

# Purveyance and the hyper : mediated commodities of situationist practice

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## Purveyance and the Hyper - mediated Commodities of Situationist Practice

The problem of communication and its mediation is central to the urban project of the Situationist International. The dichotomy between fragmentation and unity on a social level is staged as an opposition between un-mediated or *real* forms of communication and *pseudo-communication*. A critique of the prevalence of flawed forms of communication is afforded through the hyper-mediation of *detournement*. Through examining the Situationist concept of *detournement* as a form of communication and its purveyance and instrumentalization in the work of Guy Debord, Asger Jorn, and Constant Nieuwenhuys a discrepancy in the formulation of unmediated or *real* communication in these practices becomes evident. This split is symptomatic of the divergence of attitudes in the Situationist project toward the means of achieving unity in the social, urban, or architectural complex and the implementation and operative nature of communication.

The critique which the Situationist International launched from its inception in 1957 until 1972 on the urban and political conditions in post war France extended beyond a repudiation of the architecture which afforded the housing of large numbers of working class citizens in a relatively confined territory, to address the hegemony of the mass communications media and its active role in the parcelling of space. The mass housing projects, exemplified by Sarcelles, were appearing with increasing frequency as were a complete range of commodities for bringing the public realm into the privatized residential interior. The domestic cell, complete with its array of communications devices, ensured the separation of each inhabitant from his neighbors. The problem of communication for the Situationist International could be posed as an opposition between *pseudo-communication* which promotes alienation of the individual, and *higher forms of communication* which work against alienation.<sup>1</sup> Pseudo-communication as formulated by the SI most often takes the form of a broadcast in which a large number of people receive a message passively from a single source, whereas the notion of higher forms of communication, such as *detournement*, relies on the active appropriation

of the media by a large number of people engaged in simultaneous commerce with one another.

New protocols of authorship, ownership, and habitation were fostered by Situationist urban practice. The loss of value which is inherent in a condition of multiple authorship was supplanted by a value system related to customization and the portability of spatial experience. The absence of exclusive authorship finds its replacement in an authorship of purveyance. Purveyance alters the status of objects and the protocols through which our involvements with them are staged. The SI hijacked communications media as a site through which the purveyance of spatio-social propositions was deployed as a means of negating authenticity. Purveyance entails establishing menus for interaction, diverting sequences of communication, and supplying a set of parameters which can be adapted by a wide audience to generate variable outcomes as opposed to the production or performance of a single spatial proposition.

The dialectical relationship between fragmentation and unity is crucial to an understanding of the role of communication in Situationist practice. The Situationist idea of fragmentation and its relationship to alienation can be examined in light of the Marxist discourse on automation and the division of labor. One fundamental difference between Marx's formulation of alienation and the Situationist International's centers around the question of appropriation. The context for the appropriation of the external environment by the individual leads to either fragmentation or unity. In Marx it is the worker who appropriates the external world and sensuous nature leading to alienation and fragmentation, whereas for Debord, the player or *homo ludens'* active appropriation of the media, the received spectacle, leads to a unity or wholeness.<sup>2</sup> The privileging of *wholeness* as opposed to a synthesis of fragments in Situationist literature occurs with respect to both the artefacts of artistic production and the media as well as the artefacts of political ideologies. The former is constituted by a critique of the collagistic methods of pop art which devalue without re-valuing



and the latter is a critique of urbanism which assumes a separation between the city as an object and everyday life. This dichotomy between the organic and the synthetic is raised in respect to the division of labor by Lukács in the following terms:

*“The finished article ceases to be the object of the work process. The latter turns into the objective synthesis of rationalized special systems whose unity is determined by pure calculation and which must therefore seem to be arbitrarily connected with each other. This destroys the organic necessity with which inter-related special operations are unified in the end-product.”*<sup>3</sup>

The spatial pseudo-unity which is produced by the mass housing blocks in architectural terms is countered by the fragmentation which the communications media engenders. Paradoxically this brand of communication does not facilitate communication among the receivers of its message, instead it maintains their separation. The SI used the pages of its journal *Internationale Situationiste* (1958 - 1969) as a site from which to launch an assault on communications media through the media itself. The images contained in the journals were often dislocated from the popular press and altered in order to convey a message conflicting with their original context. This process of reterritorialization is one instantiation of the Situationist practice of *Detournement*. An emblematic image for this infiltration of the mass media is *Unconscious Advertising* from *Internationale Situationiste* number 8 (1963), in which the image of a television, probably taken from an advertisement for the product, is inscribed with the words *Ce Soir Spectacle a la Maison fig1*. The intertwining of architecture and communications media plays itself out here as the intertwining of image and text,



fig 1: “Unconscious Advertising” from *Internationale Situationiste* No 8

the television is present as an image and the domestic environment inscribed as text. The image ceases to fulfill its role as an advertisement and instead critiques the passive reception of the television’s message.

