

Tober

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Tober: n. (*Toh-behr*) Jargon word used by gypsies, showfolk and traders for the site or area where a Fair or market takes place. From the Gaelic **Tobar** – Well, usually sited at the centre of a village and the venue for various communal and commercial activities.

a world of freedom, without weapons, where each may travel without let or hindrance from the steppes of central Asia to the Atlantic Coast, from the high plateau of South Africa to the forests of Finland.

The Situationists drifted in permanent carnival, arriving, claiming a piece of land as a new space, and then moving on, eminently pleased with themselves. They consciously mimicked 'real' nomads, whose process of arrival, claim and departure is far less self-conscious. Their sense of space is potentially limitless, their

ability to define it for themselves by taking a patch of earth anywhere, situating themselves on it and making it theirs – temporarily – representing a worldview supposedly at odds with 'settled society'.

And yet, we have these *bourgeois*, settled Situationists looking to Gypsy camps for inspiration. Their whole project, with its emphasis on the transient organisation of space, seems to be an attempt to recreate what was a very marginal and specific lifestyle as universal philosophical principle. Accordingly, they tried to universalise this in artistic and even architectural forms.

One suspects they would have enjoyed the impertinence recorded in the picture above, and would probably have perpetuated it in some way. It may even have suffered the indignity of becoming a trend, or even a principle. A universal constant of impertinence ...

Speaking of which, the Belgian Situationist, Constant, designed a *maquette* for a structure based on 'the site' that could be taken apart, transported and reassembled anywhere; a city that served as a megastructure purely for the use of transient residents, who could change the structure and allocation of space as they desired. His manifesto for 'New Babylon' quotes Vaida Voivod III, President of the world Gypsy congress:

We are the living symbols of a world without frontiers,



I, personally, detect a tongue in Voivod's cheek and a wannabe naivete on the part of Constant. As Peter Wollen remarked in an article in the *New Left Review*, the defence of nomadism was, admittedly, a vital current in Situationist thought – the Italian Giuseppe Gallizio became politically active over Gypsy rights, while Alice Becker-Ho was an excellent Romany linguist. The Gypsies were

useful ciphers for the Situationists' stance in favour of the spontaneous over the classical – the nomads were the last true Dionysians: wild, inconstant, transcendental. Constant saw in them the precursor to his cherished *Homo Ludens* ('man the player') as opposed to *Homo Faber* (man the maker – the industrial operative).

As my forebears were acrobats and clowns, it seems a fair enough description for my kind – at least in principle, although surely all of this idealism has been superseded by *Homo Vorens* (man the consumer) that applies to nomad and urbanite alike. Furthermore, many of my relatives would be a tad irked at the notion their lives were all play and no work.

But of course, the European middle classes have long held to, secretly or not, such fantasies of the orgiastic 'others' in their midst, free from the ties they felt bound by. But it is more than mere exotic titillation – the nomadic camp was deployed as part of their wider political and philosophical quarrel. The Situationist theorist Asger Jorn famously called for 'organic unity' as opposed to the separations of modernism into zones and districts, seeing the divisions that Foucault and Joyce described as part of a 'racket' that propped up the system of 'greed and power'. Part of this unity he envisaged was, for the Situationists, found in the communal huddle of the encampment.

As a domesticated specimen of nomad, I can see both truth and illusion in the Situationist ideal – related as it



largely as their own – often through parking a pram with infant child somewhere near the steps (or if a fair, the counter of a stall). The men must negotiate access to it.

Every site is unique, laid out depending on time, terrain and feasibility. In terms of living space, the priority is visual communication between steps and windows, and proximity of family and friendship groups. Romanies traditionally circle their trailers with the towbars inwards, so that the large windows at the front of the trailer always look out onto each other. Fairground Travellers, wherever possible, arrange their wagons in an oblong sometimes with a central cluster, for precisely the same reason of creating shared space between their much more private spaces inside the van. The lozenge shape of the trailer, versus the loaf of bread shape of the wagon can explain the difference between these layouts – in many modern wagons the largest window is to the side. However, there is always an accommodation with the way things are as they are found. Thus, the shell of a factory, the bend of a river or the inconvenience of a lamppost has to be accommodated and momentarily included in this **familiarly and personally** imagined social framework.

The importance of this larger window is so that children, and of course, neighbours can be observed. This is for reasons of collective security, but also, more waspishly perhaps, for the purpose of what can only be realistically described as minding everyone else's business. It is thus a cohesive, inclusive, embracing attitude to space, land and 'the commons' dependent on an understanding of the vagaries of human nature, vanities and favours owed. What it is not, is universalist – for when Travellers make their presence felt, it is not to the inclusion of others. This is a group hug that perpetuates its own – it is not offering a model or maquette to anyone, and if they try to use it so, they will run into trouble.

Constant's maquette imagined the camp as a hotel, or a superstructure where partitions and walls could be reconfigured. In reality, the camp – or 'ground' or tober – is a cluttering of objects decided upon by a close-knit and jealous group. The land is used for assembly, disassembly and reassembly, again and again. And perhaps it is this obscene and open admission of the human situation as a transient loop, rather than an infinite movement to progress – (or even a deterioration from Grace) – that means we can never be forgiven, by humanist or divine alike.

