist way of grasping the "avant-gardes," a *gesture* of the "avant-gardes" which is at no point different from the avant-garde itself. Otherwise it would be impossible to explain how the articles, studies, essays and hagiographies that they're still the objects of could always and invariably make you feel like you're looking at a second-hand work, an auxiliary speculation. In fact it's never really anything but stories about stories, the history of a history; what people are discoursing so much about is itself in fact *already* a discourse.

Anyone who was ever seduced by one of the avant-gardes, anyone who's let themselves be filled with their self-sustaining legend, has felt a certain vertigo upon encountering those who are laymen when it comes to such avant-gardes: the degree of indifference to their place among the mass of people, the impenetrable character of that indifference, and above all the insolent happiness in their ignorance that the non-initiated have the gall to show in spite of all. The vertigo I'm talking about here

isn't what separates two diverging consciousnesses of reality, but two distinct structures of presence – the one rests upon itself alone, and the other is as if suspended in an infinite projection beyond itself. From this we can see that the avant-garde is in fact a system of subjectivation, and is in no way a substantial reality.

It would be useless to clarify that to in order to properly characterize this system of subjectivation one has to remove oneself from it first; and that those who consent to that discrepancy expose themselves to losing a great number of illusions and enchantments, and rarely is it long before they are overtaken by a melancholy beyond repair. Seen from this perspective, in effect, the shimmering, masterful world of the avant-gardes starts to look more like some kind of spectral ideality, a pile of foul-smelling, wrinkled antefoms.

To find any kind of gentleness in this vision one would first have to fall back on a kind of calculated naïveté, well equipped to dissipate so compact a fog of nothingness. And from this *sensitive* grasp on the avant-gardes there arises a sudden feeling of our common terrestrial nature.

### THREE MOTTOS

In all domains, the vanguardist/avant-gardist system of subjectivation is signaled by its recourse to “mottos.” A motto is a pronouncement, with the avant-garde as its *subject*. “Transform the World,” “Change Life,” and “Create Situations” form a trinity, the most popular trinity of all the mottos put out by the avant-garde for over the last century. One might remark with some malice that in that same period of time hardly anyone has changed the world, changed life or created new situations like commodity domination– i.e., the *declared enemy* of the avant-gardes – did by becoming an imperial power, and that the Empire has most often made that permanent revolution take place *without phrases*; but if we stopped there we'd miss our mark. What we want to point, rather, is the unequalled inhibitive power of those mottos, their terrible power to *enthrall and paralyze*. In each of them, the expected dynamic effect revolves around an identical principle. The avant-garde exhorts the mass-man, Bloom, to take as his object something that *always already comprises him* – the situation, life, the world – to place *in front of himself* something that in its very essence surrounds him on all sides, to affirm himself as a subject in the face of what is precisely *neither a subject nor an object*, but rather the indistinguishability of the one and the other. How curious it is indeed that the avant-garde never thundered out the injunction to *be a subject* so violently as it did between the 10s and the 70s of this century, that is, at the historical moment when the material conditions for the *illusion* of the subject tended to disappear most drastically. At the same time, this teaches us plenty about the *reactive* character of the avant-garde. This paradoxical injunction was thus in no way supposed to have the effect of spurring western man on to sack the Empire's diffuse Bastilles, but rather to produce a split in western man – an entrenchment, a schizoid crushing of the “I” into confinement within the self, from which confines the world, life, and situations – i.e., *his own existence* – would then be perceived as something foreign to him, something purely objective. This precise constitution of the subject, reduced to

contemplating himself in the middle of the maelstrom of everything that surrounds him, could be described as *aesthetic*, in the sense that the advent of Bloom also corresponds to a generalized aestheticization of experience.

#### GOING DOWN TO THE MASSES INSTEAD OF STARTING WITH YOURSELF

In June 1935, surrealism arrived at the last tolerable limits of its project of forming a total avant-garde. After eight years spent trying to put itself at the service of the French Communist Party, a slightly too-thick shower of affronts made it aware of its definitive disagreement with Stalinism. A discourse written by Breton and read by Eluard at the “Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture,” was to mark the final significant contact between surrealism and the French CP, between the artistic avant-garde and the political avant-garde. Its conclusion has become famous:

