Situationism's journey from its Parisian origins into Anglo-Saxon culture has been littered with feuds, schisms and excommunications. Writer and conceptual artist Stewart Home recalls the history and politics of Situationism and its British pendant, psychogeography.

Anna Aslanyan: Let’s start with McKenzie Wark’s recent book *The Beach Beneath the Street*, on the history of the Situationist International. In it he talks about the origins of what is known today as psychogeography, focusing on certain movements that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s. Where do you see their influence?

Stewart Home: I wouldn’t call these movements the origins of psychogeography – the whole thing started much earlier than the 1950s. If you need a starting point there is a range of candidates, from de Quincey to Baudelaire, depending on who you feel closer to. However, it’s not that important; if Wark wants to look at Letterists and Situationists from this angle I’m not going to argue with him. Why not consider them as the beginning? This is an artificial trick of sorts, no better or worse than anything else.

Still, I wouldn’t want to concentrate fully on Guy Debord. Of course, he was the chief ideologue of the Situationist International, but his work didn’t manifest any brilliant individual ideas – rather, it was part of a collective effort. The thing is, he was a better prose writer than the rest of them, a follower of the French literary tradition. As for the ideas themselves, they weren’t his own but born in the Situationist circle. At the beginning, his collaboration with Gil Wolman was vital for Debord – it’s enough to read their early works on *détournement*. Later an equally important part was played by such figures as Asger Jorn, with his experience of the Danish communist movement, Michle Bernstein, and Attila Kotnyi, who took part in the 1956 Hungarian uprising. Talking about Situationists, people tend to underestimate the role of politics in their activities, whereas Wark is trying to broaden our perception of them. I still think he pays too much attention to Debord. Nevertheless, one of the chapters in his book is centred on Alex Trocchi, who was doing similar things, but in his own, completely different way.

Another important fact is that the original ideas of the 1950s Situationism were
transplanted into a new soil, that is, Anglo-American culture, changing quite dramatically in the process. I think the main weakness of the Situationist International lay in the division between politics and culture that happened after 1962. If we go back to Marx with his dialectical materialism – and I believe everyone interested in Situationism should read Marx – it becomes clear that the whole communist project is about eradicating any specialisation inherent to capitalism and, therefore, any differences between culture and politics. After the split in the ranks of Situationists, two factions were formed, a cultural and a political. The Second Situationist International attempted to reunite these branches, but unfortunately many of its members were anarchists by their beliefs and, as a result, wanted to concentrate on politics, which wasn’t their strongest suit.

When I first came across Situationism, attending meetings of London Workers Group back in the late 1970s, it was one of the many leftwing movements relying on communist ideas. At that time, British Situationists tried to combine the principles of German and Dutch leftists with those advocated by Italian communists. Talking about the latter, it’s worth remembering Amadeo Bordiga, who analysed the Bolsheviks’ attitude to the agrarian question and demonstrated that the revolution in Russia was capitalist rather than socialist. The USSR was, in his opinion, a typical example of a capitalist society.

Going back to the notion of unification, this is where I see the main purpose of any revolutionary politics: in the overcoming of the barriers that divide different aspects of life. To get rid of the general alienation generated by capitalism, to bring together different forms of leftwing ideology, culture and politics, art and everyday life. That’s why the early version of Situationism, which existed until 1962, seems to me the most powerful of all. Later attempts to focus on political questions got Situationists into a trap; they found themselves doomed to the very same specialisation, diverted away from the real revolutionary goal, which is unification rather than division.

**AA:** Can you talk in more detail about the journey French Situationism had to make to become a permanent part of Anglo-Saxon culture?