*Detournement* as a process of defamiliarization is also related to Henri Lefebvre’s formulation of the reverse-image. In *The Critique of Everyday Life*, Lefebvre puts forth the notion of the *real* in relation to defamiliarization processes. In defamiliarization an image of everyday reality is presented through objects which are endowed with a distancing from reality by the manner in which they are situated. An individual’s behavior towards a mundane object deviating from normal protocols also constitutes a defamiliarization. Lefebvre stages the relationship between the mythical and everyday in the following terms:

*“...the very fact that an image with its roots deep in everyday life can be seen as mythical and that the word myth can be used to describe it...The most extraordinary things are also the most everyday; the strangest things are often the most trivial, and the current notion of the ‘mythical’ is an illusory reflection of this fact. Once separated from its context, i.e. from how it is interpreted and from the things which reinforce it while at the same time making it bearable - once presented in all its triviality,... - the trivial becomes extraordinary, and the habitual becomes ‘mythical...once images like this have been separated from their everyday context, it becomes very difficult to articulate them in a way which will present their essential everyday quality.”*<sup>4</sup>

This essential quality is what Debord and Gil Wolman in the 1956 text *Methods of Detournement* conceive of as a *parodic-serious stage* which expresses indifference to the idea of an original work rather than reaffirming the notion of an original authority.<sup>5</sup> The role of *detournement* as a Situationist strategy can be formulated as one of devaluation in the social sphere of those systems and products which both regulate and serve to reinforce the social sphere itself. The practice of *detournement* operates via techniques of reterritorialization in which the realm of everyday life usurps and critiques that which is external to it. *Detournement* can be seen to differ fundamentally from such avant-garde practices as *enstrangement* or *montage* by the fact that its act of resituation is not intended to produce shock or hybridize to generate new meanings, but rather to negate the notion of authenticity, thereby rendering dysfunctional the systems and objects of its consumption.



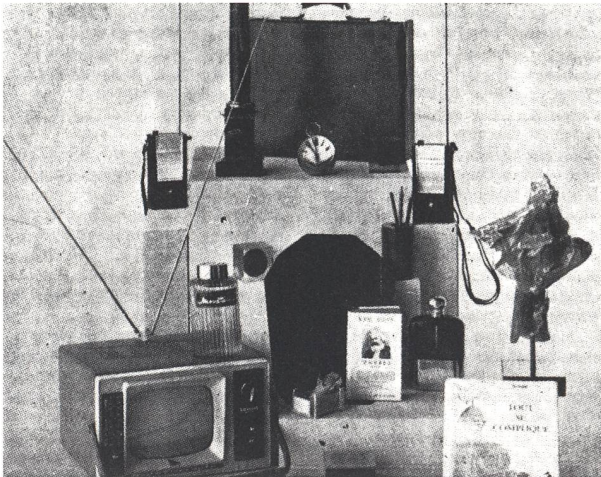


fig 2: "Diffuse Spectacle" borrowed from the pages of *Lui* magazine

Critical also to the dichotomy between fragmentation and unity is the concept of leisure. Lefebvre situates leisure as a highly idealized and artificial construct which, nonetheless must maintain its affiliations with the everyday in order for its ideal nature to be perceptible. For the Situationist International this purely artificial *world of leisure* existing in conjunction with the element of work would be displaced by an everyday life from which labor was eliminated, a life in which play would become the dominant form of interaction. The concept of Leisure is critiqued by Debord in that the very idea of leisure implies that everyday life is categorized into separate realms.

*"Lewis Mumford in The City in History points out that with the advent of long distance mass communications, the isolation of the population has become a much more effective means of control. But the general trend toward isolation, which is the essential reality of urbanism, must also embody a controlled reintegration of the workers based on the planned needs of production and consumption. Such an integration into the system must recapture isolated individuals as isolated together. Factories and cultural centers, holiday camps and housing developments - all are expressly oriented to the goals of a pseudo-community of this kind. These imperatives pursue the isolated individuals right into the family cell, where the generalized use of receivers of the spectacle's message ensures that his isolation is filled with the dominant images, images that indeed attain their full force only by virtue of this isolation."*<sup>6</sup>

This critique of fragmentation and specialization directly implicates urbanism in the sense that urbanism implies a theorizing and zoning of the urban complex which corresponds to a zoning of everyday life.

