Project
MUSE®

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

http://muse.jhu.edu

Introduction

Jonathan P. Eburne and Rita Felski

WHAT IS AN AVANT-GARDE? In posing such a question, this issue of *New Literary History* seeks to reexamine a category that often seems all too self-evident. Our aim is not to draw up a fresh list of definitions, specifications, and prescriptions but to explore the conditions and repercussions of the question itself. In the spirit of analogously titled queries—from Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" to Foucault's "What is an Author?"—we hope to spur reflection not only on a particular object of study but also on the frameworks and critical faculties that we bring to bear on it. As Paul Mann notes, every critical text on the avant-garde, whether tacitly or overtly, "has a stake in the avant-garde, in its force or destruction, in its survival or death (or both)."[1] A reassessment of these stakes is one of the priorities of this special issue.

Narratives of the avant-garde abound. Whether they come to bury the avant-garde or to praise it, these narratives are typically organized around moments of shock, rupture, and youthful revolt that speak to certain beliefs about the functions of experimental art and the nature of historical change. In his 1968 *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, for instance, Renato Poggioli describes two major phases in the development of the avant-garde. The first stage is anchored in the leftist politics of the 1840s and the 1870s, where the notion of an advanced guard serves to authorize the political agitations and underground activities that helped trigger the revolutionary events of 1848 and the Paris Commune. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the mantle of the avant-garde is transferred from politics to aesthetics, as manifested in the new stridency and shock value claimed by art and the self-consciously vanguardist ethos of such movements as Dada, futurism, surrealism, and constructivism. For Poggioli, however, such aesthetic appropriations of the insurrectionary energies of political vanguardism remained largely metaphorical and risked bad faith in exaggerating the circumscribed effects of artistic innovation and intervention.[2]

This narrative has been widely adopted and adapted in the four decades since its publication, and its insistence on the historical priority of a strictly political—and leftist—incarnation of the avant-garde remains influential. From Poggioli's vantage point in 1968, the meaning of past

avant-gardes reflected the urgency of contemporary concerns: to what extent could the history of avant-gardes and their oscillation between political and aesthetic goals shed light on the utopian ambitions of the New Left? In our own moment, we may be struck by the fact that this narrative of stages—the "political" moment of the 1840s and 1870s, the "aesthetic" moment of the 1920s, and the "theoretical" moment of the 1960s—persists in imputing a single, overriding agency and intention to avant-garde activity, in spite of the historical differences it acknowledges. Such a narrative tends, in short, to measure the successes of avant-garde activity—and above all, its failures—against a singular criterion of revolutionary political transformation.

The meanings and consequences of avant-gardes, however, cannot be deduced from the metaphorical resonance of the term itself. Indeed, the militarist aggression and forward movement implicit in the idea of the avant-garde have been questioned almost as frequently as they have been heeded; the amplitude of radical artistic and political practices constitutes a multifaceted history of such renegotiations. And whether the avant-garde represents a discrete moment or series of moments in the intellectual history of modernity or a more diffuse aesthetic or political ethos, its currency resides as much in the history of grappling with its valences as in the diverse works and movements collected under its name. This special issue proposes, then, that the question "what is an avant-garde?" remains a productive site for methodological and historical invention, and not merely a monument to the glorious past of radical art.

For the past few decades, the study of the avant-garde has persistently circled around the question of its death. The parameters for such claims were largely set by Peter Bürger's obituary to radical art, published a few years after Poggioli's study in 1974 and translated into English in 1984. In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger pays tribute to the historical avant-garde's challenge to the autonomy of art, while underscoring the lessons of its failure. For Bürger, the enshrining of the ready-made in the museum delivers the lesson that it is the institution, rather than a work's intrinsic qualities, that defines what counts as art. This lesson constitutes both the success of the avant-garde—in denaturalizing artistic genius as the source of aesthetic value—and its inevitable limit. The ease with which the museum incorporates and subsumes all artistic challenges to its authority testifies to the futility of attempts to overcome the functional separation of art and life by eliminating the mediating presence of social institutions. The heroic hopes of the historical avant-garde survive only as an object of present-day nostalgia or melancholy. Meanwhile, the ever more calculated provocations of contemporary artists—testifying to the seemingly limitless selling power of shock—merely underscore the inauthenticity of their insurrectionary postures.[3]

Bürger's insistence on the finitude of the historical avant-garde (in an argument largely centered on the Dada and surrealist movements of prewar and interwar Europe) is suffused with the imperatives of his own intellectual inheritance, that of Frankfurt School critical theory. The oppositional energies of the avant-garde find their continuation and completion elsewhere—not in the bad-faith gestures of a newly commodified neo-avant-garde, but in the practice of radical critique itself. Theory, in other words, shoulders the antinomian and anti-institutional role previously assigned to radical art. A similar logic is echoed in the vanguardist aspirations of a range of influential frameworks, from "French theory" to cultural studies, which often define their radical ambitions and interventionist agency in opposition to orthodox beliefs, intellectual traditions, and fixed institutional structures.[4] Given its frequent reliance on a rhetoric of innovation and rupture, as well as an anti-institutional animus that may seem questionable in the light of its own implication in structures of higher education, it is not surprising that theory itself—or a certain conception of what counts as theory—is now subject to the same proclamations of obsolescence, exhaustion, and death previously leveled at avant-garde art.

The following essays are, for the most part, not especially concerned with salvaging the revolutionary élan of avant-gardism or, for that matter, of critical theory. One goal of the issue is instead to question the pervasive tendency to personify the avant-garde through a biographical narrative of birth, youthful insurrection, and death—a narrative that translates psychologically into a predictable arc of anticipation followed by disappointment, and politically into the lexicon of a radical oppositional force that cannot escape its subsequent co-option. Experimental aesthetic and political movements continue to form and develop throughout the world. What is the nature of this persistence—and what new demands does it levy upon contemporary critical practice and our presumptions about historical change? For their part, historical theories of the avant-garde such as those of Bürger and Poggioli underscore the limits of formalist approaches eager to conjure evidence of transgression out of close readings of individual art works. Semiotic and social subversion are far from synonymous, and the defiance of artistic convention comes without political guarantees. Yet the subsuming of all avant-garde movements within a single development narrative allots an excessive importance to the avant-garde's European origins, while condemning all subsequent forms of radical art to repetition, belatedness, and bad faith. In this regard, Hal Foster and others have argued that the all-or-nothing nature of arguments such as Bürger's takes the revolutionary rhetoric of the avant-garde too much at its own word, overlooking the possibility of muted, qualified, deferred, or different transformations.

Indeed, as avant-garde movements develop in new locations and changed historical contexts, they continue to reassess their goals, formulate new ambitions, and develop alternative forms of intellectual, political, and artistic practice.[5]

Looking beyond a restricted vocabulary of innovation and exhaustion, resistance and commodification, a number of the following essays assess diverse forms of avant-garde activity in terms of what they make possible, rather than rushing to quantify their ultimate success or failure. Even those essays wary of retaining the term "avant-garde" as a synonym for experimental aesthetic or political activity remain interested in exploring how various forms of such activity persist under contemporary conditions. In either case, this shift in focus requires dislodging certain beliefs about the nature of social institutions and the dynamics of historical change. The relationship of the avant-garde to institutions and the market, for example, surely exceeds the either-or thinking of opposition versus co-option. It is far from self-evident that institutions leach avant-gardes of all their critical or oppositional qualities, given the extent to which these same qualities are mediated by the institutional life of vanguard groups, collectives, and movements themselves, whether via formal structures such as museums and universities or more provisional associations of groups, journals, and collectives. Neither does the economic status of the art object—given its now virtually inescapable classification as a commodity—convey much information about its social agency, how it circulates, or the nature of its effects. Indeed, the story of a pristine avant-garde subsequently defanged and domesticated by its own commodification overlooks the multifarious entanglements between historical avant-gardes, advertising, and consumer culture. Popular culture, in this sense, is not just where avant-gardes go to die, but comprises a domain with its own variegated history of borrowing, supplying, recycling, and reinventing avant-garde practices.[6]

The highly charged connections between contemporary avant-gardes and new social movements have also transformed the field of avant-garde studies. This is not just a matter of an expanded archive of works—though the significance of such an archive should not be underestimated—but also of an altered view of the avant-garde's past attainments as well as its possible futures. A feminist perspective, for example, cannot help but influence the criteria by which sameness and difference are measured: what look like formal innovations and representational breakthroughs in the immanent logic of art history often turn out to be mired in an all-too-familiar ethos of oedipal rebellion and an avowed disdain for the feminine and the maternal. Moreover, the flourishing of women's experimental art over the last four decades has inspired a host of

ground-breaking new insights into the aesthetics and politics of gender representation that can hardly be explained away as belated, attenuated echoes of a primordial radicalism.[7] From such a feminist standpoint, a history of the avant-garde grounded in melancholy for its now radically depleted revolutionary potential will clearly fail to resonate.

