

Ways In and Ways Out of the Situationist Labyrinth

Alejandro de Acosta

2011, November

Contents

1	3
2	4
3	7
4	10

“Voice 1: *Howls for Sade*, a film by Guy-Ernest Debord.

Voice 2: *Howls for Sade* is dedicated to Gil J Wolman.”

– opening of Debord’s *Howls for Sade*

1

(On a street corner, then running down the street)

Old Alciphron: Sorry I’m late. I’m always late to these things!

Young Alciphron: Don’t worry, older one. I’m the only one here. Everyone else is at that Occupy thing...

OA: ... which didn’t tempt you enough, younger one?

YA: ...

OA: Anyway, before all that, we were to meet here to talk about the book by McKenzie Wark, *The Beach Beneath the Street*.

YA: Titles that recycle slogans: always a bad idea. But I am ready.

OA: As am I, with this sheaf of notes and this annotated copy. Let’s start walking. This way. Well, the first version of the book had a much more interesting title: *50 Years of Recuperation of the Situationist International*.

YA: Much better. But look, I am impatient (though I pretend not to be when I speak with you). Why either one? Why another book on the SI?

OA: Do we know them? From the point of view of our language, the first phase of translation, rendering the texts into English, is more or less accomplished. The majority of Situationist writings have been compiled, many or most images reproduced. There are several archives that collect much of the material, adding commentary and context; there are academic and non-academic anthologies.

YA: You are suggesting that translation in other senses, the second, third, *n*th phases, is unstable and ongoing?

OA: Yes. What used to be called interpretation. Look, there have been decades of Situationist-inspired projects, so much so that for some of us some version of the SI is a basic point of reference. But for others, these many entryways are not automatically ways in. An anthology or an archive, so it seems to me, is not a way in; one needs a reason, and the reason itself needs a desire. Faster.

YA: Run together desire-reason-need to find a way in, passing through the entryway?

OA: Yes – faster, let’s run, arm in arm – if one is like you, the first-timer – idealized or not – or like me, when I become capable of reading these texts anew, studying these images afresh ...

YA: So the desire-reason-need complex will eventually show the path one takes through the labyrinth ... where are we going?

OA: For some of us our projects were the crystallization of that desire, the mark of our interest, our entry into dialogue with others (and, though many of us did not suspect it, with tradition. For example, it was one way to learn to speak Marxish and Hegelese).

YA: This goes for all of us, the idealized (or not) first-timer and the rest: we want a translation into a language of our own ...

OA: ... so that the figures who appear in a book can come to seem like our friends, and vice versa ...

YA: ... so that the theoretical terms that pepper it can be analogous, often enough, to the ones we use.

OA: Indeed, I would underline that the use of situationist terms (spectacle, situation, *dérive*, psychogeography, etc.) decades later and in other places cannot but have something of analogy about it.

YA: I imagine there are more analogies to come. The issue in this sort of translation is not one of exactitude, but of metamorphosis. We like what seems off in these terms and people when they mutate what is static in our lives. But that is a condition *we* set according to *our* desires.

OA: Have I answered your question as to why one might read a book like this?

YA: More or less. At least its appearance is a good occasion to stage such questions, because it is in some ways an introduction (corresponding to the latter phases of translation), and in other ways betrays that function.

OA: Museum, and hole in the museum's wall. Stop here.

2

(At the gate of the labyrinth)

YA: Here – you mean this labyrinth?

OA: Well, at its gate. The way in, maybe the way out as well.

YA: You can begin by explaining this to me: museum, and hole in the museum's wall?

OA: Caress the stone of the gate as I do. An article in *Internationale Situationniste* 4 had the title *Die welt als Labyrinth*: a description for an exhibition that would lead from a museum to the streets in convoluted paths. Let me read a bit to you: “it is not desirable to build the labyrinth in the museum of a certain German town which is unsuitable to the *dérive*. Furthermore, the very fact of utilizing a museum brings with it a particular pressure, and the west face of the Amsterdam labyrinth was a wall specially constructed in the guise of an entrance to breach this: that hole in the wall had been requested by our German section as a guarantee of non-submission to the logic of the museum. The S.I. has also adopted, in April, a plan by Wyckaert profoundly modifying the use of the labyrinth studied for Amsterdam. The labyrinth shall not be built inside another building but, with greater flexibility and in direct relation to urban realities, on well-situated wasteland in a selected city, so as to become the setting off point for *dérives*.”

