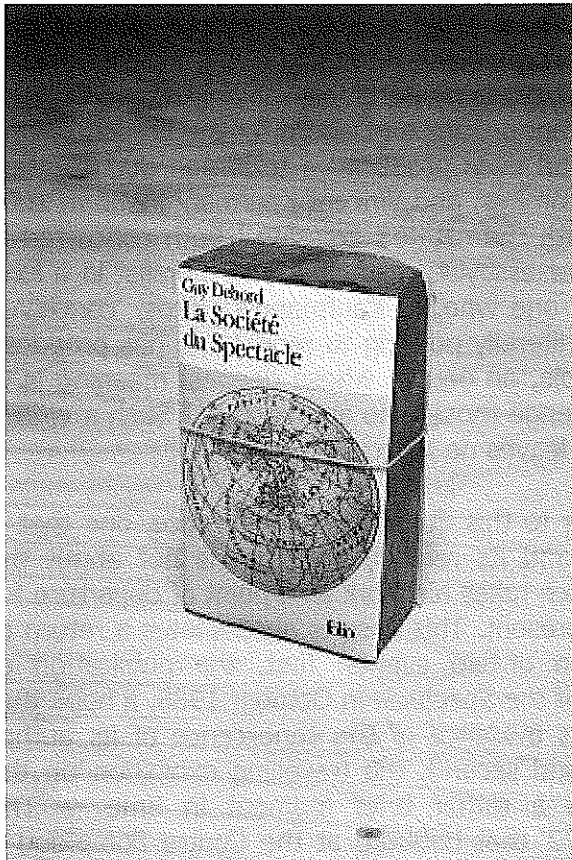


Unrepresentable Enemies

Tom McDonough



Claire Fontaine, *La Société du Spectacle* brickbat, 2006, brick, Epson Durabrite print on archive paper, 100 × 50 × 33mm. Courtesy the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine Art, New York

On 1 November 1996, a short missive appeared in the letters section of the French newspaper of record, *Le Monde*. Signed by Alice Becker-Ho, Guy Debord's widow, and Patrick Mosconi, who had been charged with establishing his literary estate, it took up the question of the legacy of the founder of the Situationist International and read, in part:

*Debord's legacy poses no problem. Only Debord himself poses a problem. [...] There's nothing to build on, or rehabilitate, or embellish, or falsify. There is, finally, only Debord, his art and his time as he has revealed them, and that is obviously much more than all these people can support. [...] There are no heirs. Debord must inherit Debord.*¹

This statement of Debord's absolute singularity was, on the one hand, a central element of the estate's conflict with his publisher since the early 1990s, the venerable house of Gallimard. The 'legacy' in question concerned, quite specifically, the rights to his work, and only two months later Becker-Ho and

of the book, 'the world has been falsified: the spectacle has taken the place of the real, entirely rebuilding it to its liking in the course of discoursing on it'.⁶ The integrated spectacle also entailed the apparent disappearance of the historical role of negation, or radical contestation; described in some circles as the end of ideology, Debord spoke of this loss as the abolition of 'that disturbing conception, which was dominant for over two hundred years, in which a society was open to criticism or transformation, reform or revolution', for his was an era that 'has had enough of being blamed', and that had attempted to persuade the generation born since the upheavals of the late 1960s to accept this sanitised form of society.⁷ This falsified world was also one of generalised secrecy: despite all the talk of transparency, it had become less and less clear who ran what, who was manipulating whom and for what purpose — some of the most trenchant pages of *Comments* address the symbiotic workings of state, economy and mafia — and those who claimed to be the best informed were generally the most deceived. 'We live and die at the confluence of innumerable mysteries,' Debord concluded.⁸

His critics found precisely this emphasis on secrecy most irritating, and mostdamning; as Droit wrote: 'By dint of seeing spies everywhere, has Debord — rather than disassembling the Kafkaesque machine that is grinding up humanity between its wheels — finally sunk into a John Le Carré-esque fog? It seems so.'⁹ The publication of *Comments* was in fact the occasion of a generalised attack on Debord and his spectacle-thesis, launched most ambitiously in the pages of *Critique* by literary scholar Laurent Jenny. Jenny likened the foundational dichotomy of Debord's thought — the opposition between spectacular appearances and lived experience — to that which animated Jean-Jacques Rousseau's eighteenth-century critique of theatre, which had insisted on the primacy of communal presence over the morally corrupting qualities of mediating representations.