Similarly, postcolonial studies has profoundly altered our sense of how avant-garde activity correlates with geopolitical space, contesting the view that non-Western avant-gardes are forever doomed to appropriate and imitate an artistic radicalism imported from elsewhere. The argument for "multiple modernities" is not, as its critics have claimed, a matter of positing the existence of discrete, disconnected modern cultures—an inherent absurdity, given that the idea of modernity is intimately associated with expansion, mobility, and interconnection. It is, rather, a question of investigating how the meanings and effects of modern forms of life, including the activities and structures of avant-gardes, are shaped by the urgencies of their own milieu and moment as well as by larger cultural-political crosscurrents. In the case of non-Western avant-gardes, this means thinking through their relation to the representational repertoires of indigenous traditions and canonical European movements alike, as well as recognizing, in consequence, that the connotations of both tradition and modernity may acquire markedly different resonances under postcolonial and neocolonial conditions. The end result, in short, is a more variegated picture of the histories of avant-garde practice, one characterized by nonsynchrony, multiple temporalities, repetition, and difference.[8]

The revisionist project of this special issue begins with a critical return to one of the principal texts in the field. In the opening essay, Peter Bürger reflects on the reception of his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and crafts a spirited response to his critics, while also expanding on and refining his original claims. For Bürger, what continues to distinguish the avant-garde are the two interrelated principles identified in his original argument: the attack on the institution of art and the revolutionary transformation of everyday life. Underscoring the explicitly theoretical, rather than merely historical, thrust of this definition, Bürger defends his generalizing strategy as a necessary means of achieving clarity about the changing role of art in society. He reiterates his argument about the failure of the historical avant-garde (to overcome the distinction of art and life), while placing a new emphasis on its equal measure of success (in transforming the internal logic of art as an institution). The avant-garde's appropriation of outdated and popular materials, for example, played a key role in challenging the norms of the art world, helping to bring about the leveling of distinctions often associated with postmod-

ernism. On the one hand, then, the avant-garde failed in its attempt to revolutionize social reality; on the other hand, its impact on the norms and values of the art institution was significant and far-reaching. Contemporary or neo-avant-gardes remain caught on the horns of this contradiction, insofar as their aesthetic experiments—whatever the explicit intentions of the artist—only shore up the walls of the institution rather than breaking them down.

John Roberts seeks to adjudicate between Bürger and his critics by means of his concept of the "suspensive avant-garde." He agrees with Hal Foster and others that Bürger's obituary to the avant-garde fails to account for the tenacity of avant-garde imperatives. Yet he also points out that critics of Bürger—those who champion the subversive potential of neo-avant-gardes—can only make their case by down-pedaling their political expectations, endorsing art's pragmatic utility within structures of capital, and repressing the intimate historical connections between the original avant-gardes and revolutionary praxis. Roberts upholds revolutionary pathos—the pained awareness of the schism between aesthetic innovation and political transformation—as a necessary condition for art's resistance; like Adorno, he regards its distance from the world as the source of its powers of negation. In this light, the contemporary avant-garde remains a crucial placeholder for the ideals of the historical avant-garde, in spite of its emergence under very different social conditions. The Russian avant-garde group Chto Delat? serves Roberts as an exemplary model of an avant-garde suspended between direct political engagement and an aesthetic autonomy that remains vital for the imagining of a radically alternative future.

In contrapuntal fashion, the five subsequent essays challenge the view that the revolutionary abolition of capitalism remains the ultimate meaning-horizon against which the avant-garde must be assessed. Elizabeth Harney draws on the performance history of the Senegalese avant-garde group Laboratoire Agit-Art—including its controversial performance in London in the mid 1990s—as the basis for a larger argument about the aesthetics and politics of non-Western avant-garde movements. The growing African presence in the international art world, she argues, has inspired a sharpened awareness of the Eurocentric dimensions of theories of the avant-garde, while triggering debates about what is gained and what is lost by dislocating non-Western art from its original context. Harney shows how the Laboratoire Agit-Art developed in the 1970s in response to local exigencies, as a grass-roots reaction to a state-sponsored model of African art fostered by Léopold Ségar Senghor and embodied in the École de Dakar. Yet, even as it embraced traditional art forms and tribal structures, this loose avant-garde grouping looked to Plekhanov and

Artaud in a free-wheeling appropriation of multiple traditions. Its local interventions had, in other words, international inflections. Subsequent African avant-gardes confront an ever more transnational world stage in which Western metropolitan audiences are increasingly receptive to non-Western art, while remaining, for the most part, oblivious to the local histories and specific struggles in which this art is embedded.

Michael Sell, while also touching on how postcolonial thought reorders what counts as aesthetic or political radicalism, focuses his attention on the example of the Black Arts Movement in the United States. Sell urges us to reflect on the blind spots and limitations of avant-garde studies as an academic field, including the historical narratives it fashions as well as the often questionable demarcations it establishes between aesthetic, cultural, and political radicalism. The Black Arts Movement epitomized a vanguard formation in which the lines between these categories were intentionally blurred, even as the development of Black Studies under-scores the dialectical—rather than purely oppositional—relationship between avant-gardes and institutions. Its interventions, in short, were not just continuations of an already predetermined idea of the avant-garde. Rather, in their complex negotiations with both Western and African traditions, they reconfigured current understandings of the past of the avant-garde as well as its future. Sell concludes by proffering his own provisional definition of avant-gardism, while insisting that the question of what counts as avant-garde can never be definitively settled.

Shifting back slightly further in time, Ben Lee examines the relations between U.S. poetry and avant-garde subcultures in the 1950s and '60s. Making a case for hipsterism as a legitimate avant-garde practice, Lee argues that subcultures played a key role in the dissemination of an avant-garde sensibility in everyday life, shaping the semiotics of dress, speech, and bodily movement. Focusing on hipsterism's distinctive and self-conscious structure of feeling, Lee teases out its stance of ironic, cool disengagement, which he describes as a "jazz-inspired, racially inflected populist elitism." By juxtaposing the work of novelist Norman Mailer with that of beat poet Diane di Prima, he draws out contrasting gender inflections of coolness, which turns out to be less "masculine" than is often supposed. For Lee, the avant-garde can be usefully reconceptual-ized as a broad subcultural formation rather than an episode internal to the history of art; hipsterism's multifarious connections to everyday life and mass culture fuel rather than diminish its critical energies.

Broaching the question of the avant-garde and the feminine, Griselda Pollock posits a discontinuous series of avant-garde moments that escape the conventional temporal schemes and periodizing narratives of art history. One such moment is the flourishing of a feminist avant-garde in

the 1970s, with its explosion of experimental art works by women as well as new theories of the avant-garde by Julia Kristeva and others. According to Pollock, such theories have become more rather than less timely under present conditions of "liquid modernity," as described by Zygmunt Bauman, in which the model of heroic transgression against repressive authority has lost its credibility. Conjuring up an idiosyncratic "imaginary exhibition" of art works by women and men that would illuminate the avant-garde's often overlooked history of engagement with sexual difference and motherhood, Pollock argues for transtemporal continuities as well as historical differences among works of art. For Pollock, then, a feminist avant-garde is not a belated addition to a extant canon, but has the power to reconfigure our very conception of what constitutes radical art, including our prevailing temporal schemes.

Amy Elias demonstrates how the avant-garde interventions of the Situationist International (SI) are currently being revitalized and reimagined on the internet. The parallels between urban space and cyberspace, in particular, allow cyberartists to appropriate Situationist strategies of *dérive* and *détournement* in the hope of reenergizing human experience and perception. In the interstices of a World Wide Web ruled by imperatives of commerce, labor, and surveillance there exists a host of artists and websites—some ephemeral, others relatively long-lasting—whose playful, disorienting explorations of emotion, sensation, and meaning are attuned to SI notions of "psychogeography." Virtual worlds such as *Second Life*, while heavily oriented toward conventional forms of usage, also offer possibilities for creative artists to reinvent virtual space and to carry such experiments over into real-world performances. The flourishing of inventive, often extraordinary, art forms on the internet thus epitomizes an avant-garde whose space of operation remains firmly within, rather than outside, the society of the spectacle.

