

---

H-France Forum, Volume 3, Issue 1 (Winter 2008), No. 4

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 Gerd-Rainer Horn, University of Warwick

In a day and age when the world of art and the world of left-wing politics are like two unlit ships passing in the night, it is more than welcome to run across a piece of historical scholarship that places this relationship center stage. Tom McDonough concentrates on post-World War II artistic engagements with cultural and political critique, and his observations span the five decades from the 1950s to the 1990s—rather than the period from 1945 to 1968, as suggested in the subtitle of his stimulating work. Keenly attuned to the realities of social protest in French society, the author highlights irreverent and innovative methodologies of artistic expression. It is not always clear whether McDonough wishes to examine “the function that the artwork might serve at moments of contestation” (p. 103) or whether, more generally, he aims to investigate “the place to be occupied by cultural production in a reformulated avant-garde” (p. 105) or, to lift yet another quotation from McDonough’s text, “the function of a work within the cultural relations of production in its time” (p. 105), all highly pertinent tasks but with potentially different dynamics—about which more below. Be that as it may, the vast majority of examples from which the author draws stem from moments in historical time when social movements were at a low point or, at any rate, not operating at full force.

The most prominent “red thread” running throughout the author’s five richly illustrated chapters is the theory and practice of the Situationist International. This choice is, of course, wholly apposite, and the author’s comments on the iconoclasts around Guy Debord are consistently illuminating and insightful. Given the relative wealth of publications on Situationism, it is astounding to realize how few of these studies draw out parallels with earlier cultural firebrands. It is yet another one of the redeeming features of McDonough’s monograph that he spends much time highlighting some spiritual ancestors, such as Bertold Brecht or Walter Benjamin, whose lineage with Situationism is not necessarily self-evident even within the (frequently obscure) writings of Situationists themselves. But, of course, the author also transcends the world of the Situationist critique, and the reader is thus presented with a free-flowing overview of artistic production, viewed by McDonough as constituting simultaneously cultural and political critique, all the way up to the eve of the third millennium. But what does the author really want to say?

Clearly, the liberatory potential of art and cultural critique lies at the center of McDonough’s concern. He approvingly cites Fredric Jameson (commenting on Brecht) who pointed out that Brecht wanted “to make you aware that the objects and institutions you thought to be natural were really only historical,” thus encouraging, in McDonough’s own words, disbelief in “the fatality of a settled history” (p. 42), assisting the audience to conceive the possibility of a different, much-improved society and life. *Détournement*, *décollage*, reciprocal ready-mades, revolutionary nihilism, and other tactics are all highlighted as promising mechanisms in the arsenal of what Debord and Gil Wolman at one point termed “cultural communism” (p. 9). Rebels of culture, from Gustave Courbet and Isidore Ducasse onwards, in various ways sought to instill “freedom” in their audience, McDonough contends (p. 39). But how successful were

such moves “to construct a language of negation out of fragments of the dominant discourse, out of the very depths of reification” (p. 8)? What role can cultural rebels fulfil?

Already in the 1940s, Roland Barthes presciently underscored that artists wishing to subvert the status quo would be wise to concentrate on “form” rather than “content” (p. 23). At that time, Barthes was centrally concerned with finding effective mechanisms for art to play an active role in radical political projects. Curiously enough, McDonough, mostly dealing with rebellious artists operating in the day and age of spectacular commodity production, rarely addresses the question of the success rate or the efficacy of “unalienated writing” (p. 25) in his work. Perhaps such a question is too much to ask from a historian of art who is primarily concerned to challenge respective dominant paradigms within artistic production rather than to investigate the mechanisms with which to challenge and overturn contemporary class society as such. This reviewer certainly lays no claim to hold a magic wand that would explain how and when artistic challenges can have a maximum impact. I have raised this issue at various times in my *The Spirit of '68*, without, however, furnishing a satisfactory answer.<sup>[1]</sup> But it seems to me that cultural iconoclasts can play an extremely important part in questioning the hierarchical status quo in historical moments when social movements are at an ebb rather than in full bloom. Marcel Duchamp, Bertold Brecht, and Asger Jorn were playing a true vanguard role precisely at those moments when political non-conformity was in relatively short supply, and when—in the absence of frontal challenges to the respective states in which these artists were operating at the time—experimentations in the cultural field were seen as possibly able to prod audiences into conceptualizing a different sort of world. By contrast (and I do not mean crudely to relegate cultural non-conformity to a secondary concern, supposedly of less importance than politics as such), I would argue that at moments of political and social upheaval, the function of cultural critique often becomes (temporarily) sidelined or overshadowed by seemingly more urgent matters. Thus, it is perhaps all too symbolic to realize that—*pace* René Viénet—Guy Debord, Raoul Vaneigem, and other Situationist rebels played a distinctly marginal role when French society finally exploded in May 1968, despite the prominence of Situationist-inspired slogans. Or, to take another example from a rather different cultural context, would Beat poets have had a similarly “revolutionizing” impact in American (and not just in American) society, if their breakthrough to national and international literary prominence had occurred in the late 1960s rather than the late 1950s?