In Issue number 9 of *Internationale Situationiste* (Aug 1964) the pseudo-use of objects is critiqued in the image 'Diffuse Spectacle' borrowed from the pages of *Lui* magazine and detailing the appropriate accoutrements of the businessman fig 2. The economy of display and possession is addressed through the display of this advertisement from a magazine. By lifting the advertisement from its spectacular context and displaying it in the SI journal one engages in a detouring of the media space. The same image deployed in two different contexts presents two different messages. This economy or sign value has nothing to do with the use value of the objects themselves. The television is presented as a status symbol rather than as an element which can be actively used by the consumer. This commentary also appears throughout Debord and Jorn's screenprint editions of the book "*Memoires*" from 1959. The role of communication as a text or as an art object is challenged by the series of mechanically produced images and reproductions of advertised products which occupy the same space as the hand-painted surface.

In *Internationale Situationiste* number 8 the following caption accompanying the text, "*All the King's Men*", elucidates the problem of fragmentation fig 3:

*"This is the ghost-image of the Ideal woman shown in France Soir from August 1962. From ten separate pieces assembled as the most beautiful woman in the world, coming from the faces of ten stars. This synthetic star gives an example which speaks on many levels of what the complete dominance of fragments can produce - here in a dialectical play with the face. This face, a cybernetic dream, is modelled through the technical devices of modern informatics as an object of suppression, control and classification as well as efficient organization. This picture is the product of a common method for police investigative techniques. Precisely in opposition to this type of information are knowledge, poetry and our possible appropriation of the world. The sociology of beauty is exactly as worthless as industrial sociology or urbanism, for the same reasons, it presents a mystifying representation of fragments through which the totality and its movements are concealed."*<sup>7</sup>



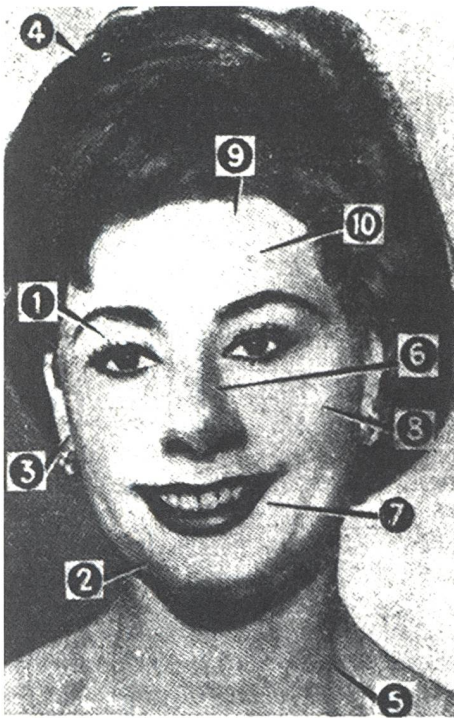


fig 3: The ghost-image of the Ideal woman in "France Soir", August 1962

The totality and its movements would suggest a direct relationship to the term 'unity of ambience' employed by the Situationists in their psychogeographic research to denote the complex interaction between the physical environment and the emotional effects engendered through the use of the environment.

Detournement constitutes a hyper-mediated experience. Situationist practice advocates a direct non-mediated form of communication, but in order to problematize this mediation thus by saturating the use of media (over-mediating) one negates the dominant forms of communication. The opposition between fragmentation and unity relates to the difference between quotation and detournement. The former is seen as a fragment isolated from a static reference point, endowing it with authority, whereas the latter is posited as a new form of communication which has no relation to an

earlier reference point and whose coherence relies on its awareness that there is no ultimate certainty which it could define. In the seminal SI text, "Formulary for a new Urbanism", by Ivan Chitchevlov, the reproduction of an external organization, the authority of free market capitalism, and its insinuation into the domain of the spectacle renders the system inoperable. The suggestion here is that the mimesis of the very system which generates the spectacle and its dislocation into the realm of spectacle itself will bring about amusement or indifference.