The ensuing four essays offer historical reflections on particular avant-garde movements. The first pair of essays looks back to the historical precedents of Dada and futurism in order to place them in a fresh perspective, whereas the second pair reexamines the contemporary practices of language poetry and recent experimental theater and performance art. French art critic Philippe Sers invokes what he calls the ontological ethos of the avant-garde work as a particular way of disclosing meaning. The avant-garde, in his view, signals not the ruin of representation but its redefinition; not the debunking of truth but a new relationship to truth. Here Sers manifests his impatience with current accounts of the avant-garde that remain fixated on its nihilism, formal novelty, and value-leveling dimensions. The contemporary infatuation with transgression, he argues, epitomizes a false transcendence that only plays into

the logic of contemporary capitalism. Highlighting the strains of icono-
phobia that pervades language-based aesthetic theories, Sers calls for a
new reassessment of the cognitive and transformative power of images.
The status of the original avant-garde work as event, he proposes, lies
not in its negativity but in its utopianism, its harboring of a moment of
transcendence that is profoundly ethical in its implications.

Walter Adamson looks back on the history of Italian futurism in order
to ponder its lessons for understanding the endings, and beginnings,
of avant-garde movements. Tracing the various mutations and historical
phases of futurism, he proposes that its ultimate death in the early 1920s
resulted from three intertwined factors: termination (the dissolution of
vanguard energies), betrayal (the repudiation of core values), and a loss
of autonomy and self-determination. Linking the case of futurism to
the subsequent encroachments of twentieth-century consumer culture,
Adamson insists that the implication of present-day avant-gardes in such
a culture should not be seen as an automatic surrender of their criti-
cal energies, but as the site of emergence for new models of dissident
activity. He concludes by making a case for an immanent rather than
oppositional avant-garde, one that acknowledges its own implication
in the structures it contests and that retains a skepticism regarding the
authority of its own solutions.

Bob Perelman grounds his reflections on the state of the avant-garde in
his own contradictory affiliations as poet and critic, arguing for a rough
distinction between avant-gardism as a concept in aesthetic theory—with
its various historical entailments—and its looser and more labile deploy-
ment in poetry and poetry criticism. An investigation of a forgotten line
in one of his own poems—a sardonic remark about losing his avant-
garde card in the laundry—triggers a sustained questioning of his own
intellectual allegiance to avant-garde principles. Drawing out the tacit
forms of orthodoxy clinging to the avant-garde's ostensible refusal of
orthodoxy, Perelman suggests that the very concept of the avant-garde
may have simply become uninteresting. Ambitious, innovative art will,
of course, continue to appear. But, like the defunct scientific concept of
phlogiston, "avant-garde" may testify to an entity that we can no longer
believe in and a framework of thinking that has become purely historical.

Richard Schechner endorses this skeptical view for rather different
reasons, making an argument for the conservative nature of the con-
temporary avant-garde. In Schechner's usage, "conservative" identifies
not a political or ideological slant, but the condition of an avant-garde
intent on conserving, recycling, and reverentially citing its own history.
The aesthetic sophistication and technical proficiency of contemporary
performance art, for example, confirms its status as a "niche-garde"

that speaks to an already identified audience demographic and taste culture. Confronted with social conditions in which revolution seems impossible, encouraged by poststructuralist and postmodern theories premised on repetition, citation, and the impossibility of originality, aided by a host of technological innovations that facilitate the storage, retrieval, and recirculation of past works, the avant-garde, in New York at least, is caught in a holding pattern, circling endlessly around its own past achievements.

In the final essay of the issue, Martin Puchner points out that news of the avant-garde's demise has failed to reach the ears of those individuals and groups still passionately committed to avant-garde projects. Rather than casting these views as delusional and mired in bad faith, Puchner urges us toward a different history of the avant-garde that can take contemporary interventions seriously while eschewing nostalgia for the ur-radicalism of the past. Such a history will be a history of repetition, where repetition is understood not as derivative, compromised, or emptied of meaning, but as central to the structure of avant-garde movements from the very start—witness their endless proliferation of manifestos. In this light, Puchner proposes that the success of avant-garde provocations be measured against the force, inventiveness, or wit of these provocations themselves rather than the yardstick of total revolutionary transformation. Detailing four present-day examples of avant-garde publications and performances originating in Oslo, London, New York, and Zurich, he underscores the unquenched vitality of avant-garde traditions and the savviness and sophistication with which contemporary artists negotiate their relationship to its past histories.

In posing the question "what is an avant-garde?" this issue of *New Literary History* offers a heterogeneous set of responses, an aggregate of exhortations, lamentations, affirmations, jeremiads, disputations, and revisions. (Other essays we had hoped to include—on such topics as Chinese and Latin American avant-gardes and on the avant-garde's relationship to popular music—may appear in future issues.) Individual contributors may disagree on the continuing relevance or obsolescence of the avant-garde; this is due largely, as we have seen, to their diverging views of what counts as an avant-garde, including its artistic and political ambitions as well as its temporal and spatial locations. Yet the issue as a whole testifies, in the fervor and animation of its contributors' voices, that argument about the avant-garde remains a live issue in the unfolding present of contemporary thought as well as the intellectual history of modernity.

NOTES

1   Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991), 8.

2   Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA; Harvard Univ. Press, 1968).

3   Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984).

4   François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States*, trans. Jeff Fort, Josephine Berganza, and Marlon Jones (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2004); Rita Felski, "Modernist Studies and Cultural Studies: Reflections on Method," *Modernism/modernity* 10, no. 3 (2003): 501–518.

5   Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996). See also Marjorie Perloff, *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Krzysztof Ziarek, *The Force of Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2004); Gerald Raunig, *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century* (New York: Semiotexte, 2007); and Piotr Piotrowski, *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-Garde in Eastern Europe, 1945–1989* (London: Reaktion, 2009).

6   Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979) and Renée M. Silverman, ed., *The Popular Avant-Garde* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2010).

7   See Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Patricia Mellencamp, *Indiscretions: Avant-Garde Film, Video, and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits 1888–1893: Gender and the Color of Art History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1993), and *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999); Lucy Lippard, *The Pink Glass Swan: Selected Essays on Feminist Art* (New York: The New Press, 1995); Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look: An Erotics of Encounter* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Lucy Delap, *The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic Encounters of the Early Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

8   See Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of New "Indian" Art: Art, Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, 1850–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Vicki Unruh, *Latin American Vanguards: The Art of Contentious Encounters* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994); Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000); Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Carrie Noland and Barrett Watten, eds., *Diasporic Avant-Gardes: Experimental Poetics and Cultural Displacement* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde:
An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*

Peter Bürger[*]

Definitions

"WHAT IS AN AVANT-GARDE?" I understand this question as a provocation. The strategy is not a bad one, because sometimes a provocation can bring about a surprising clarity, if it causes the addressee to lay his cards on the table. Usually though, this does not happen, and for good reason. Lacan was adamantly opposed to speaking "le vrai du vrai," arguing that the naked truth was always disappointing. In his *Logic*, Hegel ridiculed the arbitrariness of definitions that are supposed to pin down a concept to specific properties: even though no other animal has an earlobe, it is not an adequate way of defining human beings. And Nietzsche puts it concisely: "Only that which has no history can be defined."

If such different thinkers as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Lacan—I could have also mentioned Adorno and Blumenberg—oppose definitions, then we should listen to them. In fact, it is a practice that runs the risk of depriving the concept of what keeps it alive: the contradictions that it unites within itself. Hegel's short text *Who Thinks Abstractly?* makes this clear. A murderer is being taken to his place of execution. For the bourgeois, who subjugates the world via definitions and calculations, he is nothing but a murderer; he is, in other words, identical with his act. For the old nurse, however, who, catching sight of the head of the executed man, cries out, "Oh how beautifully the merciful sun of God shines on Binder's head," he is a concrete individual, who has committed a crime, received his deserved punishment for it, and is now partaking of God's grace.[1]

To be sure, dispensing with definitions causes problems. How can we be sure that those who express their views on the avant-garde are even

talking about the same thing? Here we have to say without illusion: we cannot. For many academics and critics the term only refers to what-ever is the most current (most progressive) movement in modern art.[2] Others even use it in a transtemporal sense—one not confined to the modern era. The painters of the early Renaissance can, in this sense, be readily discussed as an avant-garde. All this is unproblematic as long as the context makes clear what is meant in each case. We do not have to search for the "correct" concept of the avant-garde, but we can justifiably ask what these various definitions accomplish.

Whereas a nonspecific concept of the avant-garde marks, above all, a point in the continuum of time, in other words, the Now, designating the newest art of modernity, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* attempts to provide a clear differentiation between two concepts, without thereby creating an abstract opposition between them. In so far as the historical avant-garde movements respond to the developmental stage of autonomous art epitomized by aestheticism, they are part of modernism; in so far as they call the institution of art into question, they constitute a break with modernism. The history of the avant-gardes, each with its own special historical conditions, arises out of this contradiction.