YA: I see. The labyrinth is their time...

OA: ... and so we return to Wark's better title. The reference to recuperation would seem to be an irreverent gesture rather than an angry complaint. A shrug in the face of the purists of the group.

YA: Of the idea of the group, the SI, or any group ... suggesting the inevitability of recuperation, which could be the way things are at this turn of the labyrinth ...

OA: ... or, more speculatively, a spectacular version of some quite ordinary aspect of culture. I mean a glimpse of that aspect of culture that expresses our studied cruelty to the cultures of others – which can be linked with the '68 graffiti *soyons cruels!* or Nietzsche's *be cruel with your past and all who would keep you there* ... wait, was that Nietzsche?

YA: How would I know, both hands on this stone? Anyway, this would not mean that there is no important distinction between recuperation and whatever we would face off against it,

creating situations, for example, but it does mean that, from the point of view of culture as cruelty, or at least from that of the current inevitability of recuperation, there is not much urgency in distinguishing between good and bad Situationist ideas ...

OA: ... or people. And that lack of urgency, its irreverence, is a good way to describe Wark's style: though he plays the academic game well enough, he does so with a certain lack of seriousness that, in his terms, consistently allows him to set aside the concepts (and proper names!) of high theory in favor of the incomplete ramblings and failed projects of what he calls low theory.

YA: You are going to have to explain that business of high and low theory to me.

OA: Take your hands off the stone, younger one; let us step back and gaze upon the gate. Probably the terminology arises through the twin demands of the academic market and the crude pragmatism of those we could call practitioners (activists or artists, for example). If I am right about this, high theory would be whatever intellectual mode can claim some mixture of prestige and in-fashion status in the academic world at the moment, along with the canon this mode suggests.

YA: One could say so much more about this! Where such theory comes from geographically and where it doesn't, its emphasis on proper names and adjectives formed from them, who publishes it, etc. – not to mention how anyone arrived at the idea of "theory" at all...

OA: Sure, but let's remain in his schema for now. Low theory could then be either the popularization of high theory in increasingly diluted, applied forms; or, more interestingly, it could be something else entirely, a way of theorizing that not only fails to be high theory, but does not attempt to qualify as such.

YA: Outsider theory, street theory; non-academic, or at least not primarily academic.

OA: Also, if this is to be an interesting idea, not necessarily popular theory; not necessarily theory aimed at the imaginary masses, the ideal everyman, the ghostly everywoman...

YA: According to this schema, most if not all of the theoretical works produced by anarchists (and situationists, supposing there are any) today would have to be classed as low theory.

OA: Naturally, no? This is especially interesting when we consider how many of these works propose a way of thinking and living that is to some degree impossible.

YA: Yes, and how that impossibility, rather than being solely a source of frustration for writers and readers, acts as something more on the order of an intimate, vital challenge, a lure for feeling.

OA: A challenge of this sort could be Wark's desire...

YA: For that to be clear, we would have to know who Wark is addressing in this book. For my part, I am not sure. I am not sure he is sure.

OA: Yes, that is why I have to invent ideal first-time readers for him.

YA: Well, if I follow what you said a minute ago, he certainly develops Situationist terms and concepts in a satisfyingly *low* way, by which I mean: not enough of a definition to satisfy a theorist; enough to get a creative mind going in an interesting direction.

OA: Or, enough not to have read a thousand books before "putting ideas into practice," as they say, though this schema of reading-and-then-acting is silly indeed...

YA: Low theory would have to sabotage that schema, or result from its sabotage. Let's come back to theory and its terms on the other side. We are still in need of a way in. What about Situationist people (since we won't have the problem of wondering whether people can be put into practice)?