“‘Transform the World,’ said Marx; ‘Change Life,’ said Rimbaud: these two mottos are for us but one.” Breton was there not only expressing a frustrated hope for unity, he was also expressing the *fact* of there being an intimate connection between artistic avant-gardism and political vanguardism, a common *aesthetic* nature. And so in the same way as surrealism strove to reach out to the French Communist Party, the Communists strove to reach out to the proletariat. In *Les Militants*, written in 1949 [included in *The God That Failed*], Arthur Koestler gave a useful account of the kind of schizophrenia and class ventriloquism so noticeable in the surrealist discourse but less often recognized in the effete German Communist Party of the early 1930s: “a special feature of Party life at that period was the cult of the proletariat and abuse of the intelligentsia. It was the obsession, the smarting complex of all Communist intellectuals of middle-class origin. We were in the Movement on sufferance, not by right; this was rubbed into our consciousness night and day... A member of the intelligentsia could never become a real proletariat, but his duty was to become as nearly one as he could. Some tried to achieve this by forsaking neckties, by wearing polo sweaters and black fingernails. This, however, was discouraged: it was imposture and snobbery.” He then adds, for what it’s worth: “As long as I had been nearly starving, I had regarded myself as a temporarily displaced offspring of the bourgeoisie. In 1931, when at last I had achieved a comfortable income, I found that it was time to join the ranks of the proletariat.” And so, if there was really any one motto, certainly unformulated, that the avant-garde has always followed, it’s this: *go down to the masses instead of starting with yourself*. It’s also standard that the man of the avant-garde, after having “gone down to the masses” his whole life without ever really finding them – or at least without ever finding them where *he expected them to be* – spends his old age speaking out against them. Thus the man of the avant-garde, when he reaches a suitable age, can strike the ever-superior pose of the Man of the Old Regime, and make a profitable little business out of his rancor. And so, though the ideological latitudes that he lives at are certainly subject to change, he



always remains in the shadow of the masses he'd invented for himself.

#### TO BE PERFECTLY CLEAR

Our times are a battle. This is beginning to be well-known. What's at stake in that battle is the transcendence of metaphysics, or more precisely the *Verwindung* [twisting off] of it, a transcendence of metaphysics that would above all remain near to it. Empire is the collective name for the whole ensemble of forces working to ward off this *Verwindung*, to indefinitely delaying the epochal suspension. The most devious strategy employed in this project, which must arouse suspicion anytime "post-modernity" is at issue, is to push for a self-styled *aesthetic transcendence of metaphysics*. Naturally, anyone who can see the kind of aporetic metaphysics the logic of transcendence tends to get us into, and who can thus perceive how underhandedly aesthetics can now serve as a refuge for the same metaphysics, the "modern" metaphysics of subjectivity, can easily tell just where that kind of maneuver is intended to lead. But what is this threat, this *Verwindung* that the Empire has focused the effort of so many apparatuses on warding off? This *Verwindung* is indeed none other than the *ethical assumption of metaphysics*, and thus of aesthetics as well, as the ultimate form of the latter. The avant-garde arises precisely at that point, as its center of confusion. On the one hand, the avant-garde aims to produce the illusion of a possible aesthetic transcendence of metaphysics, but on the other there is always something in the avant-garde that goes beyond it, and which is of an ethical nature, and thus tends towards the configuration of a world, the constitution in ethos of a shared life. This element is the avant-garde's essential repressed force, and spans the whole distance that - in the first surrealism for example - separates the *rue Fontaine* from the *rue du Chateau*. And so, those who since Breton's death have not given up proclaiming themselves surrealist tend to define surrealism as a "civilization" (Bounoure) or more soberly as a "style," in the manner of baroque, classicism, or romanticism. The word *constellation* might be more appropriate. And in fact, it is incontestable that while surrealism was alive, it never ceased to live off the repression of its propensity to make itself a world, to give itself a *positivity*.

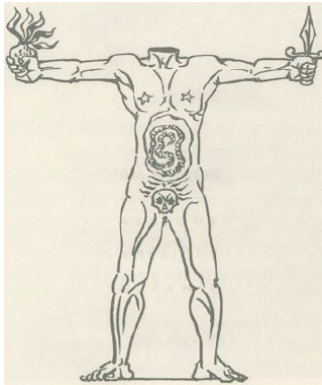
#### MUMMIES

Since the beginning of the century, we can't fail to recognize in France and especially in Paris the presence of a rich terrain for the study of avant-gardist auto-suggestion. Each generation seems to give birth to new fortune-tellers who expect their corny sleight of hand tricks will get everyone to believe in their magic. But, naturally, from one generation to the next, those auditioning for the role of Grand Simulator fade ever more, covered each season by new layers of dust and paleness, as they go on miming the mimes. It has happened that my friends and I have encountered here and there these people who prop themselves up on the literary market as the most laughable pretenders to avant-gardism. And when seeing them it wasn't even really bodies anymore that we had in front of us: they were already mere ghosts --

mummies. At the time, they were preparing to release what they called a *Manifesto for a Literary Revolution*, which was only wise; the brains behind them – the avant-gardes certainly all have their brains behind them – had just published his first novel. This novel was called *My Head at Liberty*. [*Ma tête en liberté*, by François Meyronnis] It was quite bad. It started with these words: “They want to know where I put my body.” We say that the avant-garde’s problem is a *problem of the head*.