The significance of the concept of the avant-garde developed in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* still seems to me today to lie in the fact that it does not draw up a list of individual characteristics that can be arbitrarily extended, but rather that, starting with Dadaism, surrealism, and constructivism, it develops a concept whose individual elements are integrally related. At the center of this constellation is an interpenetration of two principles: the attack on the institution of art and the revolutionizing of life as a whole. Both principles go hand in hand, indeed they mutually condition each other. The unification of art and life intended by the avant-garde can only be achieved if it succeeds in liberating aesthetic potential from the institutional constraints which block its social effectiveness. In other words: the attack on the institution of art is the condition for the pos-sible realization of a utopia in which art and life are united.

The other aspects of the avant-garde concept arise out of these two intertwined fundamental principles. By renouncing the idea of autonomy, the artist also gives up his special social position and thereby his claim to genius. (That this surrender is admittedly ambivalent is not surprising in light of the utopian character of the avant-garde project, an ambivalence that becomes evident in a figure like André Breton.) In this conception of the avant-garde, the work of art also loses the central position that it once had among modern authors and that Adorno, after the Second World War, would restore once more in his *Aesthetic Theory*. The work, which was for Mallarmé the goal of all human activity ("tout, au monde,

existe pour aboutir à un livre") is for Breton a side issue, one which makes recognizable a certain relationship to the world—nothing more but also nothing less ("on publie pour chercher des hommes, et rien de plus" he writes in *La confession dédaigneuse*). The Russian constructivists even equated the work of art with an object of use. In both cases it is subordinated to the project of revolutionizing living conditions and thus loses its aura and its illusion of metaphysical being in equal measure.

The history of concepts can show how the individual aspects of a concept, which unfold theoretically as a necessary interrelationship, have formed themselves historically.[3] Here we should not play (theoretical) construction and history off against each other, as critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* have repeatedly done. If they were being consistent, they would have to deny the possibility of generalizing concepts altogether and to agree with Hugo von Hofmannsthal when, in objecting to the categories of worker and bourgeois, he maintained, "They're all just people."

II. First Responses to the *Theory of the Avant-Garde*

Soon after its publication, the book met with forceful criticism. To be sure, there is always an element of obduracy in any form of metacriticism. For this reason, in what follows, I will not confine myself to rebutting the arguments of my critics (although in some cases, of course, this is impossible to avoid). I would much rather, first of all, use this criticism, where possible, as an opportunity to think through further what was only sketched out in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, and, second, to try in each case to discern the focus from which individual critics are speaking. This will make it possible to explain certain contradictions in terms of the varying perspectives of authors. At the same time, it will help make clear the intellectual climate within which the book was written. In order to clarify these connections somewhat, I need to address wider issues.[4]

In the image of artistic modernism that prevailed against conservative resistance in the period after the Second World War, especially in West Germany—I am thinking, for instance, of Hans Sedlmayr's book *Art in Crisis, The Lost Center*[5]—movements intent on radical social change were largely blotted out. The first Documenta in Kassel in 1955 makes this abundantly clear. While four of Max Ernst's paintings were on display, his association with surrealism was not mentioned. The name of Dalí was missing from the catalogue, along with that of André Breton. Modernism, as it was presented in Kassel, was a purely internal artistic phenomenon. In the introduction to the catalogue, Werner Haftmann

emphasized the continuity and consistency of modern art's develop-
ment over several generations. The category of rupture was eliminated
and along with it the historical avant-garde movements. The same is
true for aesthetic theory and art criticism of the time. Both Theodor
W. Adorno's theory of the development of artistic material (procedures
and techniques) and Clement Greenberg's theory of a progressive reduc-
tion to the essential qualities of each medium insisted on this element
of continuity. Greenberg explicitly states: "Modernist art develops out
of the past without gap or break."[6] Although Adorno works with the
category of rupture in *Aesthetic Theory*, it applies only to the structure of
the artwork. Whereas Walter Benjamin in his pathbreaking 1929 essay
"Surrealism" could still describe the movement as one that sought "to
win the energies of intoxication for the revolution,"[7] Adorno, twenty-five
years later, stresses above all the obsolete qualities of surrealist images,
in which the consciousness of failure is preserved—in a technologized
world, human beings have failed themselves.[8] It is as if the historical
rupture called forth by fascism were to render the very category taboo
in the postwar period. This only began to change when surrealist slogans
started showing up on the walls of Paris in May 1968. At this moment the
historical avant-gardes and their utopian projects were also rediscovered.

   The impulse of hope triggered by the May '68 movement also caught
hold of German universities at the same time and led to a series of publi-
cations about avant-garde movements, including my own 1970 volume *Der
französische Surrealismus*, though, to be sure, it submits surrealist texts to
the principles of academic analysis. The foundations for my later theory
are laid down here—for example, the insight that the "works" of the
surrealists can be read in terms of Benjamin's concept of the allegory.
When I conceived of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* a short time later, the
impulses that the May events had awakened had already been arrested.
The student movement had disintegrated into vehemently squabbling
groups, each of which claimed to represent pure Marxist doctrine.

   In this situation, I transferred, without being conscious of it, utopian
aspirations from a society in which they could clearly not be realized
to theory. Theory now seemed to be the key that could keep open the
door to the future that I imagined, along with Breton, as a finally liv-
able world ("un monde enfin habitable"). This is why the book relies
so heavily on the rigor of argumentation and methodical construction.
From Habermas, I had learned that the illumination of the past only
succeeds insofar as it simultaneously lights up the present. The history
of the historical avant-gardes and our history were mirrored in each
other. Our epoch had—in the Benjaminian sense—entered into a con-
stellation with a specific past; my accomplishment was simply a matter

of having understood this constellation and used it as the basis for a theoretical construction.

   If we now cast a glance at the discussions the book stirred up after its publication, it becomes obvious that they were not primarily concerned with defining the avant-garde but rather with questions of methodology. Even its author understood *Theory of the Avant-Garde* as, primarily, an attempt at laying the foundations for a materialist cultural science. Repelled by vulgar Marxist "derivations" of artistic works from the socioeconomic basis, whereby formal analysis was usually neglected, he had become convinced, after reading the essay on reification in Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* and the methodological reflections in Marx's *Grundrisse,* that a scientific approach needed, first of all, to discern the historical site from which the development of art in bourgeois society could be construed. The emphasis on the immanent development of art under the sign of the doctrine of autonomy, which the author set against various Marxist dogmas that were circulating at the time in the newly founded University of Bremen, are explicable in this context. According to one of the young revolutionary-minded intellectuals, for instance, a materialist aesthetic theory would have to "try to determine the functions and significances of aesthetic phenomena in the struggle for emancipation of the masses."[9] Ansgar Hillach, another of the authors in the 1976 volume of responses to my work, took refuge in a reconstruction of Benjamin's concept of allegory, which, however, he was not willing to apply to avant-garde practices such as montage. He then goes on to characterize automatic writing (*écriture automatique*) as "the transformation of the profane illumination of an inherently empty subjectivity into a corporeal collectivity" (*A* 118). Today we might smile at this strange combination of philology and revolutionary mysticism, yet despite its extravagance, it bears witness to the desire to charge one's own writing with revolutionary impulses. The most productive theoretical contributions to the volume are those in which my theses are questioned in terms of their implicit assumptions and confronted with Adorno's aesthetics (Lüdke) or when the relationship between autonomy and avant-garde is defined not as a rupture but as a continuity (Lindner).

   As is well known, in the Hegelian category of sublation (*Aufhebung*) that I made use of, both moments are thought together. The avant-gardes, I argued, did not strive for the destruction of the art institution, but rather its sublation. This would, at the same time, release its constrained aesthetic potential in order to shape ordinary life. Lindner, on the other hand, sought to strengthen Benjamin's preferred idea of destruction—let us recall Benjamin's plea for a "new, positive concept of barbarism."[10] This was also typical of the discussions of the 1970s.

Given that the revolution that young intellectuals dreamt of back then existed only in their heads, their debates were subject to the pressures of radicalization.

As a result, virtually no other thesis of the book met with more unanimous rejection during the seventies—though for a number of different reasons—than the one concerning the failure of the historical avant-gardes. Those intellectuals coming out of the student movement who thought they could connect directly with the ideas of the Russian futurists and constructivists and who read Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay as a still relevant foundation for a materialist aesthetics were compelled to reject this thesis. For it stripped them of the possibility of seeing themselves as direct descendents of the revolutionary artistic avant-gardes of the first third of the twentieth century and forced them to reflect on the differences between particular historical situations. In other words, such a thesis could not help but destroy the illusion that they were part of a revolutionary movement.