OA: The last time I reviewed a book on the Situationists, one of a spate of academic books that have appeared in the last decade or so, I inserted this remark in passing: "Many commentators on

the SI either hallucinate themselves into the decades-old fray of expulsions and corrections, or they pull away into an abstract and scholarly safety zone.” In Wark’s favor, I can say that he does neither of these. I continued: “Could it be that this split is an effect of the continual centering of Guy Debord as originator, founding genius, even Bretonian ‘pope’ evidenced in this anthology (from its title on), a certain ‘Debordism’ diagnosed by Luther Blissett with all of the spite reserved by situationists for nouns with that suffix?”

YA: So in placing (for you, unexpected) emphasis on everyone-but-Debord, some of them so-called minor figures, and their versions of the Situationist project...

OA: ... Wark dismisses the purists of the SI by writing as if there was never really one group. Listen to this bit: “One discovers in the first three years of the SI many potential versions of it”...

YA: ... and later too. It is hard to find the story of Debord as pope here. He is rather a secretary, writing letters to and about practically everybody.

OA: I noted that, although he does not place Debord at the center of his narrative, Wark does not criticize him for the practice of exclusion, which would be, for some, evidence for his own sense of centrality.

YA: It is a qualified explanation. Writing that he does not think there was one SI changes the status of exclusions.

OA: Listen to this part: “Situationists were expected to know what was expected of them and without being told. Debord’s policy as secretary was ‘to place a priori confidence, in all cases, and only until the first proof to the contrary, in a certain number of recognized comrades, based upon objective criteria.’ The reason for most exclusions is not mysterious. It was a failure to live up to expectations. Members are what they do: ‘No problem in our collective action can be resolved by good will.’ A certain unsentimental understanding of how friendships form and dissolve, of how character becomes different to itself as it struggles in and against time underlie the distinctive quality of Situationist subjectivity, where ‘neither freedom nor intelligence are given once and for all.’” Repeat: in Debord’s SI, exclusion was perhaps related more to a *certain understanding of friendship* than to the leftover habits of communist parties and groupuscules it is usually connected to by commentators.

YA: I would rather not be friends with someone that places his friends in such double binds!

OA: Your preferences or mine aside, what could be more common? Driven, intense people are often this way – nothing “sinister” about it, as Wark puts it. For a party in power, or seeking power, to exclude is indeed sinister. For a group such as the Situationist International (or some version thereof) to do so is another matter entirely. Wark aptly calls them “a provisional micro-society”: something between a political group and a band of friends.

YA: An affinity group? People are always explaining how they come together and how they stay together, not how they are disassembled or fall apart ...

OA: In any case, some people make friends for life, and others don’t; some friendships end well, and others end badly; and to the degree that some of that is done freely, I prefer to understand this as one of the many uses of freedom in friendship, rather than encroaching on them, even by criticism.

YA: So that would be one example of the openness of Wark’s irreverent approach.

OA: Yes. It is ultimately pleasant to think that this might be a sign that there are now many ways into learning from the Situationists. For example, in decentering Debord, Wark also revokes the status of *Society of the Spectacle* as the defining text of Situationist theory. I consider it a good thing that people might now begin with something other than *Society of the Spectacle*. For all its

interest, this attempt to give the movement a theory text (or to invent a movement by writing one, in classic socialist/communist fashion) is done at the cost of the expulsion of the idea of situation, probably so as to give center stage to the by now clearly dubious political proposal of worker's councils.

YA: So you are celebrating the decentering of this book? I haven't read it yet.

OA: Decentered, it will be better reading. Past decentering it, those of us who have learned something from it, and some irresponsible others, will have to rewrite it one day without the dialectic and in a way that renders the worker's councils a local solution (Council-bolos?) and restores the construction of situations to its more critical place. Otherwise generation after generation will continue to get mired in the crudest dualism of appearance and reality ... separation realized ...

YA: What about the other one I always hear about, *The Revolution of Everyday Life*?