#### THE REASONS FOR THE OPERATION AND FOR THE DEFEAT

When the hundred years’ war came to an end, the question was posed of how to found a modern theory of the State, a theory of conciliation between civil rights and royal sovereignty. Lord Fortescue was one of the first thinkers to try to lay such a foundation, specifically in his *De Laudibus Legum Anglie*. The famous chapter XIII of his treatise contests the Augustinian definition of “the people”: *populus est cetus hominum iuris consensus et utilitatis communione sociatus* – a people is a body made up of men coming together in consent to the laws, in a community of interests.



“Such a ‘people’ is not worthy of being called a body because it is acephalic, that is, headless. Because, as in natural bodies what is left after decapitation is no longer a body, but what we call a trunk, so it is that in political bodies a headless community is in no way a body.” The head, according to 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 *as a body*, of a subject that represents society *as subject* – and there’s no point in distinguishing here between existential representations such

as they are at play in a monarch or a fascist leader, and the formal representation of a “democratically” elected president. The avant-garde thus not only ends up showing the artistic crisis of representation – by refusing to accept that “an image can be the semblance of another thing that it represents in its absence” (Torquemada) but indeed that it is *a thing* in itself – it also precipitates the crisis of institutional political representation, which it puts on trial in the name of institutionalizing, avant-gardist representation of the masses. In so doing, the avant-garde effectively transcends classical politics or aesthetics, but it transcends them *on their own turf*. The exclusive relationship of negation that it puts itself in relative to representation is precisely what keeps it suckling at the teat of representation. All the currents clamoring for direct democracy, specifically councilist vanguardism, have a stumbling block there: they oppose representation, but by their very opposition to it they put representation at their very heart, no longer as the principle but rather *as the problem*. Imperative mandates, delegates revocable at any time, autonomous assemblies, etc. – there’s a whole *formalism* of councilism that results from the fact that it’s still intended to reply to the *classical* question of better government; and thus to the problem of the head. In



exceptionally favorable historical circumstances, it could always happen that these currents might manage to surmount their congenital anemia, but it would even then just be to *represent an escape from representation*. After all, politics has a right to have its *Meninas* too. In all that it does it is in the operation that it carries out that the avant-garde can be recognized: placing its body far away from it, facing it, and then trying vainly to rejoin it. When the avant-gardes go down to the masses, or deign to stoop to mingling in the affairs of their times, it's always that they've carefully made sure to distinguish themselves from them first. And so all it took was for the situationists to start having a semblance of what they called "practice" – in Strasbourg in 1966 – for them to brutally lapse into workerism, thirty years after the historical collapse of the workers' movement.

#### THE AVANT-GARDE AS SUBJECT AND REPRESENTATION

It is curious, but after all quite natural, that those who make a profession out of rambling on about the avant-garde, and who are never lacking some little anecdote or other about the most miniscule gesture made by those who the West *lived vicariously through* – that is, about the century's meager handful of avant-gardists – it is curious, indeed, that they have to such an extent held their tongues about the fate of the avant-garde in Russia in the period between the two world wars, that is, the one and only historical realization of the avant-garde. The fable goes that after a period of embarrassed tolerance, in the 1920s the Bolsheviks had metamorphosized into horrifying Stalinists, and the political vanguard had liquidated the libertarian, creative proliferation of the artistic vanguard, tyrannically imposing the reactionary, backwards, and *vulgar* doctrine of "socialist realism." Naturally that's not the whole story. So let's take up the thread again: in 1914 the liberal hypothesis, as an *answer* to the problem of the head, collapsed, and it wasn't until the end of World War 2 that the cybernetic hypothesis could come to fully impose itself. This interregnum, which lasted from 1914 to 1945, was the golden age of the avant-garde, the avant-garde as the project of answering the problem of the head *differently*. This project was the total re-creation of the world by the avant-garde artist, which was, more modestly, then called the "realization of art." It was carried out specifically, and in ever more mystical a manner, by the successive currents of the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s, from the LEF to the Opoiaz, from supremacism to productionism by way of constructivism. It was then a question of forging a new humanity, the "white on white" humanity of Malevich, by the radical modification of the conditions of existence. But the avant-garde, bound as it is to culture, and thus to the past, by a relationship of negation, could not realize that program. Like Moses, it could only carry its dream forward, not make it come true. The role of the "architect of the new life" the "engineer of the human soul," would never return to him, precisely because of what attached him to the ancient art, even in his rejection of it. Only the Party could realize the avant-garde's project, and the avant-garde was endlessly asking the Party to *put it to work*, to use it, to put it in the service of the construction of the new socialist society. Mayakovsky demanded, without malice, that "the pen be

