

# SUMMARY

## Boris GOBILLE

### CREATIVITY AS A REVOLUTIONARY WEAPON? THE EMERGENCE OF AN ARTIST-BASED FRAMING OF THE MAY '68 REVOLUTION

Using the example of the Parisian May'68 movement, the author interests himself in the relationships between art and social movements. He is aware of the diversity of such relationships depending on historical contexts and social configurations, but also of the heterogeneity of the May insurrection and the multiplicity of possible ways of studying it. In the broad spectrum of possibilities of harnessing art in the service of politics, ranging from socialist realism (subordinating art to politics) to petitions signed by writers (serving the cause without engaging their works), Boris Gobille analyzes the May events, seeking 'points of contact' and 'affinities' that cause the forms of engagement produced by this movement to circulate between the activist space and the realm of art. This circulation is facilitated by multi-sectoral mobilization, forcing the social groups participating in the movement to reimagine themselves in new categories, borrowed from other spheres of social space, particularly the confrontation of 'high culture,' its symbols and creative myths, with radical political practice. The movement's dynamics led to the questioning of the dominant Leninist concept of revolution, thanks to an anti-authoritarian critique of artistic symbolism, and consequently to another way of defining revolutionary actions as aimed at and based on liberating the creativity of all people. Therefore, the essay's topic is not the specific involvement of artists and writers in the May'68 movement, nor the artistic forms it took, but the ways in which artistic experiences fuel and transform disputes around the correct interpretation of what is happening: is the situation revolutionary? what is an 'authentic' revolution? who is a 'true' revolutionary? what is appropriate to do in such circumstances?

The analysis begins with a sketch of the complicated situation of the French left, including the French Communist Party (FCP) represented in parliament, which opposed the movement ("student messianism"); extra-parliamentary far-left groups; and even some

anarchist-oriented groups: all of them have the October Revolution and the concept of the proletariat as the main revolutionary subject as a common point of reference. Such an ideological repertoire, combined with faith in the revolutionary mission of the 'vanguard' Communist Party, in scientific socialism, and in dialectical materialism, Gobille refers to as the "Leninist revolutionary framework." The breakdown of this framework begins in confrontation with the ideology of anarchism: with the concept of direct democracy and self-management, with the practice of grassroots self-organization and direct action, with the struggle against bureaucratic and hierarchical division of labor, also within revolutionary actions. According to this worldview, the forms of revolution should emerge from action in specific, local conditions. On May 5, the 'March 22 Movement' (an organization with anarchist, Trotskyist, and Situationist orientations, from which Daniel Cohn-Bendit emerged) calls for complete "freedom of expression." Going beyond the strict anarchist repertoire, this slogan gained immense popularity in May'68.

In essence, Gobille writes, "speaking out is one of the most frequently noted aspects of the May '68 crisis in France, both for many of its participants and witnesses, as well as for some commentators, such as Michel de Certeau, according to whom 'people spoke out [in May '68] just as they took the Bastille in 1789.' The theme of liberating speech has an unprecedented social currency. It spreads across many professional and institutional circles." The author illustrates these statements with a series of surprising examples of criticism and occupation of various institutions. Jewish protesters occupy the Israelite Central Consistory of France and criticize its "archaic and undemocratic structures;" a "committee for revolution in the Church" gathers in the church of Saint-Séverin in Paris; theology students in Strasbourg University propose a reform of its teaching; dissenting architects occupy the headquarters of the Corporation of Architects; directors of theatres and cultural centres create a permanent committee to discuss the concept of 'non-audience;' filmmakers gravitating around Truffaut and Godard contest the Cannes festival and convene the 'Estates General of Cinema;' writers occupy the headquarters of the Writers' Association to challenge the established literary order; doctors and representatives of the disabled community mobilize. "According to René Viénet, one of the 'Enragés' from Nanterre (...) even immigrant workers and football clubs in the Paris region demand the right to speak out," writes the author. These examples testify to the expansion of the anarchist repertoire (refusal of political representation by others) and the placement of "creativity at the grassroots" at the heart of the Paris insurrection. "It is these cross-interpretations of revolution and creativity," we read, "that underpin the emergence, in May '68, of a new framework of revolutionary activity: openness to the event and its previously unknown properties."

The backdrop to this new approach to the problem of revolution from an artistic perspective is the gradually increasing tension created in disputes over Marx's legacy, between those who prioritize the theme of exploitation, and those who prioritize alienation. Criticism of capitalism from the perspective of art draws its indignation from alienation and disappointment with the commodification of all spheres of life, while the traditional interpretation mainly condemns the exploitation and misery of the popular classes. These two histories intersect in May'68, following the crisis of the official communist frame of

reference (Stalinism), particularly following the suppression of the Hungarian revolt in 1956. The author proposes an analysis of this intersection in the theory and practice of the Situationist International, founded in 1957. The effects of capitalist exploitation and alienation converge in the texts of Raoul Vaneigem: what remains of the creativity of a person “torn from sleep at six in the morning, crammed into commuter trains, deafened by the noise of machines, exhausted, killed by the pace of work, meaningless gestures, statistical control, and discarded at the end of the day into station halls, cathedrals of departure to the hell of the week and the tiny paradise of weekends, where the crowd unites in fatigue and stupefaction.”? Inspired by the writings of Henri Lefebvre, the critique of everyday life allows revolutionary theory to be imbued with references transferred from the world of art as a de-alienating experience of creative initiative. The result would be the reconciliation of art (creativity) with everyday life, overcoming the limitations of an art confined to museums and limited to bookish knowledge.

The new revolutionary framework, based on universal creativity and openness to events (situations), rejects the “Malthusian appropriation of creativity exclusively for artists and humanists, and is, on the contrary, aimed at stimulating the creativity of everybody for revolutionary purposes, presumably suppressed and alienated in the mercantile system.” “We are for the occupation of all cinemas, galleries, and dance halls,” declares one leaflet, “and for transforming them into bases for operations aimed at taking possession of the entire urban space: walls, pavements, streets, rivers, and the sky itself, as carriers of image, sound, and artistic expression in a gigantic outline of permanent invention in the service of all.” The new revolution is identified with the constant renewal of ways of thinking and speaking, a continual openness to everything new. “The ultimate goal of the struggle should be to establish a socialist system,” reads a declaration by the “Freud – Che Guevara” committee, “in which – through the destruction of barriers – everyone’s creativity will be able to flow freely. This goal implies a revolution not only in production relations but also in the way of life, way of thinking, interpersonal relationships, and everybody’s preconceptions of what might constitute sexual life.” May ’68 becomes a project of total revolution: in the diversity of the movement, the conviction emerges that revolution cannot be – as in the Leninist concept – about replacing established certainties with alternative certainties. The issue at stake is to overthrow the very ‘order of certainty.’ It is not enough to transform socio-economic structures for the revolution of mental structures to take place. Transforming society means, above all, revolutionizing people’s mentality, and therefore the new revolutionary framework imposes the necessity to break away from all past forms and theories of revolution. Surrealists and Situationists had previously advocated such slogans. In conclusion, the author acknowledges the methodological limitations of his analyses, while simultaneously emphasizing the limitations of biased readings of May’68 as merely “breaking away from school and parental demands for regular effort, seriousness, and work,” when in fact it was an attempt to combine anti-authoritarian criticism and creativity in social practice on an unprecedented scale.