The vehemence with which my thesis about the failure of the avant-garde was rejected starts to make sense when we elucidate the kinds of interpretations to which it was subject. Hence, in his much discussed Adorno Prize speech of 1980, Jürgen Habermas referred offhand to the failure of the surrealist revolution as an "error of a false negation." "When the vessels of an autonomously developed cultural sphere are shattered," he observes, "the contents get dispersed,"[11] and this dispersal does not yield a liberating effect. If the project of the avant-garde is already understood as one of "false negation," then its false actualization in the aestheticization of everyday life of late capitalist society can no longer offer a contrast. The very project thus seems to be nothing more than a historical "mistake" that should be avoided in future.

As a result, I tried repeatedly in later publications to clarify my thesis. On the one hand, I pointed out that the most lucid avant-gardists were themselves aware of the extravagance of their project to revolutionize everyday practices and hence recognized its unrealizability. "Notre victoire n'est pas venue et ne viendra jamais. Nous subissons d'avance cette peine," we read in Pierre Naville's *La révolution et les intellectuels* in 1927.[12] On the other hand, I also suggested that the failure of an historical project should not be equated with a lack of effectiveness and importance. Measured against their goals and the hopes that they carried, all revolutions have failed: this fact does not lessen their historical significance. But it is precisely in its extravagance that the project of the avant-garde serves as an indispensible corrective to a society foundering in its pursuit of egoistical goals. This project was by no means conceptualized as purely aesthetic but also, at least for the surrealists, as moral.

III. The Reception of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in the English-speaking World

From the beginning, the book's reception took place under the sign of postmodernism. Even before the American translation of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* was published in 1984, the Lukács student Ferenc Fehér commented on the book in his essay "What is beyond Art? On the Theories of Post-Modernity," characterizing it as "a consistent but misleading romantic theory of the *cultural revolution*, indeed, the only significant version of its kind. It is consistent in that Bürger makes a frontal attack on the autonomous art work which he intends to abolish with the gesture of *happening* or of *provocation*."[13] I still remember how surprised I was to read these sentences while on a flight to the United States. Fehér makes no bones about equating my thesis—which seeks to determine the historical avant-garde's importance for the development of art in bourgeois society—with the intentions of its author. In other words, he understands *Theory of the Avant-Garde* as a manifesto. What could have lead to such an interpretation? While reading Fehér's essay, we can literally feel his sense of dismay at the fact that *Theory of the Avant-Garde* provides convincing arguments in support of what he terms superficial postmodern theories which seek to tear down the boundaries between "high" and "low" art and denounce modern art as an elite expression of cultural domination. A symptom of this dismay in Fehér's text is the word *consistent*. He thus undertakes no small amount of effort to demonstrate that art is not an institution in the sociological sense. To be sure, he is forced to admit that the reception of artworks is institutionalized, while arguing that this does not apply to their production, since here it is not a matter of transmissible rules but rather of highly individualized processes. It suffices to recall the institutionalization of confession in the Lateran Council of 1215, however, to recognize that individual actions can also be guided by institutions. But, above all, Fehér considers *Theory of the Avant-Garde* to be "misleading" because it ascribes a decisive importance to the avant-garde in the development of modern art and thereby promotes the avant-garde's hostility to the artwork as well as an aestheticization of everyday life. Because Fehér reads the book as a theory of postmodernism, he barely registers its thesis about the failure of the avant-garde's attack on the art institution. This thesis is, however, central for the construction of the book as a whole (I will return to this point). As a result, he fails to notice those aspects of the book with which he might have agreed. He could, for example, have read its thesis about the free disposition of artistic material as an indirect plea for the readoption of "realistic" procedures and techniques—a view that should have made sense to the student of Lukács.

In light of the threat that culture now faces, and not just through the rapid development of digital media, some of these past debates now seem Byzantine. In any event, past adversaries often seem closer to each other than they were able to see back then.

Theory of the Avant-Garde also entered American cultural criticism in 1982 through Benjamin Buchloh's essay, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art."[14] Buchloh likewise applies Benjamin's concept of the allegory to decipher montage technique, yet he does not refer to *Theory of the Avant-Garde,* but rather to the above mentioned study by Hillach. This reference to Hillach is somewhat provocative in that the latter explicitly refuses to describe montage in terms of a "restrictive procedure such as the allegorical one" (*A* 114).

When the American translation of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* appeared two years later, Buchloh felt compelled to write a biting review.[15] First of all, without giving any reasons, he denies the book any theoretical status, something he can only manage to do by not saying a single word about the theoretical introductory chapter, which elaborates on the historicity of aesthetic categories in relation to the development of objects and categories. As the concept of self-critique is also not introduced, the book's thesis about the historical avant-garde's attack on institutional art looks like a bizarre whim. Was Dalí really planning to destroy the institution of art in the early 1930s? Buchloh asks rhetorically. If this question were to be taken seriously, it would not just be a mattering of simply answering "Yes," but of looking more closely at the situation of the surrealist movement at the time Dalí was engaged with it. As a result of its turn to communism, the group around Breton had lost such extraordinary members—ones so crucial for their provocative activities—as Antonin Artaud. Dalí succeeded in filling the vacant position. For a few years, he became the driving force of the movement. In doing so, he did not simply adopt Breton's original program ("pratiquer la poésie"), but took up the call of the second surrealist manifesto to trigger a general crisis in consciousness. Searching for a more aggressive forward strategy, Dalí expanded the attack on the institution of art into an attack on society's dominant reality principle, which forms the counterpart of the art institution and makes it possible. Art can be institutionalized as autonomous, as a field exempted from the principle of moral responsibility, only to the extent that bourgeois society is ideally subject to these same principles of morality and responsibility. It is therefore quite consistent for Dalí to expand the attack on the art institution into an attack on the reality principle and for his actions, texts, and paintings to be determined by this goal. "I believe the moment is near where a thought process of an active, paranoid, character can . . . raise confusion to the level of a sys-

tem and contribute to the total discrediting of the real world."[16] To the extent that he brings a theory of irresponsibility into play, he hopes to not only encourage a general crisis in consciousness but also to inscribe multiple meanings in his "double image paintings." This also relates to his indisputably highly problematic fascination with Hitler, whom he sees as a character who succeeded in fulfilling irrational desires and thereby undermined the sense of reality.

Even rhetorical questions can be answered in detail; what cannot be answered is the charge, usually raised only by the theory-phobic, that *Theory of the Avant-Garde* forces the differences and contradictions within the avant-garde movements into unifying categories—in short that the author has not written a history of the avant-garde.

There are, of course, differences between futurism, Dada, surrealism and constructivism, for example in their orientation toward technology. A history of the avant-garde movements would have to represent these differences, which can be demonstrated by tracing the intellectual altercations between the various groupings. Theory pursues other goals; thus *Theory of the Avant-Garde* tries to make visible the historical epoch in which the development of art in bourgeois society can be recognized. To this end, it needs to undertake generalizations that are set at a much higher level of abstraction than the generalizations of historians.

Buchloh does not go so far as to grant reality only to individual phenomena. However what he offers as a definition of avant-garde practice amounts to a listing of relatively random features that are in no way exclusive to the avant-garde: "A continually renewed struggle over the definition of cultural meaning" (all intellectuals participate in such a struggle); "the discovery and representation of new audiences" (this is at once too narrow and too broad a definition); the discovery of forces resistant to the controlling power of the culture industry (these can easily be found in the camp of conservative art critics as well).

There is, however, one point in Buchloh's critique where he does locate a real shortcoming in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. It concerns the characterization of the post-avant-garde situation of art. To the extent that Buchloh argues that I derive the free disposition of artistic material directly from the failure of the avant-garde's intentions—which would indeed not be convincing—he draws attention to a lacuna in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, namely the missing account of the relationship between the two theses.

IV. The Post-Avant-Gardist Situation of Art

The question of the post-avant-garde situation of art is, without a doubt, the sketchiest part of my book and the one that—not just from today's perspective—is the most in need of elaboration. On the one hand, the book claims that the "the social institution that is art proved resistant to the avant-gardiste attack,"[17] on the other it asserts that because of avant-gardist production art "means are freely available, i.e., no longer part of a system of stylistic norms" (17). What remains unanswered is how we should conceive the connection between these two theses in relation to the post-avant-garde situation of art. On this question, the chapter that elaborates on the historicity of Adorno's aesthetic suggests we should seriously consider "whether the break with tradition that the historical avant-garde movements brought about has not made irrelevant all talk about the historical level of artistic techniques practiced today" (a reference to Adorno's theorem about the continuous development of artistic materials). Furthermore, the chapter asks whether "the historical succession of techniques and styles has been transformed into a simultaneity of the radically disparate" (63).