OA: Well, Vaneigem barely appears in *The Beach*. It is less clear why – probably, whereas *Society of the Spectacle* has too much of a high theory agenda, *Revolution* sets too much of a unilateral tone. You know, the younger generations ... whatever one ultimately makes of these decenterings, they are also ways to undo some of the binds and knots that we have inherited from the Situationists and their interpreters.

YA: I think it is the nightmare of some to consider that they come together with their interpreters.

OA: Ha! 50 years of recuperation!

YA: ... better than fifty years of introduction, half a century of getting ready to live...

OA: ... in some sense even the little betrayal that is in irreverence can be a way out for which we will be grateful should the labyrinth grow tiresome.

YA: But now I am imagining two labyrinths: their time, and ours.

OA: Which suggests that we are ready to pass inside. Let's be silent for a while.

3

(Some time later, inside the labyrinth)

YA: It is very dark in here.

OA: What have you been thinking about in the dark, younger one?

YA: Proper names...

OA: ... these others, strange friends...

YA: Wark devotes the bulk of *The Beach* to discussions of everyone-but-Debord. But one could also say that the first marginal situationist in Wark's book is ... Guy Debord.

OA: Before appearing as the secretary, he shows up in the days of Lettrism as a "street ethnographer" interested in the life of non-working people – hanging out with dropouts and delinquents. I remember this line: "Debord was researching a people who were neither bourgeois nor proletarian nor bohemian, and decidedly not middle class."

YA: In their company, before there was a group, or before the group had a name, ideas and experiences were exchanged, friendships and enmities bloomed.

OA: And love affairs.

YA: And that togetherness is something other than politics or community.

OA: [Sigh]

YA: In this street research we might have learned the stakes in sticking together as gangs do. As Ralph Rumney said: “Our social exclusion made us a close group.”

OA: And love affairs? Wark describes Michèle Bernstein’s novels *All the King’s Horses* and *The Night* as *détournements* of F. Sagan and A. Robbe-Grillet, then-popular novelists, and at the same time versions of her relationships with Debord and others. Love triangles, and so on.

YA: Gangs ... different sorts of knots and binds?

OA: Wark makes this an opportunity to briefly broach the subject of sexual politics, and maybe there is something here to meditate on: when the inevitably narcissistic novel of one’s life, that novel we are all involuntarily writing about ourselves, is to be written out, it might be desirable to take a detour through the spectacular presentation of another’s life.

YA: For me, that there were *two* novels based on the same events is perhaps the remarkable, rebellious point in all that.

OA: Rebellious writing? What about Alexander Trocchi’s collective writing project, *sigma portfolio*?

YA: Its outcome was certainly something other than a novel: an “interpersonal log. It is to be an open-ended series of simple typed and duplicated documents.”

OA: In Trocchi’s own words: “This gambit, a round-robin which includes *n* participants, an interpersonal experiment in expression; a man responding as and when he pleases; copies of his response at once roneo-ed for circulation; individuals chiming in, checking out at any time.”

YA: What is roneo-ed?

OA: I don’t know either. Some kind of duplication, ditto machine.

YA: Predictably, Wark gets excited about *sigma* and describes it as “a web of logs before there was even an internet.”

OA: More interestingly, here is Trocchi again: “we propose immediate action on the international scale, a self-governing (non-)organization of producers of the new culture beyond, and independent of, all political organizations...”

YA: You have certainly memorized a lot of this book!

OA: No, I have a small light with me, and my annotated copy. You didn’t notice because I am walking behind you. I want to talk about Asger Jorn, which is going to require some lengthy quotes. Close your eyes and re-enter the dark of the labyrinth. First, concerning a recent object of some controversy, the fact that he continued to fund the Situationists after his exit, he said: “my interest in the situationist movement is purely personal and passionate, in a direct fashion, and, if the inevitable developments of social circumstances necessitate my exclusion from the movement this changes absolutely nothing in my purely economic attitude towards this movement. The economic surplus that my social situation, insofar as I am a painter, gives me is best placed with the situationist movement, even if this movement is obliged to attack me for being in a situation from which I can’t escape, but which embarrasses the movement.”

