

ONE DAY DURING THE POST-WAR YEARS IN A TINY CORNER OF SAINT-GERMAIN-DES-PRÉS, A REBELLIOUS YOUTH UNDERTOOK THE MOST SECRET AND RADICAL OF PROTESTS, THE "LETTRIST INTERNATIONAL", WHICH A FEW YEARS LATER WOULD GIVE BIRTH TO "SITUATIONISM". WE SAT DOWN WITH GÉRARD BERRÉBY, THE EDITOR OF ALLIA EDITIONS WHO HAS SERVED FOR OVER FORTY YEARS AS THE PIONEER OF EVERYTHING WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE UNDERGROUND AND AVANT-GARDES OF OUR CENTURY. WE TAKE A LOOK BACK AT THE INFANCY OF THIS UNPRECEDENTED REVOLT, WHOSE LESSONS ARE STILL RELEVANT TODAY, WHILE OPENING UP A DEBATE ON THE SURVEILLANCE SOCIETY, DIGITAL ALIENATION AND THE ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCY. CULT RADICALISM!

From the origin of situationism to the present

# GÉRARD BERRÉBY

INTERVIEW  
FRANK PERRIN

## “Dérive is like visiting London with a map of Berlin.” You find a vision of the city that is bound to be different than real life.”

**FP:** How did you start your research into the prehistory and beginnings of the Situationists, the rebellious youth movement originating in post-war Saint-Germain-des-Prés?

**GB:** When I started this research, there were very few documents available, but I was interested in the genesis of the movement: how it was formed and on what basis. My research revealed the central role played by artists, including personalities like Gil J. Wolman, whom I was able to meet and who entrusted me with numerous documents. Nothing is created ex-nihilo and I was drawn to everything I discovered. With the Lettrist International, which preceded the founding of the Situationist International, there was humor, spontaneous joy, primal and vital expression, irreverence and a refusal of any and all authority. As is the case with the work of many writers and thinkers, all the major themes are already present in the first writings. Improvement and refinement come later. People generally revolve around two or three main ideas, and I think it's like that for every creator. Now you can find all these documents in any library, but they were impossible to find before, and I haven't found a single library in Europe that had even the complete issues of the *Lettrist International*, *Potlatch* or later the *Situationist International* reviews. I searched through libraries and among collectors and participants in the movement, and that's how I managed to build the book <sup>(1)</sup>. I did it with a spirit of intellectual independence. I wanted to show a kind of raw reality that traces a path of thought. I refrained from adding any commentary or interpretation, and the texts are simply arranged chronologically.

But I realized years later that the Situationists, and Guy Debord in particular, did not appreciate what I had done, not only because I had not consulted them, but also because the work showed that the movement was not a complete departure from previous movements.

**FP:** It's an archeological work on the prehistory of a movement. But somehow, everything was already there. It's quite confusing, and I even tend to think that this period, which is indescribable, secret and messy, is almost like a collective masterpiece. At a time when consumerism was first arriving, we saw a handful of young people who, in a disorderly way, would refuse all the sacred values of the prevailing ideology based on work and happiness. How was this movement made possible?

**GB:** We must first imagine the intellectual melting pot in which the Situationists emerged. Although they denied it, the model remained the avant-garde, first Dada and then Surrealism. Some of them, at least those who would form the Lettrist International, came from Isidore Isou's Lettrism. The Situationists were part of this tradition, while at the same time wanting to radically distance themselves from it by proposing a more political orientation to their movement, through the creation of situations, which were meant to be moments of life that are chosen and not imposed from the outside, and by putting forward techniques for the reappropriation of everyday space. This was notably done through *dérive*, or drifting, which implies a totally different way of moving from one point to another or even just wandering