equated with the bayonet, that the writer might, as in any other Soviet undertaking, report to the party by offering up 'the hundred tomes of his communist-committed books.'" No surprise, then, that the resolution of the Party's Central Committee on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1932, which ordered the dissolution of all artistic organizations, was saluted by a large portion of the Russian avant-gardists. After all, the Party, in this first five-year plan, was taking up the greatest aesthetic project of the avant-garde with its motto "transformation of the whole of life." By consenting to the repression and thus the recognition of the aesthetic activities and diversions of the avant-garde *as political*, the Party was taking on the role of a collective artist, where the whole country would from then on be the raw material it was to use to impose the form of its general organizational plan. In fact, what is most often interpreted as the authoritarian liquidation of the avant-garde – and which should more properly be considered its suicide – was really the beginning of the realization of its program. "The aestheticization of politics was, for the Party administration, but a reaction to the politicization of aesthetics by the avant-garde." (Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*) And so, with this resolution, the Party became, explicitly, the *head*, the head that for lack of a body was going to create a new one for itself, *ex nihilo*. The immanent circularity of Marxian causalism, which claimed that conditions of existence determine the consciousness of men, and that men make their conditions of existence, however unconsciously, left the Party only one possible perspective in order to justify its demiurgical pretense to the total reconstruction of reality: that of the sovereign Creator, the absolute aesthetic subject. Socialist realism, in which some pretend to see a return to folklorical figuration and classicism in artistic matters, and more generally "Stalinist culture," as Groys observes, "if considered from the perspective of a theoretical reflection by the avant-garde on itself, appeared rather as its radicalization and its formal transcendence." Recourse to classical elements, so execrated by the avant-garde, only indicated the sovereignty of this transcendence, this great leap into post-historical time, in which all the aesthetic elements of the past could equally be borrowed and taken advantage of, however they could be used, by a totally unprecedented, unattached society, a society which was thus free of any hate towards past history. None of the avant-gardism that was to come after that ever gave up this promethean perspective, this project of a total overhaul of the world, and thus it never gave up envisaging itself as a sovereign subject, simultaneously contemporary with its times and separate from them by a necessary aesthetic distance. The funny thing about the whole business was that the avant-gardist hopefuls didn't notice that after 1945 the cybernetic hypothesis, by decapitating the liberal hypothesis, had *suppressed* the problem of the head – and that it was getting more and more vain each day to vainly pretend to be able to answer it. The avant-gardes' final flights of fancy were unanimously stricken by the same hallmark of grotesque untimeliness, like failed remakes, reruns of a bad show. Doubtless this is what the authors of the only internal critique of the SI that came out while it was around, *The Ego and its Own* [*L'Unique et sa Propriété* by Frey, Garnault and Holl], intended to say when they wrote: "All the avant-gardes



are dependent on the old world, the decrepitude of which they mask beneath their illusory youth... The Situationist International is the conjunction of the avant-gardes into avant-gardism. It has mingled the amalgamation of all the avant-gardes with the synthesis and recovery of all the radical currents of the past.” The pamphlet, published in Strasbourg in 1967, was subtitled *For a Critique of Avant-Gardism*. It denounced the ideology of coherence, communication, internal democracy and transparency, by which a spectralized splinter group could maintain an artificial survival by dint of voluntarism.



#### THE AVANT-GARDE AS REACTION

Futurism doubtless contributed in a considerable way to the contemporary definition of the avant-garde. So it wouldn't hurt, now that the avant-garde can't be much more than an object of mockery or nostalgia, to take another look at this reading: "We hereby declare our foremost desire to all truly living people on this earth: ... Poetry must be a violent assault against unknown forces, to summon them to bend before Man. We stand on the most extreme promontory of the centuries! ... what good would it do to look back, at this moment when we must instead smash the mysterious windows of the Impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the Absolute, because we have

created an eternal, omnipresent speed. We wish to glorify War, the world's only hygiene - militarism, patriotism, the destructive gestures of the anarchists, beautiful Ideas that kill, scorn for women... We sing praises of massive crowds, agitated by labor, pleasure, or revolt." In quoting this we are not trying to be ironic, much less to moralize; just to understand. To understand, to wit, that the avant-garde is born as a *masculine reaction* to the uninhabitable nature of the world as the Imperial Machine had begun to set it up, as a will to reappropriate the non-world of autonomous technology. The avant-garde was born as a reaction to the fact that all determinations have become pathetic within this state of universal commodity fungibility. The avant-garde's response to humanity's intolerable marginality within the Spectacle was to make proclamations; its proclamation of the self *as the center*; a proclamation that after all only did away with its peripheral character in an illusory manner. Thus the frenzied competition - syndrome of chronic transcendence - and the tragic fetishism of little differences, agitating the miniscule universe of the avant-gardes, finally reveal a rather painful spectacle not unlike the terrible arguments between bums one sees late at night when the last metro train is due.