YA: An appropriate complement to your earlier statements about friendship and exclusion. But I thought that, overall, the discussion of Asger Jorn’s theoretical contributions in *The Beach* is confused.

OA: Perhaps Jorn, the “amateur Marxist,” was confusing. One can get at least a sense of the primacy of aesthetic over scientific considerations for him. Take his flirtation with one of the most

obtuse works in the Marxist canon, Engels' *Anti-Dühring*: "It is Engels who leads Jorn down the slippery slope of a dialectics of nature, and like Engels he risks a somewhat vapid generalization of certain figures from scientific literature ... But what distinguishes Jorn from Engels is not just that his readings in scientific literature are more contemporary; they are readings of a different kind. Jorn does not aspire to a materialist world view, as Engels did, but a materialist attitude to life. He wants not a metaphysics legitimized by science but a pataphysics that reads science creatively. Rather than imitate scientific writing, Jorn – like Alfred Jarry – appropriates from scientific writing according to his own desires."

YA: It seems to me that the bulk of Wark's case for low theory rests on what he says about Jorn.

OA: It is almost inevitable that he faces off Jorn (not Debord!) vs. Althusser in the name of low theory. "Jorn's amateur Marxist theories from the 1940s and early '50s went largely unpublished at the time and received scant attention. The most influential appropriation of Marxist thought would not be Sartre's but that of Jorn's contemporary Louis Althusser. They could hardly be more different. Althusser spent the war in a POW camp, not the Resistance. Althusser's thought was in Jorn's terms clearly that of a materialist world view. It took science rather than aesthetic practice as its model. Althusser stayed within the Communist Party (with Maoist sympathies) rather than break with it. He made Marxism respectable within the space of the academy, rather than attempting to found a new nexus between theory and practice outside of it. Althusser was much more interested in history as objective process than as subjective practice. Where Althusser became a respected academic philosopher, Jorn's academic advisor gently suggested that his thesis was not really the sort of thing that could even be submitted."

YA: Why all these lengthy quotes for this guy?

OA: Be patient. Low theory can be long-winded too. "Jorn points towards the question of practice, outside of, and now after the eclipse of, both the Communist and bourgeois versions of history. If Althusser cements a place within the academy for developing Marxism as a critical postwar discourse, he does so at the expense of aligning it with high theory. Marx is absorbed into the conventions of academic thought, into its spaces of authority, its codes of discipline, its temporality of semesters and sabbaticals. Jorn offers something in addition to all that. His is a development of Marx as a critical postwar discourse that creates its own games, makes its own rules, answers to a quite different time, and belongs to a more marginal but more interesting space, the space not of an institution but of a provisional micro-society, within which the practice of thought might be otherwise."

YA: Hmmm. All of this will take some rumination. Wark assumes we have a stake in the outcome of Marxism. You might; I don't.

OA: But there are analogies to be made with anarchist theory as it exists and to come, no? Think it over. Also, as with the two novels, it's not trivial that he made such bizarre paintings while writing all this stuff. We'll talk about it later when you've had a chance to see them in good lighting. Constant?

YA: Much more appropriate for this dark enclosure. From the early researches on urbanism to the New Babylon project, he seems to have had an influence, or at least his own take, on the construction of situations. He proposed a dynamic urbanism of movable, I almost want to say poseable buildings. The psychological effects of an environment upon a person or group are quite limited if buildings are heavy and static ...

OA: So set people *and* buildings into motion: “Owning property affords someone a house in which to be at home, at the price of being homeless in the world. Dispense with property, dispense with separation, and the feeling of being merely thrown into the world goes with them. Our species-being can give vent to its wanderlust, at home in a house-like world. Constant thought modernity was already accelerating a return to a nomadic existence. New Babylon is nomadic life fully realized.”

YA: Architecture set in motion, pliable architecture, allows the events of life, no longer mere psychological effects, to be primary!

OA: Dynamism seems to make us raise our voices! Jacqueline de Jong?