about aimlessly. To give you an idea, Ralph Rumney told me one day during the interviews I did with him: “*Dérive* is like visiting London with a map of Berlin.” You find a vision of the city that is bound to be different than real life. To do this, you have to decondition yourself, have ample time, no obligations and remain somewhat asocial or removed from the so-called “official” activity. In the same vein as *derive*, psychogeography was conceptualized by Ivan Chtcheglov, a brilliant figure and a phantom mind who was passionate about the Grail Quest and knights... You spoke earlier of a collective intelligence and, indeed, everything that is most exciting about the Situationists is found in the seeds of the Lettrist International that preceded it. In retrospect, we can see how the collective kind of dissolved around a central figure, Guy Debord, who benefited from the contribution of brilliant minds like Ivan Chtcheglov, Ralph Rumney, Gil Wolman... Debord surrounded himself with people who all had strong personalities and a lot of intuition, and he knew how to draw out the substance of it. None of them (with the possible exception of Wolman and Rumney) would have had the ability and the talent to achieve what he did. Debord's key strength and intelligence lay in his ability to synthesize what each of them had to offer and to integrate it into his own thought and creation.

**FP:** For this radical youth movement, we might say that this period was the rough draft for everything that would later take shape.

**GB:** It was all right there from the outset, but it needed to mature and take shape through more reflection. And the one who was able to do that was Debord. I asked Wolman how they worked on their collective texts. He said they just talked, each person bringing up something different, and Debord summarized them when he wrote. The texts were written by four hands.

**FP:** There is a great paradox here: the Situationists built their history by losing their original foundations...

**GB:** This completely adolescent and, in my eyes, brilliant insolence, which shaped the next ten to twenty years to come, could

not continue like that because they were always on the edge. You can't hold onto such an effervescent energy forever.

**FP:** To quote the German punks in *Dilapidée jeunesse*: “The sleeper misses out on a lot of stuff.” So there was this absurd and superhuman plan to not sleep so as not to miss anything. And there are a thousand ways not to sleep.

**GB:** Those would eventually be called “eruptions”. As Greil Marcus explains, Dada, Situationism and punk were three sudden eruptions, like an underground volcano of the 20th century. Obviously it's impossible to remain in permanent eruption...

**FP:** Yes, but when you structure and stabilize the eruption, you lose something in a way. It's very contradictory. When you read *La Tribu*, the interviews I did with Jean-Michel Mension, you wonder: “But how did these young people manage to live at night, drink, eat, go to bars, all without working?” People today cannot understand it, but it was quite possible. For twentysomethings in Paris of the time, housing wasn't as terrifying an issue as it is today. I get the feeling that people felt they owned the city from the moment they moved in. Being poor didn't rob people of their dignity in those days. Through this desire for freedom, to explore the city freely, to see it differently, to invent it, people disregarded the surveillance that reigned throughout the structured and gridded urban environment. Surveillance in a city like Paris in the 1950s was nothing like it is today, when video surveillance is omnipresent. Living out this kind of rebellion meant putting yourself at the center, not hiding or refusing what you knew was coming, namely this society of control. And I believe that few people have felt this so completely.

**FP:** Orwell himself would say that today is like science fiction, and far beyond what anyone imagined.

**GB:** I'm reading the latest Senate report on the surveillance society, and it all starts with a change of language. We no longer talk about “video surveillance” but “video protection” instead. The language has changed to make it sound better, but it is there, and worse.

The inspiration comes from Asia, and in particular from China, because it turns out that it is a very good model. In other words, if you take the train without buying a ticket, get stopped by the conductor and don't pay the fine, you're simply forbidden from taking the train. Moreover, we get a citizen rating for every activity, whether it's in the neighborhood, in intimate relationships, in love and so on. And if you fall below a certain rating, you become a monitored and controlled citizen. Take the health crisis that has forced us all to stay indoors, for example. It's not the health crisis that is the scandal, but rather the extent to which we have obeyed the orders en masse.

**FP:** How the health crisis was managed is the real scandal, because it was used to domesticate us. But if you say this, you risk being called a conspiracy theorist.