Here we should note first of all that the category of a break with tradition is less precisely delineated on a theoretical level than the thesis about the attack on the art institution to which it refers (see page 61). Furthermore, the position of individual avant-garde movements vis-à-vis tradition varies considerably: while the Italian futurists loudly proclaimed a break with tradition ("We want to destroy the museums, libraries and academies of every sort") and while such hostile statements about tradition are also not uncommon in Dada, the surrealists took a different position on this question. Instead of rejecting tradition as a whole, they created a countercanon to the dominant canon of authors and works—a move that is hard to recognize today, because most of the authors favored by surrealists have in the meantime entered the canon. Rather than a break with tradition, what we find in surrealism is a displacement of the weight allotted to tradition. This particular category, in other words, is less suited to a theory of the avant-garde.

I would recommend, therefore, that we take up once more the question of the connection between the two theorems that, according to *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, condition the post-avant-gardist situation of art: the resistance of institutions to attack and the free disposition of art materials and production procedures. It is necessary, first of all, to define more precisely my thesis about the failure of the historical avant-gardes. This thesis actually consists of a number of independent aspects that need to be differentiated from each other: (1) The failure of the desired

reintroduction of art into the praxis of life. This aspect was intuited by the avant-gardists themselves and Dadaists and surrealists even made it into a component of their project. (2) The recognition of their manifestations by the art institution, that is, their canonization as milestones in the development of art in modernity. (3) The false actualization of their utopian project in the aestheticization of everyday life. Whereas some avant-gardists understood very well that their project would in all likelihood never be actualized (Breton, for this very reason, conceives of surrealist actions as an interminable preparation for an event that is continually deferred into the future), and while they were also highly conscious of the danger of being incorporated into the institution (which is why Breton, in his second manifesto, suggests an *occultation* of surrealism, a self-imposed retreat from the public sphere), the aestheticization of everyday life only develops on a large scale after the Second World War and could not therefore enter their field of vision.

The paradox of the failure of the avant-gardes lies without a doubt in the musealization of their manifestations as works of art, that is, in their artistic success. The provocation that was supposed to expose the institution of art is recognized by the institution as art. The institution demonstrates its strength by embracing its attackers and assigns them a prominent place in the pantheon of great artists. Indeed, the impact of the failed avant-garde extends even further. After Duchamp, not only can the everyday artefact claim the status of an artwork but the discourse of the institution is molded by the avant-gardes to a degree that no one could have predicted. Avant-garde categories such as rupture and shock gain admittance to the discourse of art, while at the same time concepts such as harmony and coherence are suspected of conveying a false appearance and a reconciliation with a degraded status quo. If idealist aesthetics had discarded the allegorical work because it believed that the work of art should appear like nature—whereas the allegorist kills off natural life, tears fragments out of the continuity of life and places them in new constellations without any concern for their original context—it is precisely for these reasons that allegory now becomes a model for avant-gardist "works."

In other words, the failure of the avant-garde utopia of the unification of art and life coincides with the avant-garde's overwhelming success within the art institution. One could almost say: in their very failure, the avant-gardes conquer the institution. In this regard, certain formulations in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which give the impression that the art institution survived the attack of the historical avant-garde without any significant changes, need to be corrected. While the principle of autonomy did indeed demonstrate an astounding resistance, this was

only possible because the institution opened itself to the manifestations as well as the discourse of the avant-garde and made them its own.

This success of the avant-garde—a success, to be sure, that took place only in the institution and that is, as such, simultaneously a sign of its failure—applies to the level of artistic materials as well. While modernism conceptualized its work on materials as a continuous and ongoing process of renewal, the avant-gardes broke with this principle in taking up past material forms (salon painting in the case of the surrealists) as well as the material of trivial and mass art (the collages of Max Ernst). This was a possible strategy for avant-garde artists because they were not interested in creating a work of art that would last over time, but rather in provoking attitudinal changes in the recipient (think of dadaist provocations or of Dalí's attack on the reality principle). With the failure of the utopian project of transcending the institution, the practice of a recourse to material forms that were outdated or rendered taboo by modernism fundamentally changed its significance. *A practice that aimed to have an extra-artistic impact turned into a practice internal to the institution and to art.* In admitting avant-gardist products as works of art, the institution of art simultaneously legitimates a treatment of out-dated material that was previously inadmissable. A history, as Adorno postulated it, based on the development of artistic materials is then, indeed, no longer discernible. In this sense we can say that the avant-gardes brought about, without this being their intention, what would later be characterized as postmodernism: the possibility of a reappropriation of all past artistic materials. It would be problematic, nevertheless, to hold the avant-gardes responsible for the break in the development of modern art; after all they had no intention of changing the inside of the institution, even though this is what they achieved in a de facto sense. Hegel already knew that human actions do not accomplish the intentions of those who carry them out. The avant-gardes also learned this lesson.

Thanks to the particular intellectual situation after the Second World War—where the category of the historical break became taboo in Europe as well as in the United States precisely because it had been realized by fascism and Stalinism—Adorno and Greenberg could help to again legitimate a theory of modernism that presumed continuity in work on artistic material and that consolidated once again the difference between "high" and "low" art. With the recognition of Pop Art these theories lost the basis for their validity. Soon afterwards, the post-avant-garde free use of artistic material was proclaimed as the postmodern liberation of anything goes. Of course, just how questionable this was would soon become clear in the problem of aesthetic evaluation.

To summarize: in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, the situation of the post-avant-garde, after the failure of the avant-garde project became obvi-

ous, was characterized by two theorems: the continued existence of the autonomous art institution and the free use of artistic material. The connection between these two theorems was, however, not explained. It is rendered even less recognizable by the fact that some formulations in the book suggest the art institution survived the attack of the avant-gardes without significant changes and that the categories of idealist aesthetics were again established without being diminished. In this regard, I now see the need to define more precisely, and to correct, my ideas from 1974.

This much is certain: the avant-garde's revival (from the perspective of modern art) of obsolete materials (artistic procedures and techniques) succeeded because the avant-gardes did not aim to create works of art that would last through time but wanted to use their manifestations to change the attitudes of their recipients. This means that they situated their aesthetic practices outside those sanctioned by the institution. Only with the failure of these intentions does the free use of artistic material practiced by the avant-garde become an internal aesthetic phenomenon. In recognizing these manifestations as art works and acknowledging their value in the development of modern art, the art institution retracts its claim to establish norms (in this case, the principle of continuity in work on artistic material). This also occurs in other areas where aesthetic norms are set (replacing the symbolic work with the allegorical work, and so on). In retreating to its core domain of aesthetic autonomy, the art institution demonstrates a resistance to the attack of the avant-gardes, yet also adopts avant-garde practices. Seen in this light, the failure of the avant-garde's aspirations to alter social reality and its internal aesthetic success (the artistic legitimation of avant-garde practices) are two sides of the same coin.

V. The Debate over the Neo-Avant-Garde

The vehemence of the critical response to *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in American art criticism is explicable not least by what Buchloh calls my "snide comments on the neo-avant-garde."[18] The argument of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* runs as follows: the neo-avant-gardes adopted the means by which the avant-gardists hoped to bring about the sublation of art. As these means had, in the interim, been accepted by the institution, that is to say, were deployed as internal aesthetic procedures, they could no longer legitimately be linked to a claim to transcend the sphere of art. "The neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions" (58). If one wants to reject this argument, it surely does not suffice to simply endorse the program of the neo-avant-garde—which, in the case of Daniel Buren, displays an

impressive acumen. This is what Buchloh does when he joins Buren in characterizing Duchamp's turn away from painting as a petty bourgeois radicalism that obscures the "ideological framework," that is, the institution.[19] Here the thesis of the *Theory of the Avant-Garde* is simply reversed: in order to present the institutional critique of the neo-avant-garde as a genuine accomplishment, Duchamp is devalued.

In his critique of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Buchloh is casually dismissive. Accordingly, he emphasizes again and again that the author of the book has an insufficient knowledge of 1960s progressive art. Theory, however, relies on different criteria than does historical representation. Adorno once remarked that first-rate aesthetic theory could be developed at a great distance from the work of art as well as in close proximity. It is a matter, purely and simply, of what such a construction allows us to see. Hal Foster, who, like Buchloh, belongs to the critics associated with the journal *October*, presents a distinctly more sophisticated critique that engages with the arguments in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*,[20] and which I will shortly discuss in greater detail. This task is made easier by the fact that Foster accompanies his own theory construction with critical self-reflection.

The focus that Foster chooses for his critique is a Freudianism inspired by poststructuralism. In his series of objections, however, he also relies on intellectual motifs from Derrida. His argument presupposes, for instance, Derrida's deconstruction of the notion of origin in his claim that *Theory of the Avant-Garde* treats the historical avant-gardes as an absolute origin (8).