'To the hallucinatory presence of spectacle, it was thus a question of opposing an otherwise real presence of individuals to themselves', in a return to authentic 'being' from the 'seeming' of spectacle that was little more than a revised form of the open-air festivals Rousseau had considered appropriate to the free citizens of a republic.¹⁰ Yet for Jenny even this hopelessly naïve conception was jettisoned in *Comments*, which replaced an understanding of spectacle as a historico-economic process linked to the logic of the commodity fetish with one that saw it as the result of a global plot or conspiracy. Whereas in 1967 Debord had conceived of power as operating through a regime of visibility, while 'lived experience' was forced into obscurity, 'from this point on, it is the conspiracy itself that has become invisible. Where real life should have arrived in the imagelessness of a historical practice, a conspiratorial domination has taken its place. Tyranny's ghost haunts all social appearance without ever appearing itself.'¹¹ The generalisation of the spectacle had been paralleled by the growth of Debord's suspicion, to the point of paranoia. His US critics echoed and amplified this assessment. 'By 1988,' the editors of *Telos* wrote,

Debord's account degenerated to a never-never-land of conspiracies among spy agencies [...] This is much cruder than even the most simplistic reading of the culture industry thesis. It is Adorno gone mad in a situation in which there is no

Strategies of appropriation were in this manner collapsed into the critical practice of *détournement*, by grafting concepts developed by Benjamin Buchloh, Craig Owens and Hal Foster earlier in the decade onto a rather questionable historical genealogy. Whatever superficial similarities exist between the two practices, their alignment risks a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of *détournement's* critique, based as it was in a conviction that all recognised cultural forms had been hollowed out by the reifying forces of capital and were now available for a dialectical refunctioning through which subversive meanings might be articulated. Critic Giorgio Maragliano noted at the time of the exhibition that the reappearance of *détournement* within the institutional space of art translated into its 'progressive neutralisation':

*The stripping of meaning from individual elements of allegorical montages, given that the result is intended to be neither transitory nor ephemeral, becomes merely the faculty of producing equivalences between diverse things, and thus a duplication or reproduction of the generalised equivalence between all forms of merchandise.*¹⁹

The logic of the commodity, which operates within its own protocols of devaluation and fragmentation, reasserts its prerogatives over a practice that had intended to be its negation. To speak of recuperation seems banal; it would be rather more accurate to say that the historic wager of *détournement* was deferred. If Debord, in publishing his *Comments*, was seen as somehow coming too late, as being an obscure voice from a past long forgotten (*Le Monde's* review was tellingly accompanied by a photograph of the author that was thirty years old), the Beaubourg exhibition could be said to have come too soon, anticipating a legacy that did not yet exist. Both were received at the moment of a triumphant postmodernism, whether in the arts or in the sense of an era that understood itself to be post-historical; as such, they were both destined to misrecognition.

Read by critics steeped in the doctrines of a postmodern end of ideology and end of history, Debord's *Comments* was received as a tract mourning the impossibility of radical social critique and transformation, but this neglected the author's own framing of the text. In its opening pages he described the purpose of this account of the strengthening of the reign of the commodity economy in the twenty years since his first diagnosis: 'it is undoubtedly indispensable to have understood the spectacle's unity and articulation as an active force in order to examine the directions in which this force has since been able to travel. These questions are of great interest, for it is under such conditions that *the next stage of social conflict* will necessarily be played out.'²⁰ There were some readers, however, capable of pursuing such questions. Giorgio Agamben, writing an afterword to the Italian translation of *Comments* in 1990, reframed the problem of 'Debord's inheritance today' precisely in the critical analysis of capitalist expropriation in relation to language.

