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Tom McDonough, *“The Beautiful Language of My Century”: Reinventing the Language of Contestation in Postwar France, 1945-1968*. Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2007. 273 pp. Illustrations, notes, index. \$34.95 (hb). ISBN 0-262-13477-2.

Review essay by Julian Bourg, Bucknell University

Tom McDonough has written a splendid book about a questionable aesthetico-political configuration. Difficulties appear less with his impressively executed study itself than with the object under examination—a constellation of artistic practices gravitating around the lodestar concept of *détournement*—or rather, problems arise for McDonough insofar as he endorses that concept and advocates its currency.

*“The Beautiful Language of My Century”* is sleek, elegant, and intricate. Its patient and astute readings of art works and exhibitions in 1950s and 1960s France and Italy, by the likes of Asger Jorn, Raymond Hains, Christo, Daniel Spoerri, Daniel Burn, and others, exemplify one of the best qualities of art-historical criticism: quite literally making us see more than we might have on our own. McDonough supplements these internalist readings with extrinsic analyses that reach out into extra-aesthetic contexts. As cultural history, these, too, are largely satisfying. Although sometimes prone to interpretive reaching (speculation or mere coincidence taking the place of evidence), the author shows how artists mediated and responded to some of the most pressing political concerns of the day, from the Algerian War to the Watts riots of 1965 to the growing predominance of late industrial consumerism. Distinctive practices of artistic and political contestation emerged as intersecting fields—the postwar French “neo-avant-garde,” broader political and economic conditions, and even debates on the independent intellectual Left—converged on discrete, punctual occasions whose richness merits deliberate and conscientious unpacking. *“The Beautiful Language of My Century”* is thus a welcome addition to the otherwise generally paltry literature on 1950s French culture, and it also, more ambitiously, invites us to reconsider the vitality of post-1944 French art, a field long neglected in favor of the familiar tale of émigrés in New York and their American progeny.[1]

The book moves in a rhythmic sequence among motifs in four movements: first, the model of *détournement* developed in the mid-1950s by the Situationist International as an immanent negation of an already nihilistic commodity culture (Roland Barthes is invoked as a theoretical fellow traveler and “battle” as an underlying rationale); second, the related practice of *décollage* amidst the chaotic climax of the Algerian War in 1961 and the contrast of Hains’s ambivalent street-art-to-gallery show with Christo’s ephemeral street barricade made of oil drums; third, the Duchampian type of the “reciprocal readymade” (“use a Rembrandt as a ironing board”) overlaid with a Marxist veneer through which relationships between use value and exchange value were dialectically reignited; and finally, reflection on the phenomenon of the festival, from Marcel Mauss and Georges Bataille to Henri Lefebvre, Claude Lefort, Roger Callois, Guy Debord, and others, all of whom can be seen as direct intellectual precursors of the carnivalesque dimensions of May 1968. A final chapter, where McDonough moves into the 1990s and 2000s and argues for the contemporary inheritance of these earlier aesthetico-political formulations, is no less fine than the rest of the book, though it might have stood alone as a separate article. As a conclusion it is somewhat disappointing. As the book’s subtitle suggests, May 1968 might have provided a better endpoint than the 1990s, since those events

indeed capped the “reinvented” contestation under examination. The existing final chapter, however, serves to underpin the larger claim that *détournement* persists today as a worthwhile, if more melancholic, strategy of politicized art. Hovering over the entire book is the echo of the assertion early on that *détournement* is a “vital aspect” of Situationist legacy “with great lessons for the present” (p. 6).