The appropriation of communications media with the intent of resituating authorship and influence over a product has precedents in which the stance of the artist or the creative act is defined precisely by the act of diverting the intended sequence of communication. The work of CoBrA and subsequent Situationist International member Asger Jorn exemplifies this approach in which the artist acts as a third party or mediator between the initial producer and content of the work and its audience. In the "Modifications" series of paintings produced in 1959 by Asger Jorn, detournement is used as a strategy for disrupting the relation between use value, exchange value and sign value of a spatial commodity. The dismantling of this complex relation relies on devaluation. The painting's value is decreased initially in its resale and its value as an object through which to communicate is subsequently devalued through its artistic defacement. The Modifications paintings are executed on the canvases of paintings which were purchased second-hand, thereby collapsing the excess of the market economy and creative production. The original painting is altered through an additive technique which incorporates scrawled texts and non-representational elements in the medium of paint which is shared with the original article. The same medium is used although its displacement onto the purchased canvas alters the message which it conveys. Jorn regards the painting as an effective means of communication:

*"All works of art are...tools with which to influence spectators. The artistic object...therefore, presents itself as a link between two subjects, the creating and provoking subject on the one hand, and the receiving subject on the other."*<sup>8</sup>

For Jorn *lines of communication* are present in the art object when a tension exists between the object and its value as a sign. In this case the devalued or used art object is reinvested with communicative potential,

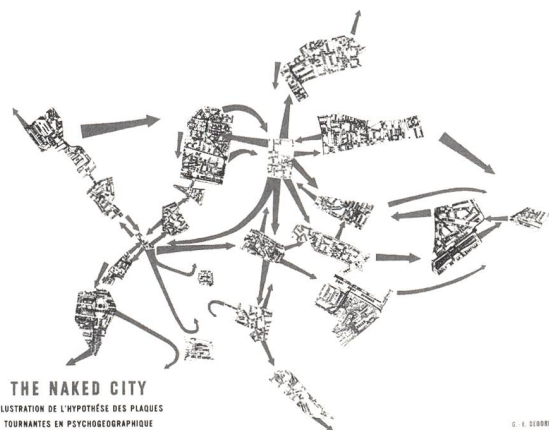


fig 4: Debord and Jorn's "Naked City", 1957

thereby reclaimed as media and re-enters the cycle of production and consumption. In the Modifications the process of appropriation occurs as an overlay treating artistic detritus as a new site for communication.

*Lines of communication* appear as another instantiation in the psychogeographic research carried out by various members of the SI and the artefacts of this research. Debord and Jorn's 1956 "Psychogeographic Guide to Paris" denotes communication routes by a field of vectors which indicate a series of flows from one center to another. Communication in the case of the psychogeographic-guide is selective in that the vectorial field of ambience denoted by a series of red arrows linking districts of Paris, flows from one region to another bypassing those areas which have been erased. The Paris configured here is one that has been torn away from its previous context and resituated in a tabula rasa of communications space. The vector field, or lines of communication displace the existing context of the city. In Debord and Jorn's *The Naked City* of 1957, the vectors negotiate between distinct parcels of space in the historic center of Paris which maintain their internal coherence, such as the Val de Grace and the Jardin de Luxembourg *fig 4*.

The unities of ambience outlined by Abdelhafid Khatib in "*Internal Currents and External Communications of Les Halles*" - from *A Psychogeographic Description of Les Halles* in *Internationale Situationniste* number 2 of 1958 set up an alternative zoning which challenges functionalist urbanism with its zoning of the city into areas for dwelling, working, circulation, and leisure.

In this instance communication space is produced by the interaction between the existing architecture and a series of mobile interventions which act as temporary extensions to the architectural complex. In Khatib's account the lines of communication are related directly to the paths along which people circulate. Communication in this psychogeographic research implies the ability to move from one location to another, to traverse a given space dependent on a particular desire, as opposed to Jorn's model of communication as the message transferred from one subject to another.