**GB:** That doesn't mean you shouldn't say anything. In the days when we didn't say “conspiracy theorist”, it was, “You have a cop's idea of history.” People might even say, “You're completely paranoid.” But calling me paranoid doesn't respond to what I said. They categorize me, put me in a box and assume there is no point in talking to what is inside that box, so I am neutralized.

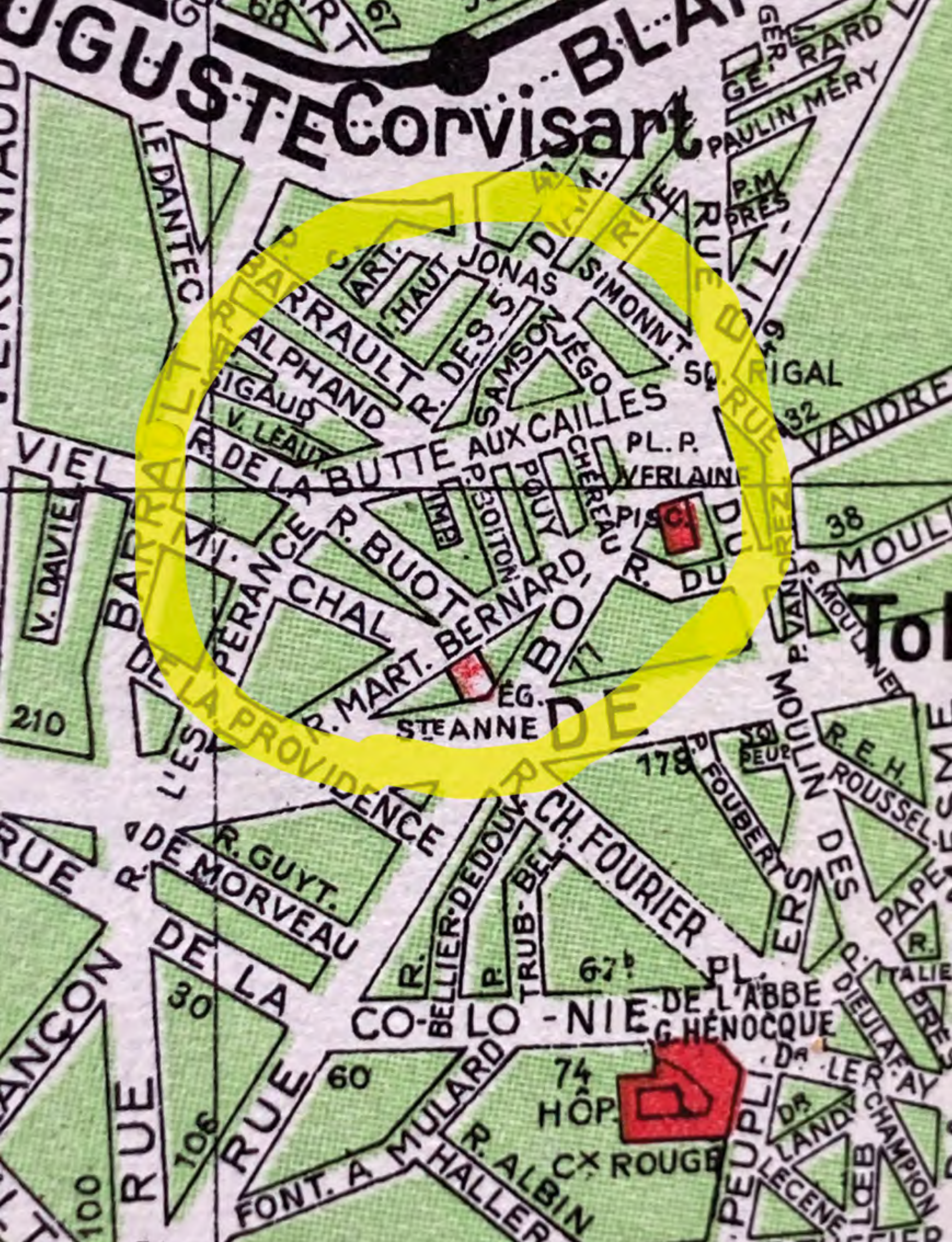
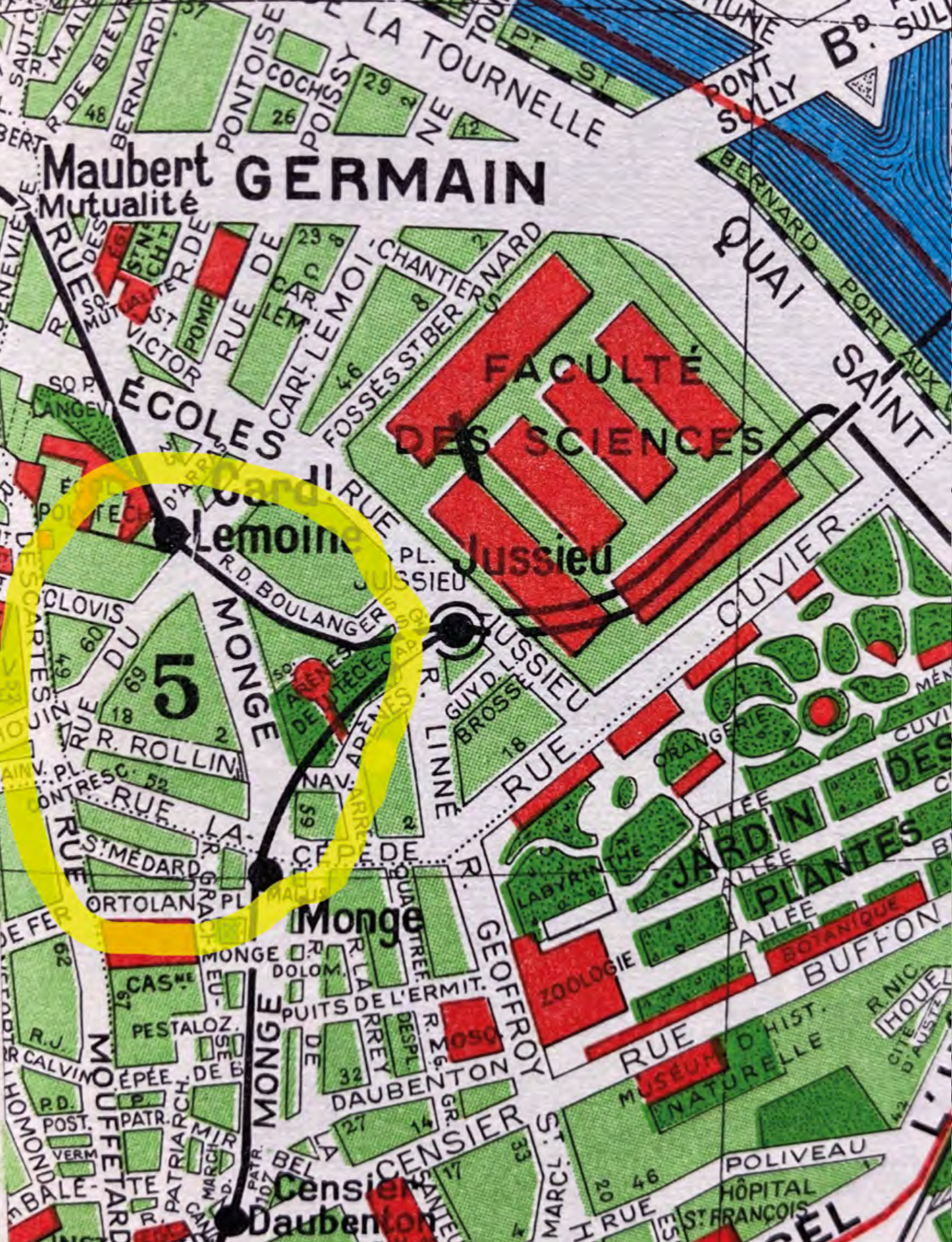
**FP:** In the same way that “video surveillance” has become “video protection”, the term “conspiracy” has been coined precisely to neutralize speech.

