piness. It is the same sort of invention that persuades us that we need eight types (pick a number) of shampoo, depending on our age, gender, profession, activity level, and the texture, coloring and sheen of our hair.

There are points in the work of a designer at which it is necessary to become completely immersed in the internal logic of our work. Creative work is not possible without the intimacy of close proximity. But sooner or later the process has to reconnect to a larger, external logic. There has to be a set of reference points that lie beyond individual works or clients, some sort of guide that can locate your activity within a collective value system. Without this, dog-biscuit boxes are undoubtedly as worthy as anything else.

When I received the first draft of the FTF 2000 manifesto, I expressed my reservations about adding my name. I felt something more comprehensive was needed. Like some other signatories, I questioned the call for "a new kind of meaning." This has nothing to do with a distaste for ambiguity. On the contrary, ambiguity often has the power to disturb because it gives the imagination what it needs—an idea free of fixed associations or interpretations. But I believe that in calling for "a new kind of meaning," the manifesto just misses the mark. If there is a problem about the role that graphic design plays in what Jan van Toorn describes as "the circulation of material and symbolic commodities," then it's related not just to the content of these cultural messages, but also to the forms of communication which carry them.

The endless streams of messages that invade every corner of our lives are not open-ended; they are monologues. A call for "a new kind of dialogue" has the advantage of suggesting that we need to address form as well as content. Replacing billboards by car manufacturers with ones by Greenpeace doesn't amount to much more than swapping one monopoly of perception for another. Better not to have any billboards at all.

Thinking about forms of communication also helps to avoid the compilation of lists of "politically correct" clients—coming to be seen as a central task. The nature of the dialogue is as important as what is being expressed. In theory this does not exclude anyone. In practice, however, those whose interests lie in the commodification of our lives will have nothing to gain in creating the sorts of dialogues that are essential to democratic society.

The cult of the instant permeates our ability to imagine. Immediacy is primary; efficiency is equated with speed. We scan for quick responses and quick solutions. The extent to which extreme, usually violent, action is celebrated in much of our popular culture is a reflection of the dominant predilection to eliminate obstacles rather than resolve problems. "Slow" solutions, which involve approaches that are local and accumulative, lack the thrust of modernity. They seem somehow less appealing, less convincing. To suggest that a daily, continual questioning of our priorities and our social ambitions is a strategy may not seem earth-shattering. It is nevertheless necessary, linked to a more far-reaching process. "Democracy," wrote John Berger, "is a political demand. But it is something more. It is a moral demand for the individual right to decide by what criteria an action is called right or wrong. Democracy was born of the principle

would have us believe, from the principle of
is a relatively trivial one." Most of us do not
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y position as calling for "nothing less than the
ractice," in a way that suggests that I lie at one
end of the spectrum. Perhaps this is true, for I do argue that a social analysis of design's cultural and political impact should be at the core of our practice. This means encouraging the socialization of design rather than its professionalization. It means learning to stand back from the daily routine and building habits in which we persistently evaluate what we communicate, to whom, in what ways and for what purpose. The sorts of strategies and policies that might arise from this will be dependent on context—there are no "off-the-shelf" solutions to be handed down from above. The politicization of design in this sense amounts to the creation of a methodological framework, a way of localizing our activity within a wider social spectrum, a mode of thinking which is the basis for acting. It is based on the idea that effective action is impossible without understanding.

Many designers are uncomfortable about the social application of their skills and energies. They recognize how problematic is the search for alternatives. None of us should be castigated for not being genial enough to find quick answers, but there is simply no excuse anymore for not looking.

THE SPECTACLE: A REEVALUATION OF THE SITUATIONIST THESIS

Véronique Vienne

Mesmerized by the computer or television screen, most of us are docile spectators, our idle hands forever deprived of the tactile satisfaction of actually making things. This enforced passivity has dire consequences for the brain. Our hands are connected to our gray matter by a crisscrossing network of nerve pathways that travel back and forth from the right brain to the left hand and from the left brain to the right hand. There is evidence that toolmaking is linked to the development of language. Recent studies on the mind-body connection suggest that

Originally published in *Communication Arts* Vol. 42, no. 2 (March/April 2000).

the development (or atrophy, as the case may be) of parts of the body can in turn affect corresponding parts of the brain. So, while manual dexterity stimulates our central nervous system, simple spectatorship has a tendency to numb the mind.