*"The essential feature of the urbanism of Les Halles is the mobile aspect of the lines of communication, having to do with the different barriers and the temporary constructions which intervene by the hour on the public thoroughfare. The separated zones of ambience, which remain strongly connected, converge in one place: the Place de Deux Ecus and the Bourse du Commerce complex."*<sup>9</sup>

The work of Constant Nieuwenhuys, a former member of CoBrA who was actively involved with the SI from its inception in 1957 until his resignation and subsequent expulsion in 1960 demonstrates another model of detournement. For Constant lines of communication implicate the physical interaction among people. The ladder which serves to communicate vertically between levels of a structure or the wheel which allows for swift horizontal motion across a surface are both consistent elements in Constant's earlier CoBrA work such as the paintings "Terre Brulee" of 1951 and "Adieu la P" of 1962 as well as in the later models for the "New Babylon" project. The ladder, and the bicycle wheel brought into conjunction with a field of vectors in the *Labyatoire* of 1962 and the lithographs of the "New Babylon" project of 1963 would suggest an equivalence between circulation and communication. In "*Labyatoire*" a current of vectors emanates from a structural element and passes through a field labeled 'atmospheric obstacles', an agglomeration of wheels is labeled 'reflexes', and notations are provided for air currents and mirrored objects. The vectors of the shifting ambience signifying communication among the participants *fig 5*. A fundamental difference between the proposals of Constant and the psychogeographic mappings of Debord, Jorn, and Khatib lies in the fact that in Debord and Khatib's accounts the vectors of ambience come out of the existing historic fabric of the city and its conjunction with the trivial elements and objects of everyday life diverted from their normal functions,



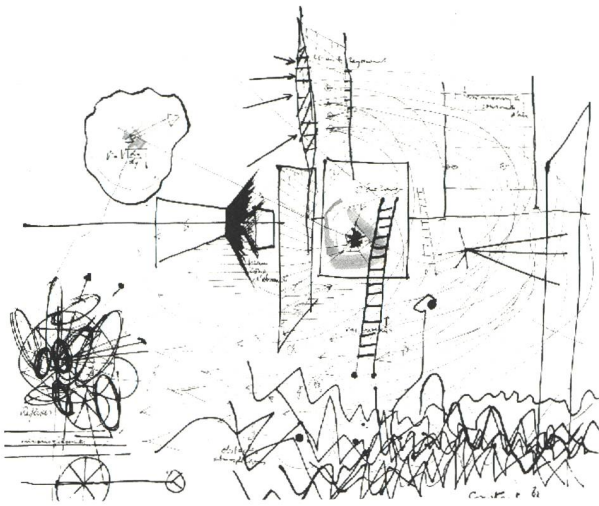


fig 5: "Labyratoire" by Constant Nieuwenhuys, 1962

whereas for Constant the ambient flow of communication would be generated by a series of artificially created situations which in his renderings and sketches appear to exist autonomously outside of the urban environment. In the later renderings for New Babylon, bridge-like structures are suspended above the existing urban fabric, treating the city as a separate image or spectacle.

The space of communication, constituted by the academy, the urban environment, or the domestic interior is invariably mediated by objects of consumption. The SI's infiltration of this mediated environment through detourning of the communications media itself is exemplified by the lecture Debord presented to the group for research on everyday life at the Center for Sociological Studies CNRS on May 17, 1961. Debord delivered the following commentary entitled Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life, later transcribed in IS# 6, via tape recorder:

*"It is thus desirable to demonstrate, by a slight alteration of the usual procedures that everyday life is right here. These words are being communicated by way of a tape recorder, not, of course in order to illustrate the integration of technology into this everyday life on the margin of the technological world, but in order to seize the simplest opportunity to break with the appearance of pseudo-collaboration, of artificial dialogue established between the lecturer in person and his spectators. This slight discomforting break with accustomed routine could serve to bring directly into the field of questioning*

*of everyday life (a questioning otherwise completely abstract) the conference itself, as well as any number of other forms of using time or objects, forms that are considered normal and not even noticed and which ultimately condition us...The new prefabricated cities clearly exemplify the totalitarian tendency of modern capitalism's organization of life: the isolated inhabitants generally isolated within the framework of the family cell) see their lives reduced to the pure triviality of the repetitive combined with the obligatory absorption of an equally repetitive spectacle."*<sup>10</sup>

This mode of intervention constructs a situation via the transformation of protocols and the devaluation of the authority of the lecturer. Identity is destabilized through the tape recorder presenting an assault on the space of communication rather than the more physical model of detournement suggested by Constant's New Babylon.

