Raoul Vaneigem, Francois Bott
Refusals and Passions
2003

Retrieved on 30th April 2019 from
http://www.notbored.org/vaneigem-interview.html
Questions and side-bar by Francois Bott. Published in the 12 September 2003 issue of *Le Monde.* Translated from the French by NOT BORED!, 28 October 2003. Minor correction made 19 June 2013 and 7 December 2014. Thanks to Alastair Hemmens.

**theanarchistlibrary.org**

# Refusals and Passions

Raoul Vaneigem, Francois Bott

2003

**CONVERSATION: The author of *Treatise on Living for the Young Generations* pursues his quest for happiness.**

Lovers of Existence.

In *The Knight, the Lady, the Devil and Death,* Raoul Vaneigem takes stock in the manner of the navigators. These aren't his Memoirs. He's asking the time. What time is it in my own existence? "It is a time in which the years efface themselves," Vaneigem writes in the Preamble. "They abandon us all the more easily because we have refused to count them. They only leave us in a forest that is both strange and familiar, worrisome and peaceful…"

Born in 1934 in Lessines, Belgium, Raoul Vaneigem was, in his youth, one of the strollers of the big cities who plotted against the market society, and one of musketeers of the Situationist International, which spread the most subversive ideas. Published in 1967, his *Treatise on Living*

*for the Young Generations* and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* inspired the May 1968 movement and revived revolutionary hopes among the even the least dreamy.

Thirty-five years have passed. Guy Debord committed suicide on 30 November 1994. Retired to the countryside, not too far from Brussels, Raoul Vaneigem has continued to write, complement his *Treatise* with such works as *The Book of Pleasures, Address to the Living, Declaration of Human Rights, The Era of the Creators…* Rustic writer, writer of the dawn, the old musketeer has lost none of his critical verve with respect to a world subservient to the dictatorship of money. This great lover of existence, launched since his youth in search of happiness, despite bad weather and bad days, has kept his refusals and passions with us.

**Question:** In *The Knight, the Lady, the Devil and Death* (editions Cherche Midi), you speak of your own existence, which is a manner of asking for the time. *What time is it?* [translator: English in original] *"Where are you in time?"* wrote the boxer-poet Arthur Cravan. Perhaps at a certain moment of their lives the fashion in which these writers asked the time was definitive and different…

**Answer:** To the question posed by Cravan, Gide looked at his watch and replied, whatever the real time was, "It is five o'clock." We more often ignore the point at which living poetry disturbs the time ruled by making a living. I don't claim that all of my hours are spent free from work, but I try to break out of the channels of work and boredom, and I know that only the happiness of one and all can perfect my own happiness. I obstinately continue to privilege the time of pleasure, of love, of amenities, of creation, of beginnings [trans: *commensalite*]. I'm not putting forward, like some hedonist, a remedy to an-

guish. These moments, which I champion with scorn for received ideas — they are never finished. They help me to live better, to better explore the labyrinth where one desire hides in another.

**Question:** In the book, you attempt, like Montaigne, to paint from life, so as "to enlighten a last voyage, backwards and against all, to again be the first." You don't act afraid of death… or aging. You speak of eternal moments. "Life is ageless," you say. "We fool time."

**Answer:** I will always love breaking the spell that dooms our destiny to an ineluctable downfall. Wear-and-tear, sickness, [and] death are the effects of an absent life, not an ontological curse. It is not death that is frightening, but the mortifying control that kills us daily — the denaturation and wasting of our living forces. I have too much life to bother myself with worries about death while I'm still exhausting my passions. A thought that doesn't find favor in a society in which money ages and kills its victims with their consent. He who samples the wonderments of living knows true youthfulness, which leaps beyond the ages. It is necessary to finish with the operative senility that identifies youth with profitable and consumable frenzy. The time that I insist upon is the time of the heart.

