To control and shape the entire social arena - Constant Nieuwenhuys

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"Architecture exists only to control and shape the entire social arena.
It is constituted by this impulse propelling it to erect itself as the center
and to organize all activities around itself."
Denis Hollier, Against Architecture: The Writings of George Bataille, 1974

Guy Debord and the Situationist International shared, with others of the sixties characteristic attempts at realizing a Utopian praxis, an interest in reforming the human experience in it's totality. The sheer ambition of the project endowed their sometimes vague ideology with a visionary and sometimes nearly mystique quality, where the re-constructed, post-revolutionary world they prophesied had become so foreign to our contemporary alienated consciousness, that only abstract and poetic descriptions could be achieved.

Žižek famously claims in the 2005 eponymous documentary that is is more difficult to imagine the end of all life, than it is to picture the end of capitalism. This no doubt never stopped several generations of thinkers on the left, before and after Debord, to attempt at picturing what the reformed reality would be like: Adorno and Horkheimer, in The Dialectic of Enlightenment, find the re-enchantment of the world to be a process overlapping with the Marxist struggle but also, historically, straying from the stalwart historical materialist and the dominant modernist narratives that often presided to the leftist politics.

And indeed the sixties would-be revolutionaries learned the Frankfurt School's lesson well: all power was now to be given to the imagination rather than the soviet, a slogan, like many in those days, that made use of concepts and terminology vague enough to accommodate the increasing diversity of an atomized and bourgeois radical milieu. Yet, if preference was given to an inclusive praxis over a perceived dogmatic theory, the alleged leaders of the movement, and among them the situationists, did not loose the opportunity to perpetuate the speculative tradition, albeit with a timely twist.

"*When man plays he must intermingle with things and people in a similarly uninvolved and light fashion. He must do something which he has chosen to do without being compelled by urgent interests or impelled by strong passion; he must feel entertained and free of any fear or hope of serious consequences. He is on vacation from social and economic reality – or, as is most commonly emphasized: he does not work.*"
Erik Erikson, Childhood and Society, 1950

Psychogeography and other elements of their philosophy mark a clear rejection of the productivist, disciplined and intrinsically teleological spirit of orthodox Marxist thought, leaving

only untouched (alongside with the authority of Debord…) the revolution itself, as an eerie absolute, largely bared from it's economic and class-based mechanics.

One of the models inspiring the situationists for this reconstruction of social relationships was to be found in the work of Johann Huizinga, a cultural historian who penned a landmark work in the field of game studies entitled *Homo Ludens* (1938) - Huizinga, like other radicals of his generation, attached himself to producing a discreet critique of the rational and mechanized way of life promoted by modernity, but the alternative, the model of social interaction against which he contrasted the alienated condition of the XXth century man was the model of the game.

Much could be said - and has been said - of the mindset fueling this pervasive and virtually indefinable activity that is play: Wittgenstein famously asserted that games, much like words, cannot be defined as such and only hold a "family resemblance" between themselves. An interesting attempt at separating the ludic activity from the quotidian, more recently, is to be found in Michael J. Apter's psychological reversal theory and it's opposition between telic (purpose oriented) and paratelic (process oriented) activities.
From this, inferring how a society based on those principles would function might prove more difficult.

"*Play is free movement within a more rigid structure.*"
Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman,
Rules of Play : Game Design Fundamentals, 2003

Debord himself, acknowledging the importance of Huizinga and of <u>games in general</u>, will develop in 1977 a game of his own, "<u>The Game of War</u>", a lucky mixture of the long tradition of wargames and simulations, and of the more accessible variations on chess. The tokens could easily accommodate the archetypes of strategy and military theory he had been reading eagerly. And maybe the checkerboard proved a more welcoming support for the war he had been waging not unsuccessfully in the compromised realm of artist, student and worker politics some ten years earlier.

One of Debord's early collaborators, Constant Nieuwenhuys, who was to leave their increasingly politicized situationist milieu in the early sixties, embarked on an ambitious project of creating an alternative reality - a gigantic, all-encompassing project of semi-abstract urbanism, somewhat akin to other sixties, unapologetically utopian, "paper" architecture as presented by Archizoom, <u>Haus-Rucker-Co</u>, or recent Turner Prize nominee <u>Paul Noble</u>.

The New Babylon, as he titled it, he envisioned for all of the fifteen years he spent working on the project as a world-spanning city designed for the new modes of living that were to arise after the downfall of capitalism in the world, and more importantly, in the minds. The city as metaphor for political organization has of course a long ancestry, from Thomas More

to St Augustine, but the peculiar approach artists have taken on those questions differentiate it radically from the mere ideological illustration: in the space of fifteen years of work, someone like Nieuwenhuys (or Noble) has not only time to develop individual, self-standing artworks, but also to extend, and enmesh or coordinate their respective mythologies to create a total framework. The choice of the urbanistic model for the construction of a grand-narrative likely reflect a will to evidence, in the inevitable variety of the artist production, a structure and a meaning, that could transcend the limited scope of the particular artwork to reflect the author's life-as-art.