If the lineage of Marxist thought had devoted itself largely to an examination of capitalist expropriation of productive activity, the spectacle thesis outlined the expansion of this domain of subjection to 'the alienation of language itself, of the linguistic and communicative nature of human beings'.²¹ A nascent capitalist

above — to behave 'as a man, as an / employee, as an unemployed person, as a mother'. The contributors to *Tiqqun* proposed that this principle be subverted, that one be unfaithful to one's identity by opening up a gap between oneself and one's attributes. Desubjectivation, not the reclaiming of a 'true' identity or subjectivity, is the paradoxical path toward the ruin of equivalence. This was the basis of the politics of the collective's Imaginary Party an anti-party without leaders or members — and their acclamation of anonymity and invisibility:

*We have seen spread — at the same time as a hatred of things — a taste for anonymity and a certain defiance toward visibility. [...] That its enemy has neither face nor name for anything that could serve in place of an identity is precisely what inspires paranoia among those in power.*²⁵

The Tiqqun collective was formed in 1999 by around a half-dozen students and recent graduates, largely under the impetus of Julien Coupat, born in 1974 in Bordeaux into a well-off family of doctors. Other members included Fulvia Carnevale, an Italian literary scholar and specialist in the work of Michel Foucault; and the writer and philosopher Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, who participated in the group only briefly before falling out with Coupat. In 1999 Coupat was reaching the climax of his rapid political evolution from successful business and finance student at École supérieure des sciences économiques et commerciales (ESSEC), one of France's top business schools — Coupat graduated in 1996 — to studying in 1997 with sociologist Luc Boltanski at Paris's École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), where he immersed himself in philosophy and political militancy, to the founding of Tiqqun two years later. It was at the EHESS that he likely discovered the writings of Debord, which were becoming an increasingly important touchstone at the school in those years, thanks largely to the rise of alter-globalisation protests against neoliberal economy policies that were soon to explode on the streets of Seattle. Coupat wrote a thesis for his Diplôme des études approfondies (DEA, or M.Phil. equivalent) on *The Society of the Spectacle*, 'Perspective and Critique of Situationist Thought', in which he charted a tension inhering in critiques of the capitalist regime between abandonment and reform; it was an insight important enough to be quoted in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, written jointly by Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, a book that was seen to mark a significant moment in the renewal of the Left.²⁶ But by 1999, when *The New Spirit* was published to accolades in France, Coupat had moved past the analysis of critical movements to the formation of Tiqqun — a group that would not escape the tensions he had outlined in his thesis.

Already in 1998 he had participated in the occupation of the Conseil Constitutionnel by the jobless movement, during which Sébastien Schiffré, another member of the Tiqqun collective, publicly tore up a copy of the 1958 French constitution on which he had written: 'The dictatorship of capital is abolished. The proletariat declares anarchy and communism.' He received an eight-month suspended prison sentence.²⁷ That same year, during the thirtieth anniversary of the occupation of the Sorbonne during May '68, Coupat balanced on the statue of Auguste Comte that stands on the busy Place de la Sorbonne and castigated tourists and onlookers: 'You, the shivering, the kneeling, the cave-dwellers, the cowards, the fearful slaves...'. In July 1999, during an International Summit of Critical Metaphysicians that Coupat had convened at a