**SH:** It’s essential to understand how those ideas were transformed as they were transplanted into a new soil. In fact, Debord’s initial attempts in the late 1960s to set up British and American sections of the Situationist International weren’t particularly successful because he tried to follow the same organising principles as in Paris. Even today, in our totally globalised era, there are obvious historical differences between Continental European and Anglo-American culture; back then they were even more pronounced. Hence the clashes between Debord and Situationists in other countries. For instance, he was dead against some of the initiatives taken by Chris Gray, an activist of the British section, who was translating Situationist texts into English. Gray tended to adapt his translations, making them more accessible in the context of his own culture, which was, of course, a very efficient way to convey Situationist ideas to his British readership. Thus, in his version of *On the Poverty of Student Life* he added a couple of words, something along the lines of “since anarchists will tolerate each other they will tolerate anything”. In my view, this is one of the best sentences in Situationist literature; however, it made Debord extremely angry. In the end, this was why the English and American sections eventually broke up – Debord expected already existing ideas to be replicated in groups organised in the same way as his own.
SH: In this country, psychogeography caught on as a form of Situationism adapted to local conditions. One of the people who made it happen was Richard Essex, whom I met in the 1970s at a meeting of London Workers. Essex revived the London Psychogeographical Association in the early 1990s. At the time he was very cross with academics who took over psychogeography, making it yet another area of their studies, publishing a lot of works on Situationism, which had nothing to do with practical applications of its ideas or with a real struggle. When it came to Situationism, all the academics were interested in was its pseudo-objective analysis. They mainly praised Debord, forgetting the fact that French Situationism in the 1960s was part of a wider international movement. So Essex was extremely displeased. He was reading, I think, the fourth Italian edition of *The Society of the Spectacle*, where Debord says in his introduction that every useful theory has to be unacceptable, and in the end concluded that academics must be unfamiliar with this principle – to them, any theory was acceptable.

Essex had been interested in psychogeography since his childhood, he grew up with it, influenced by his father. The latter, a disciple of Alfred Watkins, studied his concept of ley lines, which are superimposed on landscape and symbolise a number of things. Essex had this idea to apply the theory of leys, or the earth’s energy lines, to transform British Situationism. It occurred to him that he might thus be able to frighten away academics – they would be wary of certain occult elements related to Situationism and, in particular, to this theory. My understanding of occultism in this context is that it allows you to systematise existing knowledge and can sometimes prove useful. Take, for instance, those occasions when psychogeographers use a map of one area to find their way in another – an approach which, I believe, can generate some rich ideas.

Around the same time, in the early 1990s, I met Iain Sinclair and gave him some of the texts Essex had written for the London Psychogeographical Association. Essex had been influenced by Sinclair, especially by his early poems such as “Suicide Bridge” and “Lud Heat”, where Sinclair reflects on Hawksmoor churches and what they symbolise on the map of London. Sinclair, who had been familiar with the notion of psychopolitics since the 1960s, immediately became interested in what Essex and I were doing. A prominent author by then, Sinclair started to write about psychogeography, giving the British readers an opportunity to learn about a number of related concepts. This was how the word became widespread in literary circles. Eventually, even British papers started running regular, if not especially fascinating, columns on the subject. Anyway, it became a form of discourse which today is much more popular in Britain than in France.

AA: Despite that, you once said in an interview: “Why would anyone want to be a Situationist?” Do you count yourself as one?

SH: Not at all! This would inevitably lead to trapping yourself. When Debord first thought of theorising on the subject of poetry, he started with the Romantic poets, trying to follow the transition from Romantic poetry of the 1840s, which used to be considered the highest form of the genre, to philosophical poetry. Consequently, he got stuck in old-fashioned ideas. Today, when Franco Berardi, an Italian theorist who writes under the
name of Bifo, suggests that his work should be called poetry, I don’t subscribe to this. That would be wrong. Nor do I count myself as a Situationist. Those who do wouldn’t label themselves Situationists, as that would mean excluding yourself from a wider movement; those who don’t wouldn’t be able to understand the meaning of Situationism, all its pros and cons. From this point of view, Wark has written a very neat book. Yes, he talks about Debord a lot, yet he is far from putting him on a pedestal. As for me, I go further in denying Debord’s influence.

AA: What ideology, if not Situationism, do you subscribe to? What is the Stewart Home Society you founded?