Constant produced a series of comparative mappings in 1963 and 1964 in which New Babylon was deployed in various cities including Paris, Barcelona, the Hague, and Amsterdam. These maps would appear to constitute the inverse of Debord and Jorn's "Psychogeographical Map of Paris" and "The Naked City". In "The Comparative Plan of New Babylon and the Hague" of 1964, the structure of New Babylon's vast sector network is rendered as transparent with the entirety of the existing city layered beneath it fig 6. The paths of circulation from one sector to another are fixed by the architectural envelope of the megastructure. The homogeneity of these linkages contrasts starkly with Debord and Jorn's vector fields in which linkages of the turntable elements



fig 6: "The Comparative Plan of New Babylon and the Hague" of 1964



suggest varied trajectories and intensities indicated by the notation employed. The pre-fab pseudo-events of the leisure society perhaps find their reification in the prefabricated mobile wall units which make up the interiors of the sector network of *New Babylon*.<sup>11</sup> In the work “*Symbolic Presentation of New Babylon*” of 1969 the sector network is presented as an inversion of the earlier models. In this map the fabric of the sectors themselves consists of the displaced historic centers of a number of existing cities. The network is placed on an empty ground upon which extensions of the existing infrastructural systems of the cities are inscribed.

Circulation in *New Babylon* is stratified into a series of layers in which automobile traffic is relegated to the ground level, thereby removing the street from the habitable urban complex. Long distance transportation is intended to occupy the roof zone with the inclusion of heliports and airport facilities. The space inside the sector network is reserved for pedestrian circulation, producing the city as the model of an enlarged domestic interior. Constant, in the 1964 text “*New Babylon / An Urbanism of the Future*” comments:

*“The unfunctional character of this playground like space makes any logical division of the inner spaces senseless. We rather should think of a quite chaotic arrangement of*

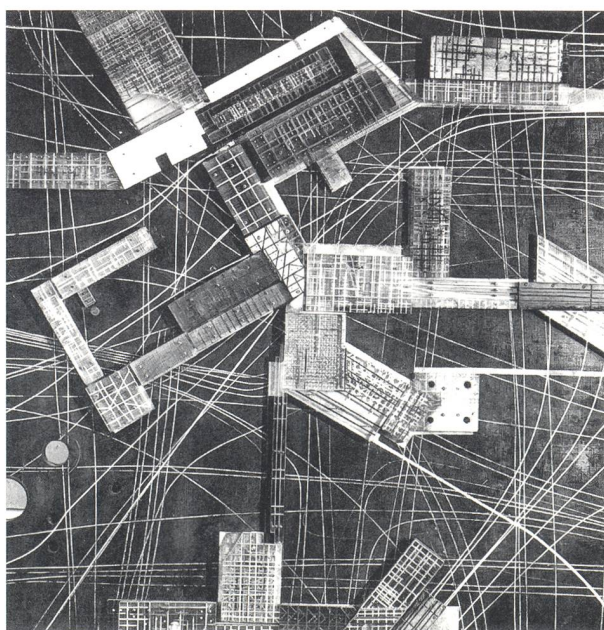


fig 7: Models of New Babylon

*small and bigger spaces that are constantly mounted and demounted by means of standardized mobile construction-elements.”<sup>12</sup>*

This aspect of the enlarged domestic interior is clearly evident in renderings such as “*New Babylon / Amsterdam Oorkmeer*” of 1962. The mobile pre-fabricated elements here assume the quality of furniture with respect to the immobile long span sectors. The quantitative scale shift of the family unit and its living environment is accompanied by a removal of both the street and the mass communications devices of the domestic interior. The models of *New Babylon* employ the iconography of mass communications media including circuit boards and wiring fig 7. The inscription of trajectories of movement in the drawings for the megastructures suggest an attempt to reify aspects of communication. This solidification of the spaces of communication presents a physical instantiation of detournement as opposed to the assault on communications media undertaken by Debord.

The uncaptioned image of the Bourgeois Living Room pictured in *Internationale Situationniste* number 8 of 1963 adjacent to the article, “*Repetition and Novelty in the Constructed Situation*” suggests a similar tension inherent in the paradox of the mass housing projects which imply togetherness although the crucial factor enabling the separation of these inhabitants is the combination of communications devices and mass media with the architectural construct fig 8. This same paradox holds for the domestic interior in which each member of the family unit is equipped with his or her commodity prohibiting any *real* form of communication to occur between them.

The production of architecture as a detourned commodity in the case of Constant’s *New Babylon* differs radically from Debord’s recognition of the “*Society of the Spectacle*” as one in which the commodity has been displaced by the *image* of the commodity. The re-usage of the social and political space of the media for Debord constitutes an instrumentalization of detournement as communication in the urban realm as opposed to a reification of communications media in architectural form.