The Tiqqun collective broke up in 2001 for reasons usually described as personal, although given the emphasis within the group on the affective dimension of critical practice, the separation of this realm from the political is ambiguous at best. Perhaps the hardening of opposition to the regime of capitalist globalisation and the consolidation of what has been called 'military neoliberalism' in the wake of the Genoa protests and the attacks of September 11 — both key events of Tiqqun's last year — also played a role in making the project of the journal untenable. The subsequent history of its members could be described as bearing out the two poles of Situationist critique outlined in Coupat's 1997 thesis: on one hand, a strategy of retreat that we can associate with Coupat himself in his experiment in rural living, and on the other, one that operates from within the boundaries of an institutional art world with the artist collective Claire Fontaine. In 2004 Coupat and some colleagues moved to a farm in the small village of Tarnac in central France, assuming a physical as well as critical distance from consumer society. On the farm they raised goats, grew vegetables and — according to questionable claims by the French intelligence service — wrote *The Coming Insurrection*, an anarchist manifesto signed by the Invisible Committee and published in 2007.³³ Coupat also continued to participate in various demonstrations in France and abroad, primarily alongside alter-globalisation militants. But the Tarnac episode has its own integrity that returns us to the politics of 'whatever singularities': to abandon the metropolis and, in rural isolation, to seize 'the conditions and the means, / even interstitial, / to experience yourself as such'.³⁴ In the wake of May '68, some former Situationists had opted for a similar trajectory, most notable René Riesel, who raised sheep and in the 1990s became an outspoken voice opposing genetically modified crops alongside José Bové within the Farmers' Confederation. Coupat and his colleagues, however, seem to have used their rural base as more of a meeting point for similarly minded militants from France and abroad, as well as investing a good deal of time in village life, running the local grocery and the like. This life was interrupted in 2008 when Coupat and nineteen other members of the Tarnac group were indicted under trumped up terrorism charges by the French state. Coupat was accused of sabotaging high-speed railway catenary cables, a charge based at least in part on a single line from *The Coming Insurrection* — whose authorship he has strenuously denied.³⁵

throughout Western Europe who perpetrated a range of pranks and media hoaxes as well as authoring a booklet titled *Guy Debord Is Really Dead* (1995). Claire Fontaine — along with projects like *Annlee* (1999—2002) coordinated by Pierre Huyghe and Philippe Parreno — clearly developed this readymade model, with its anonymous and cooperative elements; purging it of its lingering adolescent mischief, Carnevale and Thornhill have remade the masculine Luther Blissett into Claire Fontaine, a feminine whatever singularity — or 'Young-Girl', perhaps — set loose in the institutions of art.

As suggested in a work such as *The True Artist*, this practice is deeply engaged with a contemporary history of appropriation — or rather, it is a practice built on the ruins of this history. Claire Fontaine begins, we might say, precisely with what the critic Maragliano, reflecting on the allegorical procedures of the early 1980s, termed

*the old romantic error of imagining that the alienation of representation is something more than the representation of alienation, that critical merchandise is a criticism of merchandise, that a simple chiasmus is enough to bring us to an awareness of the poverty of ideology.*³⁸

Something of this suspension is materialised in Claire Fontaine's series of *Brickbats*, industrially manufactured bricks with colour photocopies of the covers of famous texts of critical theory fastened around them with rubber bands, such as *La Société du Spectacle* brickbat (2006). One might describe them as 'allegorical weapons' — resembling nothing so much as the kind of rocks to which one might attach a ransom note to be thrown through a window, or perhaps recalling the *pavés* of May '68 to be hurled at the cops.

But then again, they are artistic commodities fashioned from other, more common commodities: the brick and mass-market paperback theory, both of which have been removed from use by the artists' gesture — one can neither build with the brick nor read the book. And another layer of reference must be added: when seen as a group, the brickbats are often stacked in a way that distinctly recalls Carl Andre's *Equivalents* of the mid- 1960s, playing off his deskilling of sculptural practice toward a seriality that mimes that of the commodity itself. Suspended between exchange or exhibition value and use value, between theory and practice, the brickbats accept the impasse of *détournement* as a challenge. The evident irony of the *Brickbat's* placement within the rarified confines of the art gallery or museum is entirely purposeful: for Claire Fontaine, political impotence is taken as the necessary starting point for any reflection on the place of contemporary culture.

'Appropriated' elements are, then, ubiquitous in Claire Fontaine's work, ranging from cheap, everyday commodities to copies of well-known artworks. Signature elements of artists of the recent past are taken up and redeployed: Andy Warhol's iconic *Marilyns* and *Maos* or Bruce Nauman's neon signs most obviously; Christopher Wool's stencilled lettering or Jeff Koons's vacuum cleaners more subtly. This is what Carnevale and Thornhill call their strategy of 'expropriation', as distinct from appropriation; as they explain, this 'refers to the idea that we live dispossessed of the world and of the meaning of things and that we can