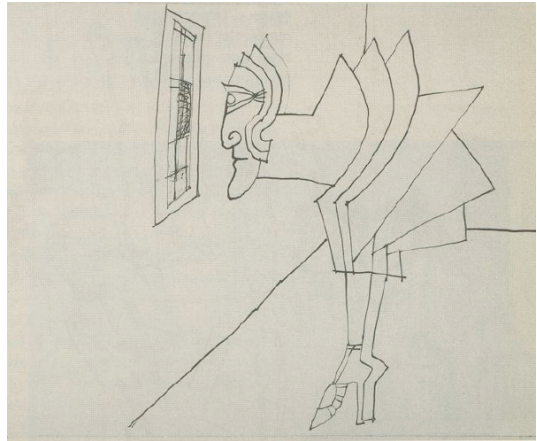
That the avant-garde has essentially been a matter among males must be understood strictly in relation to this. Indeed, the movement of the avant-garde is largely negative; it is the flight forward, the forced march of endangered classical virility towards its final blindness, towards a self-ignorance even more sophisticated than that which for so long had distinguished western males. The need to mediate his relationship with himself through a representation – that of his place in Political History or in Art, in the “revolutionary movement” or more commonly, in the avant-gardist groups themselves – only corresponds to the man of the avant-garde’s incapacity to INHABIT DETERMINITY, to his real acosmism. His empty self-affirmation and his profession of personal originality advantageously replace his assumption of *a pathetic singularity*. And by singularity I mean a presence not merely related to space and time, but to a meaningful kind of constellation, to events within it. And that is because it can find nowhere any way to access its own determinity, *its own body*, that the avant-garde claims to have the most exact, the most masterful representation of life, that is, it claims, absurdly, to stamp its name on it; thus we are in our right to ask ourselves, outside of the managerial hypothesis of a collective exercise in self-persuasion, what the situationist affirmation “our ideas are in everyone’s heads” really means: to what extent can an idea that is in everyone’s heads really belong to any one person? But luckily for us, *Situationist International* number 7 delivers the last word on this enigma: “We are the representatives of the key ideas of the great majority.” And as we know, all that fits in admirably with a hegelianism which indeed is but a puffed up expression of an inability to assume one’s own singularity within anyoneness – opportunely enough, on this subject we recall that the inaugural gesture made right at the beginning of *Phenomenology of the Mind* like a real one-armed buffoon’s pirouette, disqualifies determinity entirely: “The universal is thus in fact the truth of sensible certainty... when I say ‘me’ that singular ‘me,’ I am in general invoking all the ‘me’s there are.” That the SI’s implosion and dissolution coincide precisely with the historical possibility of *getting lost* in one’s times, participating in them in a determinant manner, shows the predictable fate of those that rushed to write on the subject of May 1968: “The situationists... had for years predicted the present explosion and in what followed... their radical theory was confirmed.” (*Situationists and Enragés in the Occupations Movement*). Clearly: the avant-gardist utopia was only ever the utopia of a final annulment of life by discourse, an appropriation of events by their representation. If the avant-gardist system of subjectivation had to be described, one might say that it is one of proclamations that petrify everyone in an *agitated powerlessness*.

#### THE DARK OPENING OF THE WELL-WORN INSIDES OF THE SHOE

(Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege*)

On September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1957, that is, slightly before the foundation of the Situationist International, Guy Debord sent a letter to Asger Jorn, his favorite *alter ego* at the time, where he affirmed the need to forge a “new legend” around the latter. The

“Avant-Garde” never refers to a particular positivity, but always the *fact* that a positivity claims: 1 –to maintain a position within negativity; 2 – to appropriate for itself its own negative character of “radicalness,” its revolutionary essence. The avant-garde thus never really has a substantial enemy of any kind, though it makes a great display of various intimations relative to this or that “enemy”; the avant-garde merely *proclaims* itself to be the enemy of this or that. Such is the projection that it carries out, far beyond itself, in order to make a place for itself, whatever place it wants, within the system of representation. Naturally in order for this to happen the avant-garde has to start by making itself somehow spectral, that is, by representing itself in all its aspects, and thus discouraging the enemy from doing so. Its mode of positivity is thus always a pure paranoid negativity, at the mercy even of the most *trivial* sort of appreciation on its behalf, the curiosity of the first imbecile that shows up, someone like Bourseiller for instance. That’s why the avant-gardes so often make one feel like they’ve missed something, a shaky, tactless assemblage of monads waiting to discover their slight bit of affinity, their intimate dereliction. And that’s why the only real moment of truth in every avant-garde is the moment of their dissolution. There is always this underlying layer of mistrust at the bottom of avant-gardist relations, that same endless hostility which characterizes all terrible communities. Crevel’s suicide, Vaneigem’s resignation letter, *Socialism or Barbarity’s* self-dissolution circular, the end of the Red Brigades – it’s always the same core of frozen misery. In the injunction, in the scarlet “we must...” in the manifesto, there always identically resonates the hope that a pure negation might give birth to a resolute determination, that a discourse might miraculously *become a world*. But the gestures of the avant-garde don’t do the trick. They can never reach out into “practice,” “life,” or “community,” for the simple reason that each of them are already there, and it’s just a question of assuming whichever practice, life or community *is present*, and bringing in the *techniques* needed to modify them. But that’s precisely *what is unassumable* in the avant-gardist system of subjectivation.