Black Dog Publishing has an excellent book _A User's Guide: The Situationist International_ by Simon Ford if you would like to read more on the situationist ideology

"_If he had been a great and wise philosopher, like the writer of this book, he would now have comprehended that Work consists of whatever a body is obliged to do, and that Play consists of whatever a body is not obliged to do. And this would help him to understand why constructing artificial flowers or performing on a tread-mill is work, while rolling ten-pins or climbing Mont Blanc is only amusement._"
Mark Twain, The Adventures of Tom Swayer, 1876

The principles governing to the organization of New Babylon's modular megastructures and of it's imagined inhabitants reflect the peculiar world-view that was arising from the creative milieu of both Debords and Nieuwhenhuys:
The ludic model they read in Huizinga offered powerful alternative to the mythic one for the blue-print of their utopia. Whereas myths pointed towards a monolithic and ossified future, the game provided the same self-contained narrative, but focused on the individual and affording him the meaningful choices a mythical framework denied. The game, in a way, was the myth for the liquid modernity.

In an interview given to BLDBLOG, architecture theorist Mark Wigley agree with the interviewer that the New Babylon "actually seems to be an example of architectural Stalinism – a world of total control." - agreeably a step or two from what is usually projected on the deconstructed and surreal architecture.
Surely games are not the most current metaphor for totalitarian societies: play, with it's associations of insouciant spontaneity, of creative individualism seems hardly to fit in as the typical activity in a regime where the individual initiative is sacrificed on the altar of the static and monolithic state.
Yet Boris Groys has written at length of the "The total art of Stalinism", as did Ulrich Schmid for fascism, on totalitarism as aesthetic pursuit, and Mussolini wrote in his Popolo d'Italia on the 14 July 1920 that "_Lenin is an artist who has worked men, as other artists have worked marble or metals. But men are harder than stone and less malleable than iron. There is no masterpiece. The artist has failed. The task was superior to his capacities._"

Huizinga sees poetry and in particular the Vate, like Wittgenstein, as engaging in a form of

play -of play with words- that creates myths by accumulating layers of discordant meanings. What Claudia Salaris calls the "lyrical order" (A la fete de la révolution, 2002, p.137) of modernist politics attempt at merging those contradictory meanings, and in the process at anchoring the concrete into the mythical.

Whether art was used as a metaphor for the construction of a coherent political community, or whether it was the political community that was metaphor of a creative endeavor, the relationship between art as a practice and that of politics seems in the case of totalitarian regimes to be more complex than purely instrumental - the sole constraint, for meta-political readings of the totalitarian discourse, be them artistic, literary or tragic, is to keep in mind the compulsory obsession with purity. Purity expresses the homogeneity of the organic whole and justify the movement/regime as Gestalt.

"*Play is the purest, the most spiritual, product of man at this stage, and it is at once the prefiguration and imitation of the total human life,--of the inner, secret, natural life in man and in all things. It produces, therefore, joy, freedom, satisfaction, repose within and without, peace with the world. The springs of all good rest within it and go out from it.*"
Freidrich Froebel, The Education of Man, 1888

The game seem a paradoxical activity: although it is intrinsically defined by it's rules, and often only by its rules, it is also a fundamentally free activity, in that it is, in it's purest forms, not compulsory. Beyond the obvious advantages, in terms of ideological construction, to build on a model that accommodate both rules and yet presupposes absolute freedom, it is worth calling on a concept of Huizinga to understand better this duality: what the Dutch writer refer to as the "magic circle" is the conceptual or imaginary frontier that separate world of the game from the real world. Just as the rules of the game do not need applying in the the players lives when they quit playing, the norms and hierarchies of the quotidian are in many ways suspended in the time and space of the game. Although the "magic circle" is obviously porous (money stakes, relationships building between players, or celebrity for a few examples) it is easy to imagine that the stretching of this circle to englobe the entirety of human life, as Constant Nieuwenhuys was fantasizing, would be a lot less idyllic than might at first appear.

As Wigley inform us, Constant himself acknowledged rapidly that life in his city would probably, if safeguard a sense of individuality, crush any sense of privacy, but, and this is probably the most amazing thing in the New Babylon project, that did not stop him from developing his project further and further for many years, willingly sliding into dystopia, mirroring history.

Was there an acknowledged connection between modernist politics and games, before the Situationists? It is hard to say: Many modernist artists, like Duchamp who apparently gave up on Art for the sake of chess, readily acknowledged their fondness of games - but if dictators were fond of comparing their work with art, I have not yet come across any

references to games; The analogy between politics and theatre, where one certainly "plays", has been widely discussed concerning both modernity and modernism, but this is still remote from games as we understand it here.

Roger Griffin defines in his foreword 'Another Face, Another Mazeway' a process of 'Mazeway Resynthesis', where "old and new ideological and ritual elements - some of which would previously have been incongruous or incompatible - are forged through '*ludic recombination*' into a totalizing worldview." This, he considers to be the key process that allow the surprising medley of sometimes contradictory elements that characterize fascism.

He borrows the notion from anthropologist Victor Turner, for whom play and ritual are intrinsically related - the notion of liminality with which he refers to the idea of a world separated from the quotidian, is bound to remind us of the kingdom locked inside the magic circle: rituals, to Turner, just like games, have for primary purpose to construct and delimit this liminal space, escaping norms and traditions, yet fundamentally regimented. This, to me, sounds a lot like Carl Schmidt defense of the State of Exception and the marxist Permanent Revolution.