A discussion of this critique can occur on two different levels. On the one hand, one could ask whether the author of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* does in fact treat the avant-garde as an originary phenomenon. As far as I can see, the criticism is not valid; the avant-gardes are rather conceptualized as a response to, and a consequent break with, the latest developmental stage of autonomous art represented by aestheticism.[21] On the other hand, the assumption of Foster's argument can be called into question: namely the supposition that with Derrida's deconstruction of the concepts of center, origin, and presence, any thinking about origins has lost its validity. This is also not quite accurate in sofar as Derrida, as I have shown elsewhere, is not only a critic of originary thinking but is also himself a thinker of the origin.[22] In fact, he designates *différance* as "the constitutive, productive and original [!] causality." If he nevertheless refuses to conceive of *différance* as origin, it is because he limits the term—diverging from normal French usage—to a *full* event, that is to say, an event in the past that is imagined as being in the present. However, if we presume that an originary event can by all means be thought of

as not present (the world-creating action of God, for example), then *différance* is precisely such an event.

Even if one only refers to Derrida indirectly, it is necessary to engage in such subtleties. It is certainly not acceptable to simply take Derrida's deconstruction of presence, center, and origin as truth. The conclusions of Derrida's thought are hedged around with too many provisions; after all, he concedes, after deconstructing the category of the center, that we are unable to do without it: "I believe that the center is a function, not a being—a reality, but a function. And this function is absolutely indispensable."[23]

Of course, a possible response would be to say that I likewise took over a Marxist model of history writing from the *Grundrisse*. However, I did not simply assume Marx's conclusions but explicated his model. In the same way as Derrida's and Lacan's thought shape Foster's style of thought, so, twenty years earlier, Marx's methodology, as mediated by Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, shaped *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

We now come to Hal Foster's decisive argument. It concerns what he calls my "residual evolutionism." "Thus for him [Bürger] a work of art, a shift in aesthetics, happens all at once, entirely significant in its first moment of appearance, and it happens once and for all, so that any elaboration can only be a rehearsal" (10). Here too, the argument depends on Derrida's critique of origin and immediate presence, but Foster relies primarily on Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* or deferred action. For Freud the term refers to a revision of past events after the fact and it is only because of this revision—and this is the decisive point for Foster—that these events acquire meaning and psychic significance.[24]

Far be it from me to reject the application of the category of deferred action to historical events. On the contrary, in my 1988, book *Prosa der Moderne*, though admittedly without referencing Freud, I presented deliberations along the same lines as Foster suggests. With regard to the time around 1800 in Germany, which Friedrich Schlegel characterized as "our unromantic epoch," the book notes that "the epoch becomes romantic for us only once we define it [one could add: through deferred action] in terms of a small group of intellectuals in Berlin and Jena."[25] And a little later, the book explains that it is only the shock of the French Revolution that gave rise to the illusion that in traditional society the subjective "I" was able to find a safe harbor in the world. The methodological reflections in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* are also based on a conception of deferred action; namely, that the adequate recognition of an object requires the thorough differentiation of a field of objects as its precondition.

Every narrative, including a historical narrative, assumes an end point from which it is told and constructs a sequence of events on the basis

of this end point. A representation differs from an actual event in at least one decisive point: while the event is open towards the future, the narrator/historian already knows this future. This makes it possible for him or her to present a contingent sequence of events as a "logical" development. The awareness of the gap between the sequence of events and its representation is an important corrective; it does not, however, devalue the construction from a fixed end point but exposes it for what it is: a construction. If the historian wanted to make the always present openness of the event to the future the guiding principle of his own work, he would quickly lose himself in the multiplicity of possibilities. Such a history would be, in a strict sense, unreadable.

I mention these problems because they cast light on Foster's proposed narrative of the relationships between avant-garde and neo-avant-garde in terms of the Freudian model of deferred action. The idea of deferred action, like the knowledge that historical processes are open to the future, is a corrective to historical representation, but it is not a model that can replace historical construction predicated upon an end point. This becomes evident, for instance, in the fact that Foster keeps repeating his thesis that the historical avant-gardes did not create meaning (that is, make the art institution recognizable and open to criticism), but that this project was first carried out by the neo-avant-gardes, while otherwise remaining at the level of bad generalization, where there is much talk of "questions of repetition, difference, and deferral: of causality, temporality and narrativity" (32).

The use of deferred action as a general category of reflection, which I am glad to endorse, needs to be distinguished from an adoption of the Freudian model of trauma and repetition. I consider it objectionable to transfer concepts used by Freud to describe unconscious, psychic events onto historical processes undertaken by conscious, active individuals. In referring to repetition compulsion, Freud defines it as "an ungovernable process originating in the unconscious. As a result of its action, the subject deliberately places himself in distressing situations, thereby repeating an old experience, but he does not recall this prototype."[26] It is perfectly clear that the repetition of avant-garde practices by the neo-avant-garde cannot be understood in this manner. It does not happen unconsciously nor does it contain elements of unconscious compulsion; we are dealing, rather, with a conscious resumption within a different context. We need, therefore, to distinguish more sharply than Foster between unconscious repetition and conscious resumption.

Furthermore, the category of repetition and the compulsion to repeat is one of Freud's least defined concepts and remained something of a riddle for Freud himself. It is always delicate to transfer a category already

loaded with problems within the scholarly context in which it was developed (Freud ultimately could not explain the repetition compulsion) to another context. What could it contribute to our understanding of processes that are clearly not of an unconscious nature?

Foster seems to be aware of the problems he has taken on with the adoption of psychoanalytic categories, but thinks he can avoid these problems by appropriating the Freudian model with all of its entailments (28). Indeed, he conceives of the historical avant-gardes as a trauma and the neo-avant-garde as its repetition. This looks at first like a clever chess move. After all, one of Freud's interpretations of the trauma concept locates the decisive event in the act of repetition rather than at the origin of the traumatic fixation. "The trauma's import is reduced and at the same time its singularity diminishes."[27] This is precisely Foster's intent: to position the neo-avant-garde as the ultimate event that establishes meaning.

But for whom could the historical avant-gardes have been a trauma? Foster avoids giving any answer to this question and contents himself with an image: they were "a hole in the symbolic order of [their] time" (29). In other words, the avant-gardes broke through the symbolic order with their actions and manifestations. If this were accurate, then they would have attained their goal of arousing a general crisis in consciousness. This, however, is precisely what did not occur.

Foster's assertion that the manifestations of the historical avant-gardes were not immediately legible is less open to debate. As far as surrealism is concerned, this thesis is countermanded by the texts of Drieu and Bataille, who were never members of the surrealist movement but observed it with an ambivalent attitude of sympathy and resistance. Their texts testify to the legibility of the surrealist message in the 1920s.

I distinguished earlier between an unconscious, compulsive repetition and a conscious resumption. A third process needs to be distinguished from these two: return. A later event illuminates a previous one, without there being a demonstrable continuity between them. Here we are dealing with what Benjamin called a *constellation*. May 1968 made surrealism legible in a manner that it had not been legible previously. However, the connection between these two events cannot be understood according to the model of a repetition of which the subject is not aware or of a self-conscious resumption. In fact, it cannot be thought of in terms of a model derived from the subject at all: rather the second event, which possesses its own context of emergence, illuminates the first. This constellation underlies *Theory of the Avant-Garde.* From the standpoint of the utopia of 1968, whose failure was already unambiguously sketched out, the author read the historical avant-gardes and saw the failure of

the May '68 movement prefigured in them. Thus, in the Benjaminian sense, he holds onto a singular image from the past. The author does not need to deny that it is an image marked by melancholy.

While Foster, in adopting the Freudian model of trauma and return, presents his own theoretical concept against which he sets the construction of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, other points of critique are strung together in a rather impressionistic manner. I would like to answer some of them in what follows.

"Bürger takes the romantic rhetoric of the avant-garde, of rupture and revolution, at its own word" (15). Indeed he does, and for good reasons. Despite all their contradictions and self-posturing, the revolutionary context (in Russia), as well as what artists interpreted as a revolutionary context (in France) lent a moral seriousness to the statements of the Russian Constructivists and French surrealists, which should in turn be taken seriously by critics. The accusation that the author of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* judges the neo-avant-gardes "from a mythical point of critical escape" points in a similar direction (14).[28] That the historical avant-gardes were not beyond critique at the time the book was conceived can be deduced from my previously mentioned surrealism study of 1971. Later, I was to read—admittedly not without an inner struggle—Michel Tournier's *Le roi des aulnes* as a successful parody of surrealism.[29]

Like many other critics, Foster wants to prove that *Theory of the Avant-Garde* over-values the historical avant-gardes in comparison to the neo-avant-gardes. In methodological terms the argument thus reads as follows: the relationship between historical avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes is conceived in Bürger's book according to a model of cause and effect (10). This mechanical interpretation is inaccurate insofar as the relationship under discussion is characterized as one of resumption. There are, however, two moments that enter into the category of resumption that have no place in a cause-effect model: the intention of the acting subject and the context. While the historical avant-gardes could rightly consider the social context of their actions to be one of crisis, if not revolution, and could draw from this realization the energy to design the utopian project of sublating the institution of art, this no longer applied to the neo-avant-gardes of the 1950s and 1960s. The aesthetic context had also changed in the meantime. While the historical avant-gardes could still connect their practices with a claim to transgression, this is no longer the case for the neo-avant-gardes, given that avant-garde practices had in the meantime been incorporated by the institution.