**GB:** I recently gave an example on a radio show about the Chernobyl incident and its impact on thyroid problems, which are virtually unrecorded in medical statistics and which exploded at the time in southeastern France and Romania. The host of the show was quick to dismiss me and immediately sensed what I was going to talk about. But it's a fact: at the time, thyroid cancers hardly appeared in the medical statistics. And then when it comes to iodine pills, with all the thyroid problems in women who take daily pills that have caused a scandal such as Levothyrox, which can lead to thyroid removal or cancer, the numbers are impressive. I spoke with doctors and physicists who were interested in the Chernobyl incident and were

making these connections. I didn't feel like I was kicking a hornet's nest, like I did on the radio program I mentioned.

**FP:** The youth of the Lettrist International and then of the Situationists foresaw in a rather visionary way the immense control mechanisms that would be put in place, though not the full extent that it has reached today. If Debord or others were still around, they would see that we have reached inconceivable heights on the question of digital domination.

**GB:** The situation we have arrived at proves to just how far commodities have triumphed over all areas of life, to the point where every individual is a personified commodity. We have never witnessed the circulation of such a massive quantity of images, especially during the first health crisis and lockdown of the population, and, I repeat, the most scandalous thing is to see just how much the majority of the population has obeyed. What happened was that each person, within their own sordid solitude, survived by sending images of themselves and their environment to all their contacts, with the images sometimes reaching beyond their circle if they became viral. The very people who talk about ecology did not realize how much the permanent, thoughtless consumption of videos and images pollutes the planet. Each person has become the director of their own life, but it's a life that has no interest. The only criterion: that the image is presentable, “instagramable”. It has become absolutely essential because you have no life if you don't have this life. You are wiped off the map. Everyone is well aware that recording our data is a godsend, but we don't care because we have to exist under this form imposed by the power of the image. Today, we have been so conditioned that I don't see much possibility of going back. We know all this, yet somehow we don't want to hear it. Never would the powers that be, in their most resolute fantasies of dominating and crushing human beings, have thought that we could reach such a state of complicity from the population. The people have become the best defenders of power.



**FP:** The people became the best police force during lockdown because they were so proud to stay at home. All of a sudden, people felt invested with a false sense of power that justified their existence. It's a bit of a paradox of great blindness and a mirror effect: we live in an era where everything is published but we have become totally blind. In this society of permanent publication, our vision has been stolen from us.

**GB:** A new dark age, to borrow James Bridle's expression. If we show so much of ourselves everywhere, it is also because we are hiding the reality that is imposed on us and that we accept. But at least I'm presenting a happy, artsy, sexy image... And from the moment we exist, we see how many people have "liked" us and then we like those who have liked us in order to expand our network. It's completely absurd. There is no more distance, no second degree, no irony, and the notion of friendship does not escape this logic at all. I wanted to make a tombstone that I wanted to install in situ at a cemetery. It would have no name, no epitaph, no date of birth or death, only a QR code that you can scan with your phone. I wanted to invent a crazy life for a dead person, with their Facebook page, group of friends and everything. What I want to say by that is that this is our present. And it's also an idea you can fully conceptualize and sell to a funeral home, which would then offer families the option of taking the deceased's digital archive, including their Facebook page, Instagram posts and so on, to create a sort of post-mortem digital showcase. Everything will work like this eventually. It used to be that when a loved one passed away, you would find childhood love letters tucked away in a drawer and you might get emotional over them. Things are different today, and as the medium changes, so does the content. And there comes a time when it is no longer you who is writing, but rather the medium that is writing for you.