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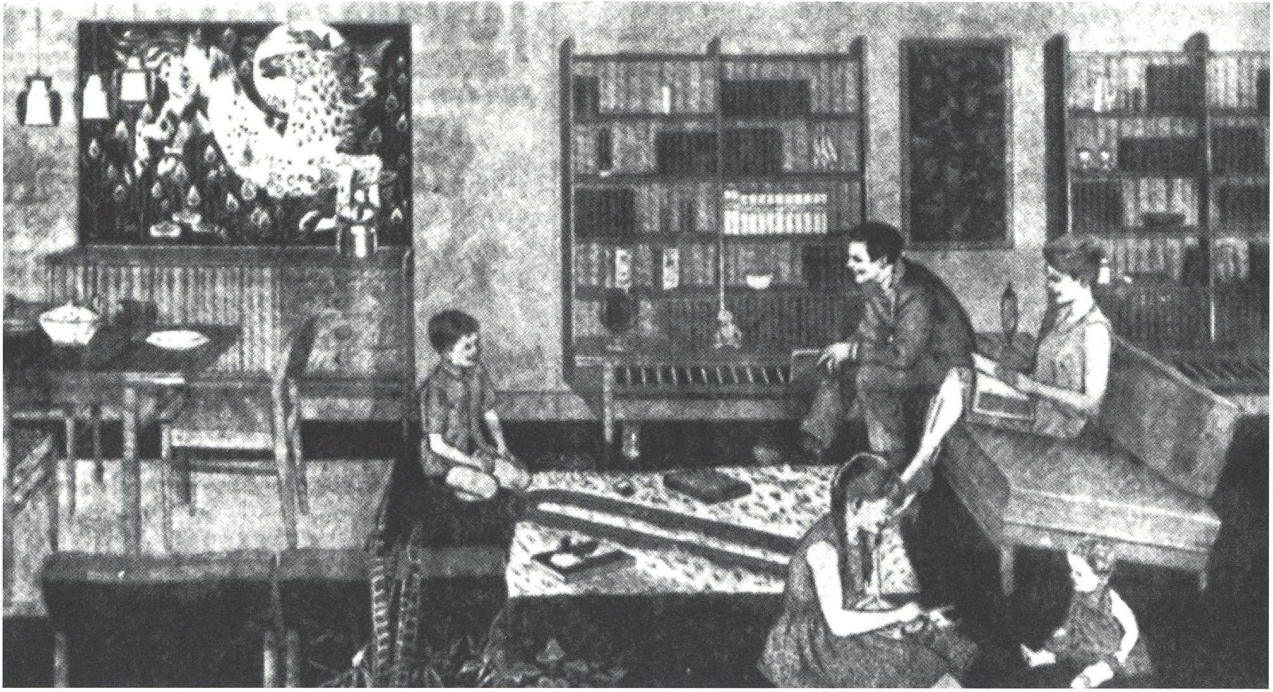