McDonough claims not to be writing a history; trying to track down the origins of *détournement*, for instance, would be “dubious” (p. 26-7). Yet one of the many virtues of “*The Beautiful Language of My Century*” is precisely the author’s careful and sophisticated reconstructions of episodes at precise times and spaces and at specific junctures of art with extra-artistic contexts. Situating Hains’s “La France déchirée” exhibition at the moment of the 1961 attempted army putsch and Évian accords, or reading Christo’s *Projet du mur provisoire* in light of the October 17, 1961 murder of Algerian protestors by Paris police—these moves are stimulating. Furthermore, McDonough does a first-rate job of succinctly reconstructing flows of intellectual influence for which there is direct textual evidence, as in his treatment of the festival from Mauss and Bataille forward. His synopses are economical and cover much ground. If anything, bolder claims lay within reach. He might have gone beyond examining specific discourses united by family resemblances among different theorists and addressed broader cultural phenomena: What are we to make of the fact that so many different thinkers, often not in dialogue with one another, latched on to ideas of the festival or the potlatch? What accounts for this vogue for radicalized ethnography? What did it mean? Without such systematizing sutures we are at times left with a hodgepodge of tidy summaries and insights whose relationships remain indeterminate. At other times, as in the case of the relationship of *détournement* and the reciprocal readymade to mass commodity culture, determinations are made. We are, however, generally led away from historical explanation and toward normative partisanship: some positions (the Situationists’) are declared more satisfying and better than others (Lefebvre’s). Still, historical punctuality and trails of cultural cross-pollination are engaging and compelling frames for the analysis.

The author is often careful to acknowledge when the evidence does not support his interpretive moves, when conjectural affinity supplants evidence. This is the case with Debord never mentioning Barthes in the mid-1950s as the model he could have been, with Christo never discussing the October 1961 massacre that might have informed his work, and with the Situationist International never explicitly citing Bataille, Callois, or Lefort on festivity. McDonough wisely admits to “speculation” in these cases, but then he goes ahead and draws his conclusions anyway. Another example of this reaching is his judgment that contemporaries who did not explicitly reflect on and interpret political events at the time were suffering from auto-repression. It is just as likely that they were thinking about other stuff. (The ambivalence of Hains’s torn posters and Godard’s film on Algeria is in some sense more aesthetically satisfying than Christo’s sexier *emballages* and oil drum barricade exactly because they expressed broader, unresolved social anxieties.)

One of the pitfalls of scholarship that relies heavily on interpretation is that one risks overestimating the significance of what one studies. The temptation seems particularly acute when studying avant-garde artists, who sometimes exaggerated the importance of their own aesthetic practices for society in general, making of their marginality the very blazon of their mettle. And the temptation is perhaps even greater when experimental aesthetic practices are alleged to have borne revolutionary political significance. Remaining too close to what one studies runs the risk of replicating and acting out some of the same dynamics as one’s object, and McDonough’s endorsing account tends to get mired in cruxes similar to those of his subjects.

Parody does not necessarily have a political valence, and the revolutionary politics of the Situationist International seem to have been gratuitous, that is, freely assumed and implied but not really justified or grounded. The form of *détournement*, of expropriating and plagiarizing the detritus of commodity culture (“cultural theft”) and then throwing it back on that culture in the name of revolution, utopia, or emancipation, is presumed to serve as a “bas[is] for a renewed political action” and as a form of “critical intervention” (pp. 20, 59). “Ritual iconoclasm” saw art and culture as one front in the revolutionary struggle and tried to balance, on one hand, the fact that art and culture were entirely imbued with the capitalist economy that was to be overturned with, on the other hand, the recognition that an “idealist fusion of the terms ‘art’ and ‘the people’” was unlikely (pp. 126-27). But overturned why? McDonough and some of his protagonists assume a Marxist anthropology, and we are left mainly with tactical questions about how revolutionary activity will go down. The dialectical dazzle of McDonough’s sympathetic reconstruction is that art was to be both destroyed and preserved through teasing, mocking, and clever anti-representational pastiche—art was to be “a means, an instrument” (Jorn criticizing Debord, p. 114), rendered obsolete (p. 134), and yet made to open up the critical possibility that mass consumer society could be surpassed. The crux then is the (representational?) status of revolutionary wholism or even utopian counter-factuality.