#### THE QUESTION OF HOW IT IS TO BE DONE

From Lautreamont’s famous declaration “Poetry must be made by all, not by one,” to the interpretation that its “creative” wing gave to the movement of 77 – the “mass avant-garde” – everything points to the curious propensity of avant-garde artists to see the O.S. [the “Secret Organization”] as their brothers, their peers, their true addressees. The consistency of this propensity is all the more curious, since it almost never got paid back its due. It’s as if this consistency expressed a mere bad conscience, that of a “head” towards its supposed body for instance. There is

effectively a kind of solidarity between the existence of art as a separate sphere of the rest of social activity and the installment of Work as the common fate of humanity. The modern invention of Work as abstract labor *without phrases*, as the indifferent commingling of all activities into that category, takes place in keeping with a particular myth: the myth of pure acts, acts *without commentary*, which are re-absorbed entirely into their results, where the accomplishment exhausts all the meaning. Today still, wherever the term is still used, “work” means everything that is lived in the imperative denial of *how it is done*. Everywhere the question of *how* gestures, things, and words *will be made* is suspended, unrealized, *displaced*, Work shows itself. Now, there was also a modern invention of art, which was simultaneous with and symmetrical to the invention of work. It was an invention of art as a specialized activity, one that produced *oeuvres*, not simply commodities. And it was there, in that sector that all the attention elsewhere denied to *the question of how it would be done* was concentrated, where all the lost meaning of productive gestures was as if *gathered together*. Art would be the activity which, as diametrically opposed to work, never exhausts itself in its own accomplishment. This would be the sphere of *the enchanted gesture*, where the exceptional personality of the artist would make the rest of everyone else, in the form of spectacle, into an *example* of the forms of life that they were now forbidden to assume. Art would thus be given *the monopoly on the manner in which acts were to be carried out*, in exchange for its silence and complicity. The setting up of an autonomous sphere where the *how* of each gesture is endlessly weighed, analyzed, commented on (“how-ed”), has never since then ceased to nourish the prohibition of all evocation of the *how* of existence in all the other alienated social relations. There, in everyday, productive, “normal” life, there must be nothing but pure acts, without any *how*, without any other reality beside its raw results. The world in its desolation can only be peopled by objects referring only to themselves, and only coming into presence as *products*, configuring no other constellation of presence aside from the one reigning that manufactured them. In order that the *how* of certain acts could become artistic, it was thus necessary the *how* of all other acts cease to be real, and vice-versa. The figure of the avant-garde artist and that of the O.S. are polar figures, as ghostly as they are sympathetic, of modern alienation. The offensive return of the question of *how* finds them facing one another as that which it must protect itself from *equally*.

#### THE WORLD WHICH IS NO LONGER A WORLD

The innate defeat that determines a collective enterprise like the avant-garde is its incapacity to *become a world*. All the scandals, all the actions, all the discourse of the avant-garde ceaselessly fail to give any body to it; everything happens in the heads of a few, where the unity, the organic nature, of the whole, survives, but only *for intellection*, that is, externally. *Common place*, weapons, a temporality of its own, a shared elaboration of everyday life, all sorts of *particular, determined* things are necessary for such a world to truly come into existence. It is thus only just that all

the manifestations of the avant-gardes end up in the museums, since they were there already before being exhibited in them. Their *experimental* pretense refers to that and that alone: the fact that an ensemble of gestures, practices, relations – transgressive as they may be – *never make a world*; Vienna Actionism was somewhat aware of this. The museum is the most striking form of the world-that-is-no-longer-a-world. Everything that's in a museum is the result of the tearing out of a fragment, a detail, from an organic milieu. It should suggest it, but it can't anymore all by itself – Heidegger was wrong about this in *The Origin of Oeuvres of Art* by placing the work of art at its own origin: oeuvre-being does not mean “setting up a world” but rather mourning its death: an oeuvre, as opposed to the *thing* itself, is but the melancholic remains of something that once was lived. But the museum does not merely gather together “artworks” – and here we can see how “artworks” are first of all deaths of art: a *thing* first produced as a work carries in itself its lack of a world, and thus its destined insignificance – it thus claims, through the history of art, to reconstitute an abstract hacienda – to make a world all to themselves for them, where they would find themselves once again in good company, like the nouveaux riches meeting in their clubs on Friday evening among other “successful” people. But among these “art works” there is nothing, nothing but the most frigid pedantic discourse of philosophies of history: the history of art. I say frigid, because at all points it is identical to capitalist valorization.