**FP:** More generally, we want to legislate on everything. And a society that legislates too much is a sick society. There are things that belong to the private sphere. We cannot legislate in these areas because it is a human and social relationship of exchange. Whether these things are acceptable, pleasant, painful, violent or conflicting, they remain private. All this is now done through generalized surveillance: we have cameras to know who is ringing our doorbell, we can visit our apartment from our smartphone to see if our children are okay or if there is a fire. Soon we will be networked with cameras in our bedrooms and we will have to prove who we are. If you refuse, that means you have something to hide. When you arrive at the U.S. border, they ask you to open your computer and Facebook page. And you look suspicious if you don't have an account. When you take a step back, you realize that everything is connected.

**GB:** There is one point I'm interested in which is not too clear in Debord's work, namely the ecological dimension.

**FP:** Technology dispossesses you, while gently helping you do things better and faster.

**GB:** It is always a matter of freedom. In economics, the major breakthrough was learning how to generalize what was once reserved for the elite. The great

fashion designers, for example, created ready-to-wear clothing. Not so long ago, taking a plane was reserved for the financial elite. We have totally democratized this so that anyone can go anywhere, no matter the conditions. The boss of one of these low-cost airlines declared that they will soon transport passengers for free, and they will be paid instead by the destination airports, which have become full-fledged shopping malls that you are required to walk through, just like inside IKEA stores. The taxes paid by all the brands will finance the companies. Today, you can go around the world on Google Maps in 69 minutes, which is much faster than Jules Verne! Since I have access to every museum all over the world and their works in exceptional quality, I don't have to leave my home. And this even extends into sexuality, where sexuality with machines is even better than with a person, because a machine doesn't cause any problems, since it is a purely binary relationship.

**FP:** We print our magazine on paper, which is paradoxically much less polluting than social media or cryptocurrencies... But saying that social media and digital activity pollute is taboo!

**GB:** Look at the fire at one of the hosting company OVH's data centers in Strasbourg. It was a disaster. It's no longer possible to do anything without going through digital. I also published *L'Obsolescence programmée des objets* ("The Planned Obsolescence of Objects") by Bernard London. We realized, for example, that a single light bulb could once last a lifetime and beyond. But after the 1929 economic crisis, this was seen as dangerous because we wanted to revive the economy. So we created perishable light bulbs despite our superior knowledge. It's the same for cars, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators... Planned obsolescence has created an obligation to consume. And now we're the ones being lectured all the time. The big supermarket groups are getting in on the act,

explaining that we have to repair everything and buy second-hand clothes. As soon as these groups take an interest in the private sphere, it's only because there is a profit to be made. No one actually cares about the reality of protecting the planet, it's all an illusion.

**FP:** In Guy Debord's papers a final text that was planned for this publication, entitled *La Planète malade* ("The Sick Planet"). He was quite sensitive to these questions and he sensed the direction in which we are heading. He even anticipated ecological disasters. We have to understand that ecology as it is conceptualized today and promoted by a whole new generation has taken on a spectacular dimension. We no longer distinguish between the powers that be and the people, and this is done through a moral discourse of blaming the older generation who are seen as responsible for the world we live in. But at a time when we had very little information, when excessive consumption was being developed by governments, when the dream of cars and travel was sold as the pinnacle of success, everyone was already moving in this direction. This perception of ecology is cut off from questions of economics and power. I think we have to stop everything and pull the plug, otherwise we are heading straight for the abyss, it's obvious. I don't think it works to keep blaming people for their carbon footprint. The widespread use of computers and massive circulation of images have much more serious consequences than if I light up a cigarette in the street.

