

Ralph Rumney

RALPH RUMNEY, the artist who has died aged 67, was the sole English founding member of the Situationist International, the subversive movement which helped to inspire the Paris riots of May 1968, the Sex Pistols, the K Foundation, the decor of the Hacienda Club in Manchester and Damien Hirst.

The Situationist International was founded in 1957 by Guy Debord in a bar in the village of Cosio d'Arroscia, high in the Italian Alps. Rumney was there throughout the week-long meeting, supposedly representing the London Psychogeographical Committee (which did not exist). He documented the proceedings in photographs, witnessing, as he believed, the dawn of a new era of civilisation. "We were fanatics," he said later, "but we weren't wrong."

The "Situs" argued for a renewal of the ways in which the world was seen and held that the true nature of things was revealed not in the stultified "proper" uses we make of them but only in their intentional abuse. Pharmacists, for example, should sell cigars. Plagiarism, meanwhile, constituted the only true originality, but better still was to misquote, to leave out such words as "not" and insert taboo ones.

Rumney's own Situationist career was short: he was expelled by Debord in 1958 after failing to file his "psychogeographical" survey of Venice on time. Rumney's delay had to do with problems with his wife Pegeen, the highly-strung daughter of Peggy Guggenheim. When Pegeen killed herself with an overdose in 1967, Rumney found himself accused by the Guggenheim family of aiding and abetting her suicide.

Ralph Rumney was born on June 5 1934 at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the son of an Anglican clergyman. After boarding school, which he hated, he went to Halifax School of Art, but dropped out. He then refused to do National Service, which led to a fugitive life on the Continent.

Rumney hung out in St Germain-des-Pres with the abrasively radical Parisian grouping, the Lettrists. This was not the St Germain of the existentialists and tourists - the Cafe Flore and the Deux Magots - but a cheaper dive across the road, Chez Moineau. Rumney was soon nicknamed "The Consul", after the alcoholic Englishman in Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, and began to gain notoriety as an original artistic talent. Painting in tachiste and abstract modes, he never saw himself primarily as a producer of aesthetic artefacts, believing that art should express ideas, and that it was not necessary to make "art" to be an artist.

In 1957, he had a show at the Redfern gallery in London, and there met Peggy Guggenheim. He later told her biographer Anton Gill how he had suggested to Mrs Guggenheim that she might like to go to the preview of Francis Bacon's new exhibition at the Hanover Gallery later that evening. In the event, Peggy Guggenheim was too tired, but sent her daughter Pegeen. Rumney flirted with her there without knowing who she was. When she left, he followed in a taxi, gatecrashed a party and enticed her back to his studio in Neal Street.

The next day, feeling better, Peggy Guggenheim went with her daughter to the Hanover Gallery and bought a Bacon, *Study for Chimpanzee*. Some days later she went to the Redfern, where she tried to buy Rumney's painting *The Change* privately. Rumney refused, and instead gave it to Pegeen (it is now owned by the Tate). Piqued, Peggy Guggenheim blurted to her daughter: "You're f***ing your way up to quite a collection." From that point on she did not care much for Rumney, simultaneously jealous and fearful of the danger this rebellious young man posed to her daughter. After divorcing her first husband, Jean Helion, Pegeen married Rumney in 1958. The couple divided their time between London, Paris and Venice. Though as happy as she had ever been, she was dogged by bouts of severe depression.

In Venice, Rumney proceeded with his ill-fated psychogeographical survey, psychogeography being a central Situationist concept. Taking Debord's definition as his starting point ("the study of the exact effects of geographic environment, controlled or otherwise, on the affective behaviour of individuals"), Rumney followed Alan Ansen around the byways of Venice with a camera, recording his behaviour as it was influenced by the changing ambiances. This became a substantial piece of work, set up as a montage with captions in the manner of "photo-romance" comic strips. But Rumney - distracted by his domestic problems and by the birth of their son - submitted his survey to Debord two days late, and fell an early victim to the Situationists' policy of excommunication.

When Pegeen Rumney died from drink and pills in 1967, Peggy Guggenheim was convinced that Rumney had murdered her, or at the very least failed to save her. Rumney was obliged to flee journalists across the rooftops and live undercover in Paris (he was to be separated from his son Sandro for the next 10 years).

Trailed by private detectives hired by the Guggenheims, he eventually admitted himself to La Borde, the alternative psychiatric clinic run by Felix Guattari. Even as an outpatient, Rumney was safe from arrest under French law. After a year, he left for London, where, penniless, he worked as a bilingual telephone operator. He later worked at art schools in Canterbury and Winchester, before returning to France. In 1974 he married Debord's ex-wife Michele Bernstein, to the disapproval of Debord. They lived in Salisbury for a time, but she

found Rumney hard to live with and they separated, beginning instead a warm and enduring friendship by telephone.

Like those Japanese soldiers who used to be found hiding in the jungle decades later, unaware that the war was over, Rumney remained faithful to Situationist principles. He was a lifelong opponent of the so-called "Spectacle", the alienated and inauthentic world of proliferating and commodified media imagery - a state of affairs that is now associated less critically with postmodernism in general, and the work of Jean Baudrillard in particular. Rumney's explicit series of Polaroid nudes, *The Map is not the Territory* (1985), was less about pornography than about the gap between the image and the real.

Rumney liked it to be known that the London Psychogeographical Committee had been on strike since 1957, but in 1989 it suspended its long grievance and picked up tools again. Rumney's revived Comité Psychogeographique de Londres had branches as far apart as Geneva, Edinburgh, and the Celebes, but not in London.

The revival of interest in the Situationists that accompanied the 1989 Beaubourg and ICA retrospectives (condemned as "recuperation" by pro-Situ diehards, and to some extent by Rumney himself) meant that Rumney's name became known to a new circle. References began to appear to "the legendary English psychogeographer Ralph Rumney", and some psychogeographical pranksterism directed against the 1995 Venice Biennale was entitled (without Rumney's approval or cognisance) "Ralph Rumney's Revenge". Rumney's autobiography, *Le Consul*, appeared in 1999. He is survived by his son, Sandro, an art dealer.

The Telegraph – 09/03/2002