#### TRY TO BE PRESENT!

For some years now it has been the custom to fault the avant-garde of being too visibly complicit with “modernity”; PEOPLE reproach it for sharing too summary an idea of historicity with the latter, a worship of newness that in the end is but faith in Progress. And it is certain indeed that the avant-garde is teleocratic in its very essence – that people have been able to present the synoptic history of the different artistic movements and the history of radical political groupings with the same kinds of graphs is here far more striking than this or that common Hegelian hobby horse, whether it's the death of art or the end of History. But above all it is by its way of making itself felt, by its manner of experiencing itself as always already posthumous, that the historicism of the avant-gardes condemns itself. We are thus periodically presented with a curious phenomenon: in its own time, an avant-garde occupies more than just a marginal position if it can occupy it with the pretense of forming the center of its history; its time passes, and the whole presentness of the latter distances itself; and that's when the avant-garde becomes visible, emerging from its era as the purest bedrock thereof. Then a kind of resurrection of the avant-garde takes place – Debord and the situationists offer almost all-too-exemplary an illustration of this, and quite a predictable one at that – which passes it off as the heart of its era, the key to the times, sometimes even as the times themselves. At the foundations of the avant-gardist subjectivation system is this confusion between history and the philosophy of history, a confusion that allows it to consider itself as history itself. And in fact everything happens as if the avant-garde, by subtracting itself from its times, had taken them over, and ended up posthumously being *remunerated* for that in terms of historical consideration.





#### THE MUSEUMIFICATION OF THE WORLD

In 1931, in *The Worker*, Jünger noted: "We are living in a world that on the one hand resembles a construction site and on the other a museum." Around ten years later, Heidegger brought out his hypothesis of the fulfillment of metaphysics, in his course on Nietzsche: "The end of metaphysics, which here we are trying to think through, is the beginning of its 'resurrection,' in derivative terms: these forms leave to the proper, exhausted history of fundamental metaphysical positions the purely economic role of providing raw materials with which – once they are correspondingly transformed – the world of "knowledge" is built anew... It appears then that we are dealing with the reconciliation of various fundamental positions here, their elements, and the concepts behind their doctrines." We are living in times of the general recapitulation of all of past history. The imperial project to do away with history thus takes the form of a *historicization* of all past events, whereby it can neutralize them. The museum institution only realizes this project of the general museumization of the world in a sectorial manner. All the avant-gardes' attempts unfold in this theater, which is simultaneously real and imaginary. But this recapitulation is also the dissipation of the historicist illusion that the avant-garde lived off of, with its pretense to newness, to being the first, to originality without response. In such a movement, where the element of time is absorbed into the element of meaning, where all past history is gathered together in a topology of positions among which we must learn to orient ourselves, since we can't penetrate

them all, we are watching the progressive accretion of *constellations*. Men like Aby Warburg, with his boards of images, or Georges Duthuit, in his *Unimaginable Museum*, began to sketch out those kinds of constellations, to liberate the *ethical content* within each aesthetic. Those who, even in a cavalier fashion, approach the punk style of certain post-war para-existentialist circles, or those of the Gnostic ferment of the first centuries of our era, were doing the same thing too. Beyond the temporal spacing that distances their points of eruption from one another, each of these constellations comprise gestures, ritornellos, pronouncements, usages, arts of doing, particular forms-of-life; in sum: a *Stimmung* of its own. It resembles, by attraction, all the details of a world that demands to be animated, to be *inhabited*. In the context that the avant-gardes affirmed themselves in, and a fortiori today as well, the question is no longer one of making something new, but of *making a world*. Each thing, each being that comes into presence brings with it a given economy of presence, *configures a world*. Starting from there, it is only a question of inhabiting the determinity of the constellation in which our presence always-already deploys itself, following our derisory, contingent, finite tastes. All revolts that start from the self, from the *here and now* that they rest in, the inclinations that pass through them, move in this direction. The movement of 77 in Italy remains, on this head, a promising defeat.