But with nothing to fabricate, the majority of people are reduced to buying ready-made products—examining them, poking them and fondling them in the process just to satisfy the yearning in their fingers. Shopping is a substitute for producing. When my daughter was a teenager, she would often say, like so many of her contemporaries, "Mom, I have nothing to do. I am bored. Let's go shopping!" It soon became a family joke. We worked out a couple of silly variations, including, "Mom, my closet is full of clothes. I have nothing to wear. Let's go shopping," and, "Mom, I have too many pairs of sneakers. I am confused. Let's go shopping."

From time to time, I indulged her shopping impulses, but I also suggested fun alternatives: fix toys, repaint the bathroom, make jam, wax the furniture. One of her favorite mood-uppers, it turned out, was doing the silver. I will always cherish the memory of her sitting at the kitchen table, a big apron secured around her chest, happily polishing our odd collection of forks and spoons.

"In his or her day-dreams the passive worker becomes an active consumer," wrote John Berger, Britain's eminent critic and novelist, in his 1972 best-seller *Ways of Seeing*. Acquiring things, Berger believes, is a poor alternative for fashioning objects. The spectator-self, no longer involved with the making of artifacts, envies the consumer-self who gets to touch and use new gadgets, appliances, devices and goods. Deprived of the sensual pleasure of manual creation, we satisfy our tactile cravings by purchasing more and more ready-made objects and products.

This perception is not new. More than forty years ago in Paris, an obscure group of cultural critics calling themselves "Situationists" began protesting against the escalating commercial takeover of everyday life, and against the artists, illustrators, photographers, art directors and graphic designers who manufactured this fake gee-whiz reality. In his book *The Society of Spectacle*, French Situationist leader Guy Debord wrote: "In our society where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles." Yet, by today's standards, the spectacle hadn't even begun. This was before the Cuban revolution, before the invasion of Tibet, before the Pill, before *La Dolce Vita*, before Pop Art. In the 1958 Paris of the early Situationists, Edith Piaf was singing "Milord," François Truffaut was shooting *The 400 Blows*, and demure Danish modern *was* the cutting edge.

Yet, with a clairvoyance that's startling in hindsight, the short-lived (1957–1972) Situationist International movement predicted our most serious current predicament. According to recent findings, we spend 58 percent of our waking time interacting with the media; people sleep less and spend less time with their family in order to watch more television; megaplexes and superstores are increasingly designed to resemble theme parks; and the Mall of America in Minneapolis hosts more visitors than Walt Disney World, Disneyland and the Grand Canyon combined. In his book *The Entertainment Economy: How Mega-Media Forces Are Transforming Our Lives*, Michael J. Wolf asserts: "We have come to expect that we will be entertained all the time. Products and brands that deliver on this expectation are succeeding. Products that do not will disappear."

No wonder the Situationists ethos has become the mantra of critics and detractors of our imagineering culture. Everyone who is anyone these days is dropping their name—from *Adbusters* to *Emigre* magazines, and from Greil Marcus to J. Abbott Miller. Debord's seminal book, *The Society of Spectacle*, is on the list of the trendy Zone Books, and M.I.T. Press has recently published *The Situationist City*, a comprehensive investigation of the Situationists' urbanist theories, written by Simon Sadler. Move over Paul Virillio; SI, as the Situationist International movement is now labeled, is the latest French intellectual import.

An underground movement that shunned the limelight—the members of this elusive group lived by the precepts they preached—SI's subversive ideology at first defies comprehension. Unless you understand the specific context of the period, many of their assertions make little sense today. Influenced by Lettrist International, a radical group of the 1950s that sought to revitalize urban life through the fusion of poetry and music, Debord and his colleague Raoul Vaneigem used Dada slogans to spread their message. "The more you consume, the less you live," and, "Be realistic, demand the impossible," are two of the most memorable SI pronouncements.