There are other, more tangible, weaknesses in McDonough’s study. In an attempt to read political meaning into artistic forms, on occasion his imagination, at least in the view of this reader, seems to get the better of him. It first occurred to me that wishful thinking, rather than reasoned and verifiable argumentations, may have inspired some of McDonough’s interpretations when the author portrays some of Christo’s exploits. Christo’s earliest employments of his wrapping technique (initially mostly virtual rather than real), such as his 1961 Project for the Wrapping of the École Militaire, may still reasonably be regarded “as a means of literalising the increasing opacity of modern ‘techno-bureaucratic’ state apparatuses and their architectural forms” (p. 84). But to claim that Christo, when devising his Project for a Temporary Wall of Metal Drums, meant to link it to the massacre and repression of Algerian demonstrators in the streets of Paris on 17 October 1961 or, in McDonough’s words, “that it was marked by these events through and through” (p. 90), is rather fanciful indeed. Such tenuous links between specific works of art and high-flying ascriptions of political meaning become more spurious as the narrative proceeds, especially in the final chapter showcasing recent works by Pierre Huyghe, Philippe Parreno, and others. Truth be told, McDonough himself repeatedly interjects that some of his interpretations are “rather occult readings” (p. 163) or “entirely speculative” (p. 90). It is thus for the reader—and, perhaps, the art historian rather than the historian—to judge. Art historians may well offer unique insights into the

hidden meanings of artistic devices that may not be readily apparent to the naked, untrained eye. But, ultimately, of course, it should not necessitate extensive training to unlock the subversive message of a given piece of art.

Be that as it may, a little bit of additional historical knowledge about the social movements at the center of McDonough's (and the Situationists' as well as others') concern would have helped to strengthen further some of the central theses the author puts forth, in particular with regard to the intimate link between artistic and political critique. Some of the radical impetus behind the Situationists' critique, for instance, appears to be largely lost on McDonough, who seems to know French history very well, but who is apparently unaware of crucial revolutionary moments in neighboring states. The Situationists, for instance, again and again drew upon historical characters and historical examples from the Spanish Civil War, emphasizing in particular the social revolutionary characteristics of Catalan and Aragonese society in 1936-37 with anarchists, such as Buenaventura Durruti, in front-rank position. At one point McDonough suggests that the Situationists dated the demise of the revolutionary tradition of the classic labour movement "to Franco's triumph in the Spanish Civil War" (p. 41). In reality, Guy Debord and other sympathizers of past revolutionary movements located this crucial moment at the point of the brutal defeat of the revolutionaries *within* the Spanish Republican camp, in particular in the moment of the violent suppression of anarchist- and POUM-inspired efforts at collectivization and self-management, symbolized by the Barcelona May Days in 1937. By the time the Spanish Republic was decisively defeated by Franco's forces on 1 April 1939, the hopes, dreams, and concrete experiments of the social revolutionary forces on the Republican side had long since been crushed by the post-May 1937 repression meted out by a curious combination of moderate social democrats and Moscow-oriented communists. A quotation contained within a footnote in the relevant passage in McDonough's text (p. 219, n. 73) even explicitly says as much, but this does apparently not register in the author's perception, fixated as he is on France.

Such 'Francocentrism' likewise emerges in full force when discussing Daniel Buren's October 1968 work in situ at the Milan Galleria Apollinaire. To emphasise the close connection between radical politics and radical innovations in the world of art, McDonough contextualizes Buren's performance in the following relative clause: "Only five months following the upheavals of May 1968...." (p. 128). Surely Daniel Buren, and certainly his artistic companions in Milan would have been aware of the fact that Italy itself, and particularly the industrial triangle in northern Italy comprising Milan, was then in the middle of a societal upheaval which, in some respects, far outpaced and certainly preceded the French events. By February and March 1968, that is, at a time when most French students were not even dreaming of occupying the Sorbonne, the entire Italian university system had ground to a halt. And Milanese universities in particular were in the forefront of these 'happenings', with building occupations commonplace from the autumn of 1967 onwards. By October 1968, Italian workers had begun to join the fray, rendering Italian urban centers increasingly contestatory terrain. Thus, to contextualize Daniel Buren's innovative contribution to the arsenal of "cultural communism" by exclusively referring to then bygone French events is missing the forest for the trees.

To McDonough's credit, however, he is in all likelihood very open to the sorts of critical comments I have addressed in this review. The spirit of contestation is at the center of his concerns. He is aware of the tenuousness of some of his formulations. And, as in the above example of his discussion of the precise moment in the Spanish Civil War when the classical revolutionary heritage, born in the heady days of the 1840s, was decisively crushed, McDonough himself often furnishes persuasive arguments against his own point of view, if sometimes in footnote quotations only. Thus, it is perhaps only appropriate—if, perhaps,

---

somewhat in the spirit of *détournement*—to end with a citation from another quotation McDonough relegates to a distant footnote. In general, McDonough seems to be agnostic with regard to the precise link between revolutionary art and revolutionary politics. All things seem to be possible—at all times. Here is what one of the most influential spirits within the Situationist heritage, Mustapha Khayati, had to say about the interaction between politics and art, on the occasion of a brief comment about a precursor in the long lineage of revolutionary artistic tendencies: “Dada had a chance of fulfillment in Spartakus, in the revolutionary practices of the German proletariat. The latter’s failure made the former’s inevitable ...” (p. 222, n. 104).

#### NOTES

[1] Gerd-Rainer Horn, *The Spirit of '68. Rebellion in Western Europe and North America, 1956-1976* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), esp. 20-23.

Gerd-Rainer Horn  
University of Warwick  
g-r.horn@warwick.ac.uk

Copyright © 2008 by H-France, all rights reserved. H-France permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the [Editor-in-Chief of H-France](#).