There are two components to the design: the model of linguistic praxis and that gratuitous “eschatology of revolution” (p. 41). The Situationist practice of *détournement*, developed out of dissatisfaction with Sartrean engaged or committed writing and bearing some loose parallels to Barthes’s mid-1950s politics of form, fits squarely within the broader structuralist paradigm, whose politicized versions also involved the theoretical practices of *Tel Quel*, Louis Althusser, Julia Kristeva, and others. McDonough presents us with the entirely familiar recipe of “symbolic resistance” (Richard Terdiman from 1985), “struggle for control of the sign’s use,” “subversive social accenting,” “literary communism,” “language ... as a site of class struggle,” and “ironic, punning plays on words” (pp. 26, 35, 43, 80). Doesn’t the version of theoretical practice whereby linguistic/textual/formal agitprop would hasten and abet significant social change—a project that has formed multiple generations of English-language academics since the 1970s—seem a little played out? At best one could ask: How’s it going? Would a response of “not so well” prove the intractability of the target—monstrous capitalism—and thus reinforce the sublimity of the model (*Français, encore un effort ...!*), or might we want to more fully interrogate the model itself? I’m not sure how great the lessons of *détournement* for the present really are.

Aside from the issue of how the politics of form may tend toward formalist politics (for example, the “end of art” as a statically predictable trope), there is also the problem of how the model of linguistic praxis may smuggle in the very “naturalism” it self-consciously attacks. One easy example of this latter, vast, and admittedly complex issue is the Situationists’ groundless revolutionism. There are many reminders in “*The Beautiful Language of My Century*” that we are dealing with artists who refused to indulge in apolitical formalism. Describing Debord’s work as pointing toward “potential transformation” and as “a hopelessly utopian effort” is one case in point (p. 42). Even if there is some maneuvering, as in the important qualification that “at this particular juncture in France, there was an *inverse* relation between the possession of a ‘correct’ political line and a work’s ability of reward continued attention” (p. 77), the concern for correct political lines nevertheless bubbles up constantly. The tightest formulation of this position is when McDonough sums up the “language of negation” as “deleting a false idea [and] replacing it with the right one” (p. 45). There is a reasonable argument as to why this particular generation, born mainly in the 1930s, invested in revolutionary or utopian politics; namely, they felt that they had been born late and missed the Popular Front, the Spanish Civil War, and even the Resistance. McDonough leans in part on Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, an acknowledged influence throughout, for this contrast of a generation’s “closed perspective” and “the promise of

radical transformation” (p. 41; cf. p. 71). Similarly, the “failure of the historical avant-gardes” to reconnect life and art served as a double bind insofar as some took inspiration from its foreclosed promises (for example, Buren’s 1968 closed gallery) (p. 105). In the end, more is at stake than the politics of form/formal politics or internecine debates among the neo-avant-garde and the intellectual-political Left; we are asked to bear witness to the project of creating an “oppositional public” (pp. 84, 96). To grasp that figure, however, we would need to know a lot more about reception and social mobilization. And at some point the well-known authoritarian character of the Situationist ambience—their quasi-Leninist desire to shape critical consciousness of the spectacular, their purges and ideological purifications (closer to the Stalinist PCF than McDonough admits)—would have to be considered as well. [2]