**Question:** Once again like Montaigne, you affirm that you are the author of a single book. You haven't ceased to rewrite, to complete, to update *Traite de savoir-vivre a l'usage des jeunes generations* [trans: *Treatise on Living for the Young Generations,* known in English as *The Revolution of Everyday Life*]. Your judgment of commodity society hasn't changed. It remains severe and radical. You evoke "Mozart's tears," "the noise and fury of History," and you speak of "universal despair." "The quest for money," you write, "is a killer insanity for everyone."

**Answer:** I have never written to clarify, revise and correct the mess that is my everyday existence. I rewrite in line with my desires, they modulate according to the fundamental accords of life. I have never ceased to try to destroy this society

of profit, which I execrate, but I no longer have the intention of destroying myself along with it. I see the emergence and conscience of a human society that does away with several millennia of commodity history and evolution, and replaces them with a true human evolution. Neither prophet, mystic, nor aesthete, I only work with the values that will one day build, on the ruins of mercantlism, a living society. I mock the beautiful style, I will pursue those thoughts that increase my pleasure.

**Question:** One morning in the 1960s, you and Guy Debord traced the steps of Malcom Lowry. You were high on mescaline … before visiting the city of Sarcelles. Was this a preventive measure?

**Answer:** The doctrine of immediate profit, as practiced by political "affairism" and the real estate market, constructed — just 30 kilometres outside of Paris — the decor that would come to cover the entire planet. The architects constructed mafia ghettoes where "clientelism" annihilated revolutionary consciousness in the name of the fetishism of money. They made their personal fortunes before abandonning it and having it taken over, according to the law of complementarity, by petty delinquency and the repressive security forces. Our crazy walks were a real descent into hell, into an arrangement of barracks that made dreaming and strolling impossible… walls oozing a boredom that doesn't echo diversions other than morbid games of violence and crime. Our headache was less alcoholic than prescient.

**Question:** And when were extinguished the hopes of May 1968, when you drank, in your words, "the little mark on the bar of the disheveled," in one of the "lost bistros" of which you were so fond?

**Answer:** The evening that we left the Institute of National Pedagogy, which we had occupied in May 1968, I proposed to my friends to drink a mark in each one of the bistros situated on the left side of the street where we derived. It seemed to me that we were following in the footsteps of the combatants of

closes according to my own dispositions and the imperatives of the dominant world. I am conscious of the wanderings of the desires and annoyances, meanderings and impasses that form my destiny. I amuse myself by uncovering the meaning of my gestures, furtive thoughts, dreams. I orient in my favor the roads that come to me, guided by the only care of taking pleasure and becoming better according to an alchemy in which misfortune becomes a raw material to be transmuted.

**Question:** More than a revolution, it is a change in civilization that you hope for and announce.

**Answer:** We assist in the ending of a civilization founded on the exploitation of man [sic] and nature, and the emergence of a civilization that calls upon the human capacity to re-create the world and thereby create a destiny. The dynamic element resides in the appearance of a new mode of production: the recourse to natural renewable energies and the re-naturalization of agriculture. These things will revoke the archaic form of an economy that is desocialized, not invested in the closed circuits of stock speculation. I hope that the reclamation movements will henceforth orient themselves around their preoccupations with the gratuity and quality of life, with making public transportation free, abolishing all charges at health clinics, multiplying schools at which there's living teaching, and demanding the right of universal insurance for all.



the Paris Commune. The more we wandered in the mists of a frozen alcoholic high, the more we sensed the change to hate of the unsteady and ephemeral sympathy of the patrons we'd witnessed [...] This was at a time when the people of Versailles were out on patrol, they wanted to put us up against a wall and shoot us so that their lack of awareness might sleep better. I have measured the point at which disenchantment produces the promise of life not warped by the reflexes of death and destruction.

**Question:** Two books inspired the Spring of 1968: your *Treatise on Living* and Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle.* Nevertheless, you didn't work together to write them...

**Answer:** The two works were created according to individual specificity and a communal resolution to have done with the old world. We discussed a great deal before writing. Once we'd resolved to develop our ideas in books, we stopped discussing. The resulting texts happily confirmed that the two machines of war, though they had very different natures, shot the same red cannonballs. By the time *The Society of the Spectacle* was republished, Debord had stopped drinking even the slightest amounts of alcohol. We had the time to catch up with the editors who were resigned, after so much procrastination, to publish us.