Yet in spite of its so-called anarchist mentality, the SI methodology was precisely constructed. The name of the group was born out of the realization that participants had to create in their everyday life special conditions—special "situations"—in order to resist the insidious appeal of the pseudo-needs of increased consumption and overcome the mounting sense of alienation that have characterized the postmodern age. They conducted open-ended experiments that involved playful constructive behavior aimed at scrambling mental expectations. Most popular of these strategies was taking aimless strolls through a busy neighborhood, deliberately rearranging the furniture in their apartments to create as many obstacles as possible, systematically rejecting labor-saving devices and voluntarily disorienting themselves by consulting the map of London when visiting Amsterdam. Called "Drifting"—*Dérive* in French—the technique was an effective way to "reclaim the night," to momentarily defy the white patriarchy of traditional space-time.

Like most rational people today, I would find this approach naïve and dogmatic if I hadn't experienced it firsthand. In 1960, as a student at the Paris Beaux-Arts school of architecture, I was unwittingly part of an SI experiment. The very first day I showed up at the studio with a dozen other new recruits, the young instructor announced that we should reconvene at "La Palette," a bistro across the street. At nine in the morning, the sidewalk had just been washed and the waiter was trundling the cast-iron tables out in the open. We each grabbed a wicker chair from a tall stack in a corner, picked our spot on the terrace, angled our seats to catch the morning sun, stretched our legs, yawned and ordered a round of black coffee.

"This is your first lesson in architecture," said the instructor, a gaunt young man in a black turtleneck—the trademark look of the avant-garde back then. "For the next three months, we will spend six hours a day sitting right here. I want you to learn about

space-time—particularly how to use space in order to waste time. Unless you understand that, you'll never be good architects."

I now know that this is straightforward SI doctrine. Embracing Arthur Rimbaud's assertion that laziness is a refusal to compartmentalize time, Situationists advocated "living without restrictions or dead time," and "never work—never risk dying of boredom." They wasted time deliberately—and playfully—as a guerrilla strategy against the sense of emptiness imposed by the relentless spectacle of consumption that was quickly subsuming French culture.

And so, for the first semester, we sat at the bistro from 9:00 A.M. to 2:00 P.M., five days a week. Except for mornings when we would drift through Paris, sketchpads in hand, making detailed drawings of whatever caught our fancy—a stairway leading to the river bank, an abandoned gazebo in a park, the monumental gate of a hospital—you would find us huddled at the terrace of La Palette. This was *in situ* urban anthropology. I learned to observe how people choose the best spot to sit; how lovers fight, how couples brood and how friends compete; how everyone sits straighter when a pretty girl walks in; how people celebrate on payday—and how they scrutinize a menu when they are broke.

Sometimes we would get into conversations, sometimes we would draw, sometimes we would read, sometimes we would argue—and often we would simply daydream. As promised, the space-time equation became a reality, one rich in surprises and discoveries. We became familiar with the angles of the various streets, the movements of the sun, the sounds of the city, the rhythm of life around us. No two minutes were ever alike. As we sat there, absorbing what felt like vital information, we developed a perception of the human scale—a critical notion for architects. And then, almost reluctantly, after lunch, we drifted across the street to the studio where we worked late into the night to acquire the rudiments of the classical orders of architecture.

I never completed my architectural studies. Instead, I moved to the States and eventually became a magazine art director. During my career in design, I often used the *dérive* technique to avoid the pitfalls of linear thinking. Instead of focusing on a thorny design conundrum, the solution would come to me unsolicited if I patiently listened to a photographer rant on the phone about his mid-life crisis, or when I watched a five-year-old play with her baby brother. Another Situationist construct also came handy. Called *détournement*, translated as "rerouting," it consists in transforming images by interpreting them to mean something of your own making. SI theorists liked to describe the method as "hijacking, misappropriation, corruption of preexisting aesthetic elements." I simply call it sticking words on top of images.

