The focus of this essay is a relatively unknown exhibition of works by the post-WWII avant-garde group called the Situationist International (1957-1972) that was held at the Galerie EXI in Odense, Denmark in June 1963. The title of the show was ‘Destruktion Af RSG-6: En kollektiv manifestation af Situationistisk Internationale’ (in English: ‘Destruction RSG-6: A Collective Manifestation of the Situationist International’). I have chosen this particular exhibition for its anomalous, yet significant, place within the history of the Situationist International (henceforth the SI). It was the first and last collective exhibition of so-called ‘situationist’ works within a gallery context. And, crucially, its 1963 date dispels the commonplace assumption that after the group split in 1962 (into what is often erroneously referred to as a division between the Debordists and the Nashists) the so-called Debordist faction gave up being artistic cultural producers to become instead dry, political theoreticians. A rejection of such a false division between theory and practice, typically read as a separation between politics and art, is made emphatic by the title and contents of Debord’s essay for this exhibition’s catalogue, namely, ‘The Situationists and New Action Forms in Politics And Art’ (my emphasis). From its opening lines this text defines and affirms three particular constituents of the SI’s decidedly intertwined artistic-political project. Firstly, it asserts the SI’s status as “an artistic avant-garde”; secondly, that this artistic status involves a search, through experiments in culture, “to find the way to the human being’s free arrangement of everyday life”; and thirdly, that the theory and practice of the SI revolves around the construction of a “new revolutionary contest” (Debord 1963: 9). It was only a targeted opposition in all three areas simultaneously that for Debord offered the possibility of a “free creativity, the dominion of the human being over his own history in every sphere” (Debord 1963: 9).
In general, this much overlooked essay presents an important distillation of Situationist writings on the question of an avant-garde mode of praxis that, I argue, still generates productive conclusions. In particular, it provides a novel model of avant-garde temporality, whereby acts of cultural-political interventions are understood as taking place immanently, in the ‘now’ of time. Such ‘nowness’ was intended to work against horizons of future actions associated with the military heritage of the meaning of an avant-garde, literally as a group that was situated ahead of, or in front of, the rest. But, somewhat paradoxically, this ‘now’ time did not abandon links to the past. This is because the SI’s concept of the ‘now’, as I explain later on in more detail, is constituted through a complex overlapping of past and present revolutionary moments, but, crucially, without recall to, or melancholic laments for some lost, originary historical avant-garde moment, contra Peter Bürger. It is precisely Bürger’s model of a periodised division between a genuine, first historical avant-garde c.1920, followed by later, poor imitations, the so-called ‘neo-avant-gardes’ of the 1950s and 60s that I contend is challenged by the SI’s particular temporal definition of an avant-garde that acts in the present, since ‘nowness’ troubles models of a discrete before and after. Or, to put it more emphatically, from the SI’s perspective there can be no such thing as a so-called ‘neo-avant-garde’ (in Bürger’s belated and repetitive sense) since to be avant-garde means to act now, never later on.

By claiming that the “Destruktion” exhibition presents a novel avant-garde temporality, I do not infer by this that the SI offers a new, or original model of avant-garde praxis as such. Indeed, throughout Debord’s essay certain familiar avant-garde principles remain in place, such as the intertwining of art and politics to form a critique of everyday life aimed at transforming that life. To use, that is, revolutionary artistic practices as a model for an alternative liberating life praxis, as opposed to merely aestheticising the everyday or committing what Peter Bürger calls a “false sublation” of the autonomy of art into the means-end rationality of everyday debased living within a culture industry (Bürger 1984: 54). Or to put it into situationist speak, to avoid the recuperation of a living artistic praxis (what the SI called a “constructed life situation”) by the alienating machinations of the society of the spectacle. What is unfamiliar or different here is of course the particular historical moment at which the SI announces their mode of radical or avant-garde revivalism.