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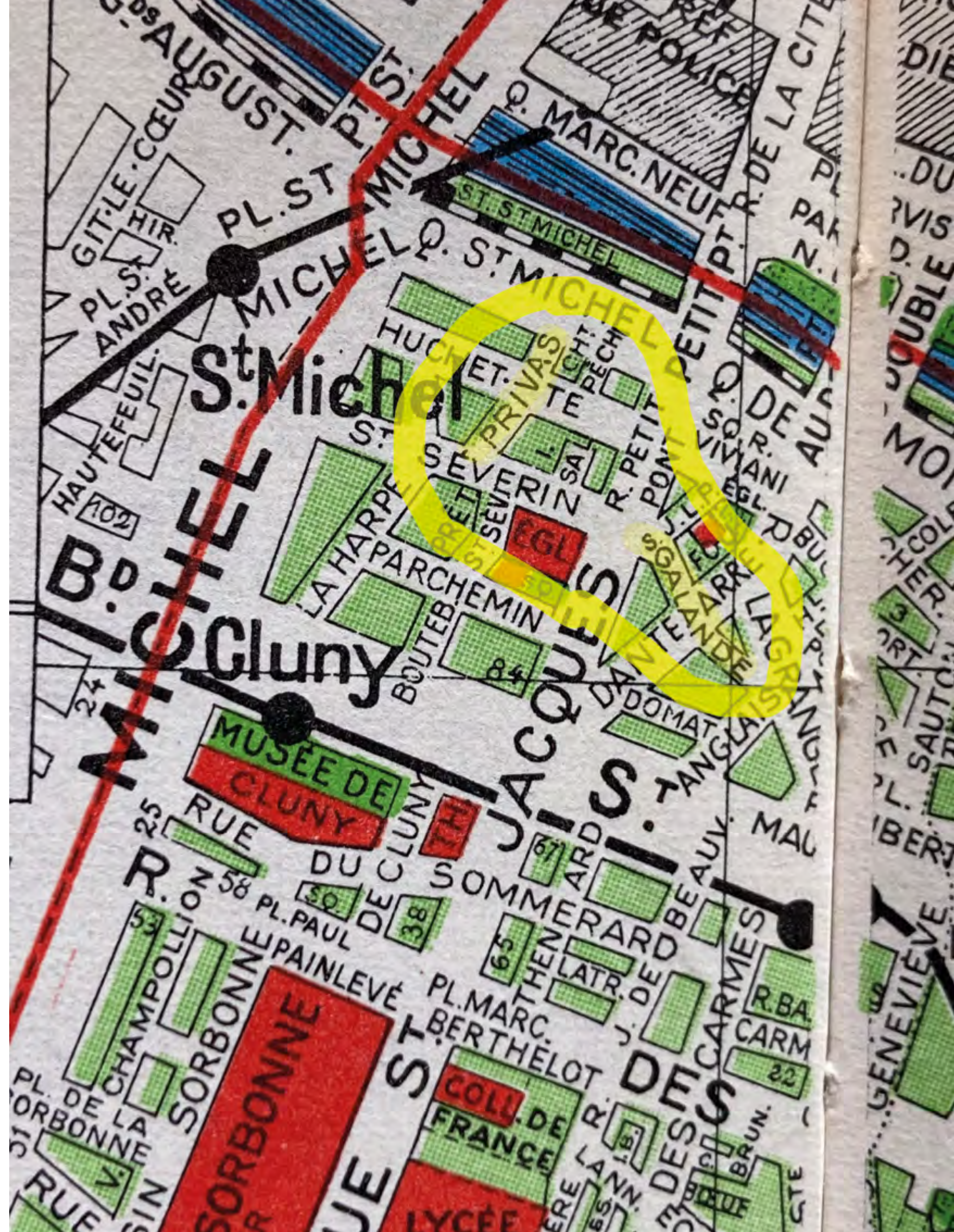
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*(1) Documents relatifs à la fondation de l'Internationale situationniste*  
*"Documents pertaining to the founding of the Situationist International"*  
 (Allia Editions, 1985)  
[www.editions-allia.com](http://www.editions-allia.com)