Footnotes

1. 'Au courier du "Monde": Autour de l'héritage de Guy Debord', *Le Monde*, 1 November 1996, p.8. Translation of this and the other French quotations the author's.↑
2. See, for example, 'Les ayants droit de Guy Debord rompent avec Gallimard', *Le Monde*, 9 January 1997, p.9. The novel in question was Bertrand Delcourt's *Locus Blocus* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1996), which featured the murder of the author of *The Society of the Spectacle*, here called Guy Bordeaux.↑
3. See Philippe Sollers and Emmanuel Descombes, 'Guy Debord, une étrange guerre' (2000), which was made for the France 3 series *Un siècle d'écrivains*; and Vincent Kaufmann, *Guy Debord: Revolution in the Service of Poetry* (trans. Robert Bononno), Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2006.↑
4. V. Kaufmann, 'L'Irréfutable', *Le Monde*, 15 October 1999, 'Le Monde des livres', p.viii.↑
5. Guy Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle* (trans. Malcolm Imrie), London and New York: Verso, 1990, p.9.↑
6. Roger-Pol Droit, 'Guy Debord, le dernier des Mohicans', *Le Monde*, 22 July 1988, p.11.↑
7. G. Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, *op. cit.*, pp.21, 27. Emphasis Debord's.↑
8. *Ibid.*, p.55.↑
9. R.-P. Droit, 'Guy Debord, le dernier des Mohicans', *op. cit.*, p.11.↑
10. Laurent Jenny, 'The Unrepresentable Enemy' (trans. Stephen Sartarelli), *Art & Text*, no.35, Summer 1990, p.111. Translation modified.↑
11. *Ibid.*, p.112. Translation modified.↑
12. Paul Piccone in Russell Berman, David Pan and P. Piccone, 'The Society of the Spectacle 20 Years Later: A Discussion', *Telos*, no.86, Winter 1990—91, pp.85—86.↑
13. Anselm Jappe, *Guy Debord* (trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith), Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999, p.121. Jappe notes that 'there is no denying, however, that the years since the book's publication have confirmed its claims in myriad ways'.↑
14. The exhibition travelled to the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (1989) and Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston (1990). The years 1989 and 1990 were key in the contemporary reception of the SI for other reasons as well: they mark the publication of Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) and Roberto Ohrt's *Phantom Avantgarde* (Hamburg: Nautilus, 1990).↑
15. See Christophe Bourseiller, *Vie et mort de Guy Debord*, Paris: Plon, 1999, pp.395—96.↑
16. Paul-Hervé Parsy, who oversaw the Paris iteration of the show, quoted in Edward Ball, 'Welcome Brigands', *Village Voice*, 2 May 1989, p.106.↑
17. One of the best accounts of Baudrillard's reception in the US, and in artistic milieus in particular, is found in François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (trans. Jeff Fort), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.↑
18. Elisabeth Sussman, 'Introduction', in E. Sussman (ed.), on the *Passage of a few people through a rather brief moment in time: The Situationist International, 1957—1972*, Boston and Cambridge, MA: Institute of Contemporary Art and The MIT Press, 1989, p.13.↑
19. Giorgio Maragliano, 'The Invisible Insurrection' (trans. Henry Martin), *Flash Art*, no.147, Summer 1989, p.89.↑
20. G. Debord, *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*, *op. cit.*, p.4. Emphasis the author's. See also his remarks regarding the 'return of history', p.73.↑
21. Giorgio Agamben, 'Marginal Notes on Commentaries [*sic*] on the Society of the Spectacle', *Means without End* (trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino), Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000, p.82.↑
22. *Ibid.*, pp.82—83.↑
23. *Ibid.*, p.87. Emphasis Agamben's.↑
24. Tiqqun, 'How Is It to Be Done?', *Introduction to Civil War* (trans. Alexander R. Galloway and Jason E. Smith), Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2010, p.204.↑
25. Tiqqun, *Théorie du Bloom*, Paris: Éditions la Fabrique, 2000, p.93.↑
26. See Eric Pelletier and Anne Vidalie, 'Julien Coupat, l'homme invisible', *L'Express*, 29 January 2009, p.29.↑
27. Tiqqun, *Premiers matériaux pour une théorie de la Jeune-Fille*, Paris: Éditions mille et une nuits, 2001, p.103.↑