A cheeky clichéd way to put some of these issues, finally, is that Marcel Duchamp was indeed a Marxist, but of the *tendance* Groucho. Duchamp dramatically undermined the institutional seriousness of art, and his interpretive, conceptual, and aesthetically productive dialogues continue to be excavated. But one cannot pretend for a moment that he was committed to a leftist political agenda. In fact, it is possible that Duchamp, who did so much to dismantle the sharp divide between art and life, might have also helped reinscribe the autonomy and even the apolitical isolation of the aesthetic. Politicizing Duchampian practice to some degree runs against the grain of the kind of idiosyncratic game-playing he embodied. One can be an aesthetic anarchist without being a political one. For cleverness and “radical” aesthetic posing may offer psychological compensation, and they might even spark ephemeral moments of shared experience and the recalibration of thought, but their transformative political promises, in the sense that politics eventually involves those publics and peoples and other referents that parodic linguistic-formal play shuns, seem to be somewhat lacking. Elsewhere I have argued that the antinomian ethos of some contestatory movements yields results that are more ethical than political. [3] The aesthetic and the ethical often combine in rich and provocative ways. But using the term “political” to describe their intersections is sometimes a serious misnomer. What kind of revolution does not invite the masses?

The avant-garde continues to putter along as one ethos among many in contemporary society, though not a privileged one. The neo-avant-garde has had many heirs. The Art Strike of 1990–93 (Stewart Home) and more recent “flash mobs” (Bill Wasik)—the latter a “situation” par excellence—come immediately to mind. But the Situationists in particular appear interesting today in part for their datedness, in other words, how their commitments to avant-garde practices such as *détournement* and to revolutionary politics were symptomatic of their times. Their historical moment lay squarely between the Surrealists and Jean Baudrillard. The revolutionary overcoming of the “spectacle” Debord sought owed much to an earlier avant-garde generation, especially the politicized Surrealists, but Debord was also diagnosing the media-capital-state bubble Baudrillard would later characterize, without emancipatory or redemptive possibility, as hyper-real simulacra. Baudrillard’s simulacrum is Debord’s spectacle without the potential Hegelian *Aufhebung*. Debord might have endorsed Baudrillard’s proposition to play amidst the ruins of the real, but his gratuitous revolutionary politics led him to smuggle “the real” back in as unrealized potentiality. The paradox of Debord and others was to have secretly longed for wholeness and resolution and then gone out of their way not to realize it.

There is a certain admirable beauty in McDonough’s brazen recycling of the basically Hegelian-Marxist terms of these fifty-year-old debates. That Situationist aesthetico-political practices are questionable does not necessarily mean that they are dismissible. And McDonough’s concluding line about laying in wait for novel forms of contestation is fair enough. But we might add in conclusion that alongside the beautiful language of Debord’s century, we are dealing here with the beautiful souls of an era now passed. Twisting his intended meaning,

we'll give the last word to Hegel himself, whose famous description of the beautiful soul seems apposite to the characters and projects at hand:

“It lives in dread of besmirching the splendour of its inner being by action and an existence; and, in order to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from contact with the actual world ... In this transparent purity of its moments, an unhappy, so-called ‘beautiful soul,’ its light dies away within in it, and it vanishes like a shapeless vapour that dissolves into thin air. ... [T]his ‘beautiful soul,’ then, ... is disordered to the point of madness, wastes itself in yearning, and pines away in consumption.”[4]

## NOTES

[1] An exception to the former is now Richard Ivan Jobs, *Riding the New Wave: Youth and the Rejuvenation of France after the Second World War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007). Another invitation to the latter is Rebecca De Roo, *The Museum Establishment and Contemporary Art: The Politics of Artistic Display in France after 1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). McDonough's and De Roo's work developed in conversation at the University of British Columbia. While McDonough's engagement with *Nouveau réalisme* is serious, we still need a long-overdue systematic treatment.

[2] Debord himself was a tragic figure who ended his days wandering in an alcoholic stupor through Parisian bars, and while one can take the theory and leave the biography, there might also be telling lessons about the historical-cum-personal depressive fate of earlier revolutionary anticipations. Len Bracken, *Guy Debord: Revolutionary* (Venice, Calif.: Feral House, 1997), part 3.

[3] Julian Bourg, *From Revolution to Ethics: May 1968 and Contemporary French Thought* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

[4] G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller, foreword by J. N. Finlay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 400, 407.

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