YA: She appears most dramatically with the Second Situationist International, “a rival and a replacement” for what was, for them, the “First” SI. Their journal, *Situationist Times*, was an alternative to *Internationale Situationniste*. In their founding document, one can read: “now everyone is free to become a Situationist without the need for special formalities.” I loved that.

OA: So maybe you have an opinion on this matter of exclusions as well?

YA: No, that is their business. But I prefer to do things without special formalities.

OA: De Jong writes in a letter to Debord: “The Situationist International has to be considered either as an avant-garde school which has already produced a series of first-class artists thrown out after having passed through their education OR as an anti-organization based upon new ideology which is situationist and which has not yet found in details its clear formulations in the fields of science, technique, and art.” The anti-organization does not practice exclusion, but rather allows an uncontrolled inclusion: “everybody who develops theoretically or practically this new unity is automatically a member of the situationist international and in this perspective the *Situationist Times*.”

YA: Well, we could have inherited this schizo version instead of the paranoiac pro-Situ, post-Situ, etc. arrangements that respected the central and centralizing version...

OA: Schizo, that reminds me ... Chtcheglov?

YA: Almost not mentioned at all! I will remember Chtcheglov with a line from outside Wark’s book. Poor Chtcheglov! He was bored in the city. In Olympia I found a book of poems about him. Here is the best line: “The moon rises above the State.”

OA: Our dialogue is lunar, no? I believe we have found our way to one of the exits.

YA: Let us pass through the hole in the wall, older one.

OA: On the other side, we might speak about some situationist terms before parting ways ... these words that needed, perhaps still need definition...

4

(Outside the labyrinth, on another street, maybe the same street)

YA: It is bright here, or at least brighter. And I am the one who asks the questions now, older one! You are the one who knows something about these terms that are more concrete than ideas, less precise than concepts, and I want to see what news you learned in this book of Wark’s. My list is short. *Decomposition?*

OA: It might be helpful to compare the definitions from *Internationale Situationniste* 1. Here is the one for decomposition: “The process in which traditional cultural forms have destroyed themselves as a result of the emergence of superior means of controlling nature which make possible and necessary superior cultural constructions. We can distinguish between the active phase of the decomposition and effective demolition of the old superstructures – which came to an end around 1930 – and a phase of repetition that has prevailed since that time. The delay in the transition from decomposition to new constructions is linked to the delay in the revolutionary liquidation of capitalism.” Wark broadens the context for understanding this idea, presenting decomposition in and as the passage from a technique of avant-garde art to a critique of modern life: taking things apart until we notice that things are falling apart ...

YA: ... or as we notice things are falling apart. And then still taking things apart, but in other ways and for other reasons.

OA: One source is Isidore Isou: “When most people thought of the postwar years as a time of reconstruction, Isou wanted to push the destruction of culture still further. His trans-historical theory of culture took the will to create as its primary axiom. Not Marxist necessity, not Sartrean freedom, but creation is the highest form of human activity. Creation takes us from the spit of unconsciousness to the eternity of a consciously created history, for while the artist creates within history, the act of creation touches the eternal. All forms – aesthetic and social – move from a stage of amplification to one of decomposition. In the amplification stage, a form grows to incorporate whole aspects of existence. The amplified form shapes life and makes it meaningful. In the period of decomposition, forms turn on themselves, become self-referential. Forms fall from grace and from history. As the form decomposes, so does the life to which it once gave shape. Form becomes unreal; language becomes tame: ‘Tarzan learns in his father’s book to call tigers cats.’”

YA: But somehow the situationist can get into decomposition and operate within it, push it farther? Tiger cats are not just sad, they are also funny. They are dialectically reversible to cat tigers, mini-tigers, suggesting the power of the small and the weak ... Yes, I see. This decomposition was to be pursued “to the limit.” I like that. *Dérive*?

OA: From the journal: “A mode of experimental behavior linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances.” Wark supplements this with the memory of your friend Chtcheglov, his part in the invention of street ethnography; this wandering or drifting around urban spaces could be understood more precisely as a discovery of lived time. This is time devoted neither to work nor to leisure. The time of the non-working classes.

