

**Detournement and Recuperation: Paradox in the Performances of  
Vanessa Beecroft**

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## Détournement and Recuperation: Paradox in the performances of Vanessa Beecroft

The recent 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* prompts a review of its currency to contemporary art. The characteristics of the spectacle as identified by Debord have tended to be reified by subsequent generations of artists. One such artist is Vanessa Beecroft whose performances simultaneously engage the Situationist method of *détournement* and its opposite, recuperation. If, as Debord says, we are to understand *détournement* as making use of concrete concepts, the dialectic recuperation, then, 'simultaneously recognizes their *fluidity* and their inevitable destruction'.

Through her use of nude models, Beecroft presents the ultimate *détournement*, negating the cultural authority of the arts museum to contest the representation of many passive and anonymous female subjects as they appear in the tradition of European oil painting. In this way, Beecroft parodies the prevailing socio-cultural and political forces aligned with classicism by presenting her nudes as flesh and blood reality. Furthermore, her works highlight the passivity of spectatorship by privileging the viewer's gaze which remains largely unreturned by the performers. Beecroft, then, articulates the unconscious complicity of the spectator to the conventions of the gallery. At the same time, however, the spectator consumes the work as image-object and thus it becomes recuperated into the spectacle. Conversely, it can be argued that Beecroft's *détournement* is compromised as her conspicuous collaboration with design houses such as Louis Vuitton and Gucci sees 'woman' arranged as in a marketplace, resulting in the recuperation of the performances to commodity fetishism.

In the media-saturated consumer culture of the twenty-first century, Beecroft's performances give rise to the challenge of recovering the Situationist critique from the abyss of the spectacle itself. In light of the challenges posed by Beecroft's work in understanding arts' relationship to spectacle, this paper explores the tension within Vanessa Beecroft's performances which render visible the dilemma of critiquing spectacle without recourse to recuperation.