SH: It started as a joke. Some time ago, in the early 1990s, one of my fans created a site under this name. Later he handed it over to me, so now I write everything myself, including the blog. Over the last five years the society has, in fact, become something virtual, simply a name. I don’t want to be the head of any group. The site focuses on my own interests, which, of course, are linked to art as well as politics. It states my political views in some detail. I don’t speak for anyone, I’m just a loner interested in revolutionary politics. This has been determined by the processes of the 1990s. I used to discuss communist organisations with my like-minded friends, including Richard Essex. Those long discussions lasted twenty years but never led to any particular conclusions. Our response was to dismiss ourselves and to found individual groups, each consisting of a single member. When one of us proposes an action, for instance, a three-sided football game, the others are free to join in or stand aside. This allows us to avoid the difficulties we used to have. Clearly, any communist group tries to answer the question of how to stop alienation and attain solidarity. We prefer to answer it with a good deal of humour.

When I talk about Situationist ideas as collective, I don’t mean to say that those people were all part of a single organisation. For instance, Letterists worked with Italian nuclear artists for a while, but when the First World Congress of Liberated Artists was held in 1956, only the latter participated – the two groups had split up by then. Similar things used to happen with Paris Situationists all the time. When Ralph Rumney founded the London Psychogeographical Association in the 1950s, he wanted to join the Situationist International. But our approach is different – we want to collaborate with each other, while at the same time remaining members of our own separate groups. This is how we respond to our inability to resolve all our issues.

Even this system is not without flaws. For example, a few years ago Richard Essex suffered from split personality, so he and the new person had a row and expelled each other. This, of course, is a parody of the manoeuvres once practised by Situationists. The question remains, how seriously you should take the expulsions the Situationist International was famous for. When Rumney was kicked out by Situationists, it was supposed to be the end, he wasn’t going to see his former comrades any more. Later he married Michle Bernstein, who had been Debord’s wife, so the connections between them weren’t severed. The documents in which Debord announces the dissolution of the International are, no doubt, themselves parodies of earlier events in Marxist circles. So the question is how seriously this should be taken.

AA: The same question can be asked about your own practices, too.
SH: True – and everyone is free to answer it the way they like. Let people decide for themselves how they want to take what I do. A few years ago I had this project: first I called several places advertising phone sex and recorded my conversations with prostitutes. They all boiled down to my asking for something unusual; for instance, I would ask for a woman with circus skills or somebody who would have sex with me inside a power station. The women I spoke to would usually just laugh and refuse. Then I went to a red light district and played this recording – the idea was to defy William Burroughs, who claimed that if you went to a public space and played a recording made during a riot, a real riot would start. I was right: instead of flocking to the area and offering new methods of sexual congress, people began dispersing. Yes, I wanted to show that Burroughs was wrong, but also that the capitalist desire to turn everything, including sex, into a product is evil. It was clear by the women’s reaction that prostitution limits sex in many ways, because it’s seen as a product.

Another thing I do is shredding – I shred books into small pieces with a special machine. This is also to stress that I don’t want to see a book as a product. At first I thought of shredding the Bible, but that would have been too primitive. So I do it mainly with my own books to avoid attacking anyone; this way it becomes a pure anti-commercialisation gesture.

AA: Recently you came up with another kind of performance where you read your works standing on your head. What meaning do you ascribe to this?

SH: This, too, is an attack on capitalism, on its desire to verbalise everything. The thing is, when you read standing on your head it gives you a completely new feeling, different from what you experience when reading in a normal way. It’s a much more physical, bodily sensation than what we are used to. Apart from that, there is a certain deal of humour in it, a light-hearted attitude to everything, including your own works – I think we all need it.

AA: My last question may sound too serious in this light, but still: Are you really hoping to be able to change the world?

SH: Of course I’d like to change the world – and anyway, it’s constantly changing itself. But to nudge it in the right direction is what we all, and I personally, have to do. I was talking about collective ideas and movements. It is by developing them – something I do both as an individual and in collaboration with others – that we should be able to achieve these changes. To get somewhere it’s important to know where you are coming from; of course, each of us can only have a partial understanding of history, but we can’t do without it. The same can be said about the goal; it’s possible that no one fully knows what it is, but it doesn’t mean we have to stop. Moving towards your goal is more important than arriving, and as you approach it you can and should readjust its position every now and again. The latest example of this is the occasion when I was asked to referee a three-sided football match. I didn’t quite understand their off-side rule, so I just got rid of it. Moving the goalposts, so to speak.

Published 22 May 2012

Original in English
First published in Neprikosnovennij Zapas (NZ) 82 (2/2012) (Russian version);