Rerouting images is the basic modus operandi of graphic communication. The minute you caption a photograph, or place a headline next to a picture, or create a collage, or single out a pull-quote, or write cover lines, you subvert the significance of both word and image. I believe that most of the creative tensions between editors and art directors, or between clients and designers, evolve from a misunderstanding of how visual artifacts can be reconfigured into constructed situations.

Chris Dixon, art director of *Adbusters* magazine, the anti-consumerism publication that has whole-heartedly embraced the SI legacy, is probably one of the few North-American designers to consciously uses *détournement*. "Often the captions we use in the magazine are much more provocative than the images themselves," he says. "In fact, we deliberately use rather conventional photographs to let our readers know that we speak the same language they do." Even though its overall message is anti-commercial and anti-advertising, *Adbusters* is surprisingly well-designed, as if to mock the very aesthetic that drives the advertising community.

Where *Adbusters* and SI part ways is on the discourse they have chosen to promote similar ideas. "We link anti-consumerism to the environmental movement," explains Dixon. "Readers understand the correlation between buying too many useless products and depleting the natural resources of the planet." Concern for the environment never appears in the newspapers, journals, tracks, graffiti or manifestos left behind by the SI. They didn't have much of a social agenda either. Their mandate was to resist the cultural imperialism that drains human beings of that most French of concepts, their *joie de vivre*. Boredom was their enemy; happiness their goal. Another of their maxims was: "They are buying your happiness—steal it back."

The Situationist idea of happiness is very different from the "hedonomics" of the buying experience, as defined by Michael J. Wolf in *The Entertainment Economy*.

Whereas Americans equate feeling good with having "fun," the French in general, and the SI in particular, describe happiness as liberating—as being euphoric, mischievous, prankish. It's the feeling that swept over France during the first weeks of the May 1968 general strike, when all Paris took to the streets in what was at first a festival more than a student revolt.

The Situationists were responsible for initiating the construction of barricades in the streets of Paris that month. Pull up some cobblestones, add a half-dozen trash cans, more cobblestones, some discarded lumber, maybe a broken bicycle. Borrow chairs from a café, sit and wait. They also encouraged students to cover the walls of the city with Lettrist-inspired graffiti ("It is forbidden to forbid"). Last but not least, they were credited with giving the rebellion its upbeat and high-spirited signature.

But the events of 1968—not only in France but all over the world—were eventually "rerouted" by the establishment. As Thomas Frank, editor in chief of *The Baffler* explains in his book *The Conquest of Cool*, the anti-consumerism rebellion of the post-war era was commodified by Madison Avenue into what is now known as the "Youth Culture"—one of the greatest marketing tools of the second part of the twentieth century. The Society of Spectacle was here to stay. Blaming themselves for their failure to change society, but also grieving for the millions of consumers who would only experience euphoria through shopping, Debord and his troops dispersed in 1972. However, their ideas continued to resonate, quite notably in the early days of English punk, when Jamie Reid's photo-collage for the Sex Pistols captured the defiant challenge punk rock posed to class and authority. Tragically unable to recapture the *joie de vivre* of the early days of SI, Debord took his own life in December 1994, shortly after completing a documentary film on his work.

Five years after Debord's suicide, events would prove that the spirit he had

championed still survives. On December 5, 1999, the front page of the *New York Times* featured a photograph that would have cheered him up. Taken by Jimi Lott of the *Seattle Times*, it showed Mr. and Mrs. Santa Claus being escorted home by four riot policemen, the latter wearing Ninja-turtle combat boots and padded breastplates. The violent protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle had so disrupted holiday shopping, explained the caption, that the Yuletide pair had to be put under police protection.

As one flipped through the newspaper, one quickly realized that the former Saint Nicholas (a historical figure incidentally recast in 1931 by Coca-Cola as the beloved red and white icon we now identify with Christmas shopping), was not the only consumer icon that needed police protection. Riot troops had been posted in front of all retail stores in downtown Seattle—guarding Starbucks, Banana Republic, Coach, Gap, and Gucci, just to name a few. The entrance of Niketown in particular looked like the set of *Star Wars*, with hooded figures in black armor standing at attention, their four-foot bludgeons poised to strike.