YA: The time of research ... of low theory. *Situation*?

OA: Well, you know, “A moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambience and a game of events.” As you might have heard, part of the polemical function of this definition is to replace the concept of the artwork as commodity. But Wark suggests that in the background of the polemic there is also an engagement with the idea of freedom. He helpfully contrasts Sartre’s use of the term situation: “Sartre ... famously makes the category of freedom a central one, but in so doing [has] a sly recourse also to the category of situation. That which is for-itself, consciousness, presupposes something external to it. ‘There can be a free for-itself only in a resisting world.’ It is because of the intractable physicality of things that freedom arises as freedom.” But the situation as defined above does not distinguish between consciousness and what is external to it.

YA: Which perhaps explains the attraction of the adjective *unitary* for some of these folks.

OA: To construct freedom, construct situations: micro-worlds, provisional micro-societies, in which the obstacle and what it blocks are simultaneously transformed.

YA: I am thinking of Constant, again ...

OA: It is a telling aspect of situation as a low-theoretical term that it includes a hidden reference to, and correction of previous high-theoretical concepts of, the supremely recuperable idea of freedom. And?

YA: ... I almost don't want to bother, given what you've said so far. There's plenty to get going with ...

OA: So ...

YA: Oh, what the hell. Spectacle?

OA: The term is not defined in the initial list in *Internationale Situationniste* and was later overdefined...

YA: ... Debord aiming in *Society of the Spectacle* at a concept worthy of high theory, so you have suggested.

OA: Wark somewhat perversely amuses himself by discussing it not through Debord's opus, as social relation mediated by images or materialized worldview or topsy-turvy world but through the work of his sometimes friend, sometimes enemy, the sociologist Lefebvre. For Lefebvre it is "the great pleonasm, the Thing of Things." As though the term was already saturated with meaning at the beginning – as though the books that speak of it (Lefebvre's *and* Debord's) are also pleonastic ... The definition of the spectacle and the spectacle of definition: schema for high theory. Wark allows us to consider this sociological appropriation of what was hardly intended as a sociological concept as a moment of 50 years of recuperation...

YA ... this term, so it would seem, has a different status.

OA: The first three already belong to low theory. Almost no one cares about them. This last one will have to be re-appropriated if it is to be of use.

YA: As long as re-appropriated does not suggest the mastery that is high theory's concern. I think rather of setting it adrift, along with all the others.

OA: Wark says: "Low theory returns in moments, not of disappointment, but of boredom. We are bored with these burnt offerings, these warmed-up leftovers. High theory cedes too much to the existing organization of knowledge and art. It is nothing more than the spectacle of disintegration extending into knowledge itself. Rather a negative theory that reveals the gap between this world and its promises. Rather a negative action which reveals the gap between what can be done and what is to be done."

YA: But is all low theory negative theory? We need to think this through, work through the permutations ... we need *spaces* in which to do this ...

OA: "For such experiments the Situationist legacy stands ripe for a *détournement* that has no respect for those who claim proprietary rights over it."

YA: Rights: the museum. Experiments: the hole in the museum's wall. Where else?

OA: Though one is often housed inside the other, "The archive too is a space for *dérive*."

YA: The city and the archive ... well-positioned wastelands, they said. But they are dead. Who is there now, in the *dérive*?

OA: In some exemplary and dangerous sense, we are. In another sense, we only find a mask, that of translator or researcher of low theory. In a third sense, no one is there.

YA: What am I supposed to do with that answer? I am going back into the labyrinth. I want to see if the way in is also a way out. Wherever I come out, I guess I'll go visit the Occupy thing after all. But I am going to be late.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Alejandro de Acosta
Ways In and Ways Out of the Situationist Labyrinth
2011, November

Retrieved on July 12th, 2016 from
<http://theanvilreview.org/print/ways-in-and-ways-out-of-the-situationist-labyrinth/>

theanarchistlibrary.org