**Question:** Evoking your relationship with Guy Debord, you speak of a friendship "founded on alcoholic exuberance and rigorous thought."

**Answer:** In incarnating the negative, we cast a look without compliance at the trashcans of the commodity. Sustained by the leisure of drinking and kissing, and as much as we celebrated pleasure, our propensity for global critique easily nourished our starved lucidity. Our ideas were improved by a communal passion for attaining the extreme. Our sentiments exalted what is mandated by history — which we will make — by executing the death sentence that market civilization has pro-

mulgated against itself. It was a period of high jubilation in the midst of the worst despair.

**Question:** In the face of "existential penury," you insist upon your passions: love, friendship, the avidity and curiousity of living, the pleasures of knowledge and the knowledge of pleasures, beauty and the mystery of things, the geography of chance encounters and dreams, the alchemy of time, the great game of existence and the voyage within what you call "the labyrinth of destiny" …

**Answer:** The absolute preeminence accorded money has precipitated the debacle of traditional values and, little by little, effaced the references on which societies haved guided themselves for millennia: hierarchal power, the authority of the male and the father of the family, respect for the army and the police, the supremacy of religious institutions, the virtue of sacrifice and work… It will be a beautiful *tabla rasa,* if affairism hasn't propagated a nihilism in which everything is permitted except for life. Reclaiming our humanity is reinventing La Carte du Tendre, in which the desire to play with beings and things is allowed to claim and heighten the pleasures long dismissed as garbage. Our progressions gropingly discovered a world to explore and create, like an infant whose training consists of finding what's agreeable and avoiding what's misfortunate. The construction of destiny isn't anything but this.

**Question:** Like Stendhal, you are an indefatigable seeker of happiness. But happiness remains a novelty, an unknown continent…

**Answer:** "Happiness is a new idea," Saint-Just said. This idea is concretized, but in the worst fashion, in the proliferation on the shelves of ready-to-throw-away plastic prestige and the excretions of the agricultural industry. And in the service of packaging the commodity. All that must be re-done. Happiness must be reinvented. This is the chance to strike, in a world in which unhappiness makes the laws.



**Question:** Once again like Stendhal, you elogize love and absolute love, without excluding diversity or libertinage. You rather poignantly give "infinite gratitude" to the women in your life. You also speak of a "refuge against distress."

**Answer:** The essential of who I am, is that I'm devoted to my friends of several hours, several months [or] several years, [my] lovers or friends. Women aren't the only ones who learn to give life. If torments enflame the passions of love, they also authentically teach one to explore La Carte du Tendre, to desert the territories conquered by money, ambition, power, the territories of barbarism. Love appears as a refuge against distress, but it itself becomes distressing if the lovers fail to implant everywhere the ferment of life, creative pleasure, sensitive intelligence, generosity. I'm inclined to think that it is our true gravitation. To detourn Fourier without betraying him, I say: love is the science of pleasures that organizes destinies. In this sense, I always aspire to an absolute love. Freedom for everyone may seem chimerical. It is thus that I live, with the idea that the new world will be amorous or it will not be (anything).

**Question:** In the chapter you dedicate to the "labyrinth," you write that we are "surrounded by signs," but that "we refuse to read them." Which signs? And is this "labyrinth that is me" [trans: *labyrinth du moi*] confused with the "labyrinth of the world"? You allow a glimpse of a "poetic science of destinies" that logic will oppose to that of profit and will reverse the order of cause and effect…

**Answer:** Each instant we are enjoined to be servile and obey the mechanistic economics that govern the commodity. Steadily, we agree to get used to manipulated objects, to being sold on the employment market, according to the criteria of saleability, competition, competitiveness, exchange, price, spectacular packaging. Against this economized life, which conditions us both psychologically and physically, I try to break the boredom of the routine, the choices imposed on me every minute, in a labyrinth of possibilities that opens or