#### REALIZATION OF THE AVANT-GARDE

One of the weakest books concerning the avant-gardes of the second half of the twentieth century, published in 1980, announced the *Self-dissolution of the avant-gardes*. The author, René Lourau, the founder of that old joke “institutional analysis,” omitted what is really the essential thing: to say what the avant-gardes *dissolved into*. The most recent progress made by western neurosis has since then given the answer: *the avant-garde has dissolved into the totality of social relations*. The now banal characterization of our times as “post-modern” evokes no more than that, even if it is just another way of purging modernity of all its razzle-dazzle so as to save its fundamental gesture: the gesture of transcendence – it is not fortuitous, in this regard, that the very term “post-modernism” made its first appearance in 1934 *in the Spanish avant-gardist circles*. Also, the best definition of the Spectacle given by Debord – “a social relationship between people mediated by images” – and which today defines the dominant social relations as a whole, only *acknowledges* the generalization of the avant-gardist mode of being. Bloom is thus the man whose every relationship, both his relationship with himself and with others, is entirely mediated by autonomous representations. He is the *hipster* organizing his own permanent self-promotion, the *cynic* who at every moment threatens to let himself be absorbed into one of his discursive excrescences, or to disappear into an abyss of bathmological irony. The avant-gardes’ paranoia has also become diffused, with its diffuse way of setting itself up in exception to itself at every moment of its life; with its general disposition towards building its little remote controlled legend. Enzensberger was entirely correct to see the fulfilled realization of the avant-garde in the *Bild-Zeitung*, both from the point of view of formal transgression and from



that of collective elaboration. A certain dose of situationism seems required, even, by all decently paid employment, at present. The content of the particular tone of this intervention, which is deliberately *boring*, is to be found there: it's just a matter of separating out the *ethical meaning* of the avant-garde.

## EPILOGUE

*As an epilogue to all this, it does not appear superfluous to bring up a point of reversal in the avant-garde. Acephale, the symbol of the leaderless crowd, is one of these extreme points. Acephale tried to liberate itself from the problem of the head. Acephale wanted to efface all the avant-garde's agitation, all its gesticulating, whether political or artistic, by renouncing a form of action "which is but the putting off of existence until later." Acephale wanted to be that secret existential society, that elective community which would gather "individuals that had truly dedicated themselves to taking on the struggle, on a necessarily infinitesimal scale, but taking such an effective route that their attempt could almost become epidemic, [in order to] take on the same scale as society, on its own turf, and attack it with its own weapons, that is, by setting themselves up as a community as well - and even further by ceasing to create values - they defended the prerogative of the rebels and insurgents; by seeing them, inversely, as the primary values of the society that they wanted to see implemented, the most social values of all, no matter how slightly implacable they were... Presiding over their constitution as a group was their desire to combat society as society, the plan to confront it as the most solid and densest structure out there, attempting to establish itself like a cancer within a more labile, more cowardly structure, however incomparably more voluminous it may be." (Caillouis, "The winter wind"). The papers of Henri Dussat, a member of Acephale, include a note dated March 25<sup>th</sup>, 1938: "to tend towards ethics is the resolution of what the Christians acknowledge - or should acknowledge but fail to - as being the supreme value." Explicitly seeking to set itself up as a world, Acephale not only broke with the avant-garde, but also recovered from what was not at all avant-garde about the avant-garde, that is, it recovered precisely from the desires that were aborted in it: "since the end of the dada period, the project of a secret society responsible for giving a kind of effective reality to the aspirations that surrealism partly defined, always remained an object of concern, at the very least one kept on the back burner," recalled Bataille at the March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1938 College of Sociology conference. But Acephale was no longer able to exist any more than to contaminate. Though they had made rites, habits, sacred texts, and ceremonies of their own, their declamatory politics, which had disappeared externally, remained internally: to such extent that the motto of community, secret society, finally absorbed their reality entirely. Common places could not be established, nor could the classical figure of a virility far too ignorant of the sweetness of bare life be escaped. Acephale was almost exclusively a matter engaged in by males, and more perceptibly so than surrealism, for example. Acephale was, to top it all off, incapable of doing without a head, and had to be no more than just the community of Bataille alone, from top to bottom: since he alone wrote the genealogy, the "interior journal" which gave birth to Acephale, since he alone defined the rites of the Order, he ended up all alone there, imploring his pale companions to sacrifice him at the foot of*

*his sacred tree. "It was very beautiful. But we all felt like we were participating in something that was happening in Bataille's world, in Bataille's head." (Klossowski).*

*It does not appear appropriate to draw any conclusions, much less a program, from what has just been said.*

*As far as I know, some kind of connection should be able to be made here with the Invisible Committee, if only in the sense of it as a generalization of insinuation.*

*It should be mentioned in passing: there is no problem of the head; there's just a paralysis of the body – of gestures.*