It looked like the police were confronting rowdy crowds not to protect civil liberties and political institutions—but to protect global brands. Though one didn't have to be a trend forecaster to feel that brand backlash was coming ("My wish for the New Year was to get through meetings without someone mentioning branding," joked renowned Web page editorial designer Jessica Helfand shortly after), most of us never expected it would be so sudden, so graphic or so ready-for-prime-time-television. The revolution will not be televised, sang Gil Scott-Heron in 1974. Wishful thinking, indeed. The anti-consumerism, anti-brand revolution, complete with demonstrators smashing store windows, was on the eleven o'clock news. Replays showing over and over the same scenes were aired every ten minutes, as if to "brand" the violent images in the mind of viewers.

Kalle Lasn, editor of *Adbusters* magazine in Vancouver and famous for advocating what he calls "culture jamming," was one of the few people who weren't surprised by the Seattle uproar. In fact, the December 1999 issue of his magazine had an article predicting that the WTO conference would be "a historic confrontation between civil society and corporate rule." His book, *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*, had just been released. *Time* magazine had praised him for taking arms against our three-thousand-marketing-message-a-day society. Still, he wasn't prepared for what he saw when he went to Seattle to observe the riots.

"It was like a festival," he says. "Except for a few people confronting cops, demonstrators were laid-back, happy, having fun. There was a lot of street theater, spontaneous happenings, and cheerful pranks being played." It had a Situationist ambiance, for sure. But then, unexpectedly, Lasn got his first whiff of tear gas. "I'll never forget that smell," he says. "Nor will I forget the savage look on the faces of the policemen. They really didn't get it."

But who gets it? Why are the global brands a threat to our very existence—a threat so real it galvanized 30,000 people to take to the streets? "There were more than one hundred different groups," tells Lasn. "Environmentalists, students, anarchists, but

also musty old socialists, Christians tired of the violence on TV, critics of genetic engineering, and card-carrying union members—every single one of them worried about some unofficial global government body enforcing an elite corporate agenda."

During the WTO riots, my friends in the design community were in a state of complete denial. No one talked about what was happening in Seattle. Heck, we were still nursing our Las Vegas hangover following the "hedonomic" AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts) conference held two months earlier. There had been practically no references then to the social or environmental responsibility of designers, let alone their role in "supporting, or implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact," to quote the language of First Things First 2000, the *Adbusters* manifesto signed by thirty-three prominent designers worldwide. In fact, when AIGA president Michael Bierut, in his closing statement in Las Vegas, had made a passing reference to this controversial call for moderation in marketing, some people in the audience had booed his comments.

But, as luck would have it, that same week—for the fifth anniversary of Debord's death—I had given my graphic design students at the School of Visual Arts a series of *dérive* exercises directly inspired by my own SI experience and studies. First they had to draw a map of all their travel, wanderings and whereabouts in New York City during the last three months, plotting on paper their perception of time-space in the Big Apple. Their map, I told them, was supposed to be an "aid to reverie," a tool for "annexing their private space into the public sphere." Then, they had to explore and draw the Beaux-Arts colonnade at the Manhattan Bridge anchorage, with the idea that urbanism was in fact "the organization of silence."

Though the discussions, laughter, confessions and astute comments generated by my students as we reviewed their serendipitous maps and awkward sketches reaffirmed my faith in design and art education, I am not sure they *really* got it. How could they? Unlike my instructor in Paris forty years ago, I couldn't ask my M.F.A. students to spend a whole semester observing the sidewalk. My education at the government-sponsored Beaux-Arts school of architecture had been free, whereas, in contrast, theirs was expensive. To pay for their hefty tuition, my students had gone into debt, worked overtime or impoverished themselves. I was keenly aware that I couldn't squander their money—they were consumers of a knowledge I was trying to share with them. As a result, my class had to be a spectacle of sorts—not the powerful and lasting experience gained by the subversion of spectacle.