fig 8: Image of the Bourgeois Livingroom in "International Situationiste" 8/1963

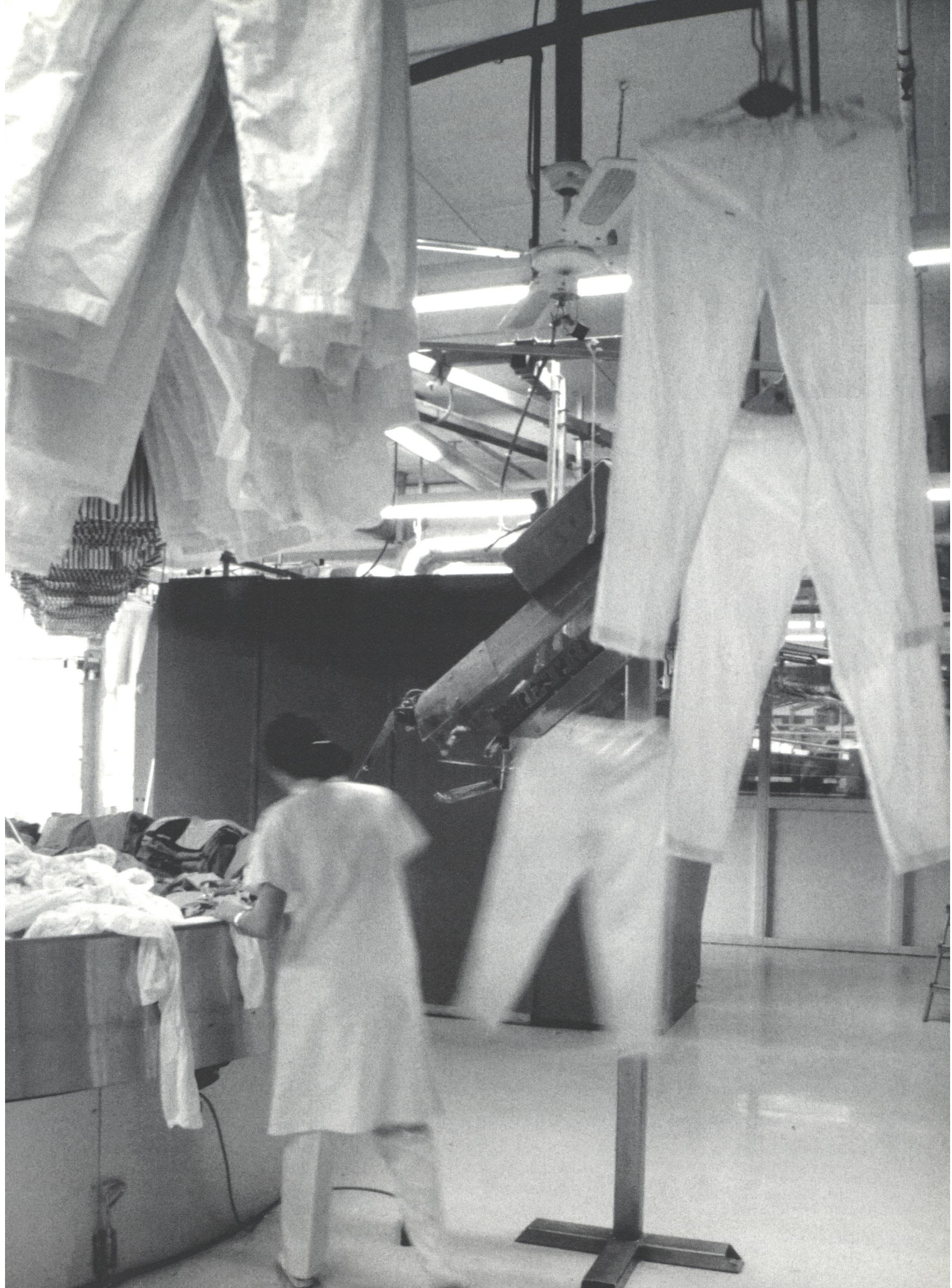
- 1 On the notion of "higher forms of communication" see Debord's 'Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life', 1961, in *The Situationist International Anthology*, Kenn Knabb, ed., (Berkeley, Bureau of Public Secrets, 1981): 75.
- 2 Karl Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts', in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Lawrence H. Simon, ed., (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Co., 1994.): 60. Also see Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*, trans. anon., (Boston, The Beacon Press, 1955.) for a more extensive characterization of homo ludens.
- 3 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, Rodney Livingstone, trans., (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1971.): 88-9.
- 4 Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Volume one, John Moore, trans., (London Verso, 1991.): 14.
- 5 Guy Debord and Gil Wolman, 'Methods of Detournement' In Knabb: 9.
- 6 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, Donald Nicholson-Smith, trans., (New York, Zone Books, 1994.): 122.
- 7 This image accompanies the German translation of the text, 'All the King's Men' from IS #8, 1963, in *Der Beginn Einer Epoche: Texte der Situationisten*, (Hamburg, Edition Nautilus, 1995.): 165.
- 8 Asger Jorn, 'Detourned Painting', in *Elisabeth Sussman*, ed., *On the Passage of a Few People Through a Rather Brief Moment in Time: The Situationist International 1957-1972*. (Boston, The MIT Press, 1989.): 142.
- 9 Abdelhafid Khatib, 'Attempt at a Psychogeographic Description of Les Halles', IS #2, 1958, trans. in *Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa*, eds., *Theory of the Derive and Other Situationist Writings on the City*, (Barcelona, ACTAR Publishers, 1997.): 75.
- 10 Guy Debord, 'Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life', trans. in Knabb: 68.
- 11 The phrase "prefabricated pseudo-events" is taken from a more extensive discourse on consumption in Debord, *Spectacle*: 141.
- 12 Constant Nieuwenhuys, 'New Babylon: An Urbanism of the Future', *Architectural Design*, June 1964: 304.





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und Verzweigung Grosser St. Bern