Hal Foster is too honest a critic not to concede that, even from his own perspective, the thesis of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* ("The neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thereby negates genuine

avant-gardist intentions") applies to a not inconsiderable number of neo-avant-garde works: Jasper Johns' painted beer cans as well as Arman's assemblages and Yves Klein's neo-Dadaist provocations (11). He later adds the names of Kaprow and Rauschenberg (21). Foster does, though, outline a way of saving those artists whom he sees as belonging to the first neo-avant-garde: its reified treatment of the historical avant-garde's artistic materials was necessary so that the second neo-avant-garde (above all Buren, Haacke, Broodthaers) could criticize these practices. With the help of this model, to be sure, almost any artistic approach can be legitimated after the fact once it has found its critic. We can therefore maintain that *Theory of the Avant-Garde* did call attention—admittedly with a polemical sharpness and a high level of generalization—to *the* problem of the neo-avant-gardes, namely their deployment of procedures and artistic materials that were designed to transcend the institution of art for internal aesthetic purposes. I am happy to concede that not all artists who have endeavored to resume the program of the avant-garde are covered by my polemically constructed concept of the neo-avant-garde (as my Beuys essay tries to show).[30] Whether there are more artists who elude my verdict is not a theoretical question, but a question of evaluating the artistic work. With regard to Buren, who along with Broodthaers occupies a prominent position as a critic of the art institution in the estimation of Buchloh and Foster, I have shown elsewhere why I do not see things in the same way but believe, rather, that he has been temporarily overvalued by a criticism that does not want to let go of the concept of advancement.[31]

What follows from what I have said for our contemporary engagement with the texts and objects produced by the avant-garde? To begin with, we must admit that the avant-garde is now far removed from us. How far is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the fact that the concept is nowadays increasingly applied to very different things, for example, as a prestige-bearing designation for a new consumer product. Seen in this light, the nonspecific use of the concept, which simply makes it a synonym for progressive modernization, is an expression of a deep alienation from what the avant-garde desired.

The starting point for an investigation of the avant-garde that does not fall short of the level of reflection possible today would have to be the paradox represented above: that the failure of its project (the sublation of the art institution) coincides with its success within the institution. This means that every positivistic treatment of the texts and objects of the avant-garde that slots them into the history of art and literature without further critical reflection misses what is specific to them. We have to accept that avant-garde texts have become literature, but we

should also not lose sight of their originally intended effect, that is, to draw out the claim to authenticity in the seemingly most unserious products. A nonpositivistic treatment of the products of the avant-garde would have to keep both perspectives in mind without playing them off against each other. The difficulty of fulfilling this demand underscores how far removed the avant-garde's impulse to transform real social relationships is from us today. This does not exclude, but rather includes, the possibility that the avant-garde could gain a renewed relevance in a future that we cannot imagine.

<div align="center">

TRANSLATED BY BETTINA BRANDT AND DANIEL PURDY

NOTES

</div>

1   G. W. F. Hegel, "Wer denkt abstrakt?" in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. Eva Modenhauer and K. M. Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 2:579.
2   See for instance, Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992). For a critique of this nonspecific concept of the avant-garde, see W. Asholt, "La notion d'avant-garde dans *Les Règles de l'art*," in *Le symbolique et le social*, ed. J. Dubois (Liège: Les Éditions de l'Université de Liège, 2005), 165–75.
3   On this point, see my sketch with the problematic title, "Pour une définition de l'avant-garde," in *La révolution dans les lettres*, ed. Henriette Ritter and Annelies Schulte Nordholt (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 17–27.
4   In what follows I address only the critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, not the many substantial works that extend the book's approach. Examples thereof include two essays by Walter Fähnders and Wolfgang Asholt about the "Project of the Avant-Garde" in *Der Blick vom Wolkenkratzer: Avantgarde—Avantgardekritik—Avantgardeforschung*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 69–95 and 97–120. Fähnders suggests that the "Avant-garde Project" can be derived from the Romantic fragment, which, despite and because of its fragmentary character, is held to be perfect. Asholt elaborates on how self-criticism is an important moment in the "Avant-Garde Project."
5   Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis, The Lost Center*, trans. Brian Battershaw (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1958).
6   Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 759.
7   Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism," in *Selected Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Belknap, 1999), 2:215
8   Theodor W. Adorno, "Looking Back on Surrealism," in *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), 90.
9   Heiner Boehncke, "Überlegungen zu einer proletarisch-avantgardistischen Ästhetik," in *"Theorie der Avantgarde": Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft*, ed. M. Lüdke (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976) (hereafter cited in text as *A*).
10 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," in *Selected Writings*, 2:732.
11 Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," in: *The Anti-Aesthetic*, trans. Seyla Ben-Habib (New York: The New Press, 2002), 11 (translation slightly modified).
12 Pierre Naville, *La révolution et les intellectuels* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 120.
13 Ferenc Fehér, "What is Beyond Art? On the Theories of the Postmodern," *Thesis Eleven* 5/6 (1982): 10.

14   Benjamin Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Art Forum* (Sept. 1982): 43–56.

15   Buchloch, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," *Art in America* 72 (Nov. 1984): 20ff.

16   Cited in *Salvador Dalí Retrospektive 1920–1980* (Munich: Prestel, 1980), 276f.

17   Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984), 57. The page numbers that follow in the rest of the text refer to this edition.

18   Buchloh, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," 20.

19   Buchloh, "Parody and Appropriation in Francis Picabia, Pop, and Sigmar Polke [1982]," in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 353.

20   Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) The page numbers that follow in the text refer to this book. Charles Harrison has presented an interesting discussion of Foster's book. The title "Bürger Helper" indicates that the reviewer sees Foster and the author of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* as standing closer together than they think, for both participate in the turn from "interstitial text to institutional frame" (Foster). Harrison sees in this type of critique the danger of blending together the art world and academic discourse: "One cannot know a work of art without being in the know." *Bookforum* (Winter 1996): 30f and 34.

21   As regards the concept of autonomy, the discussion of the *Theory of the Avant-Garde* suffers from the fact that its critics refer in a sweeping manner to a false notion of autonomy (Buchloh). This covers over the contradictory nature of the concept of autonomy, which signifies both art's relative detachment from life and the hypostatization of this historically created condition as the "essence" of art.

22   See the chapter, "Von Nietzsche zu Derrida. Die Frage nach dem Ursprung," in Bürger, *Ursprung des postmodernen Denkens* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2000), 179–84.

23   Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. R. Macksey and E. Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1970), 271.

24   See J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1973), 111–14 (article on "deferred action").

25   Bürger (in conjunction with Christa Bürger), *Prosa der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), 143 and 145.

26   Laplanche and Pontalis, *Language of Psychoanalysis*, 78 (article on "Compulsion to Repeat").

27   Laplanche and Pontalis, *Language of Psychoanalysis*, 468 (article on "Trauma").

28   See the chapter "Surrealism as Ethics" in the second edition of my book, *Der französische Surrealismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), 191–208.

29   See, "To Think Madness: The Postmodern Novel, Surrealism and Hegel," in Bürger, *The Thinking of the Master: Bataille between Hegel and Surrealism*, trans. Richard Block (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2002), 24–55.

30   Reprinted in the volume *Das Altern der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001), 154–70.

31   See Bürger, "Zur Kritik der Neo-Avantgarde," in *Jeff Wall Photographs* (Cologne: Walther König, 2003), 174–98.

Revolutionary Pathos, Negation, and the Suspensive Avant-Garde

John Roberts

THE RECENT DEBATE ON THE AVANT-GARDE and the visual arts has tended to bifurcate around two distinct positions: those who think that the avant-garde (constructivism, productivism, Dada, surrealism) is a purely historic category that has now been superseded, and those who think that the avant-garde is still very much an unfinished project. However, these two positions are themselves internally divided. In the first category there are those who mourn the passing of the avant-garde, as well as those who have no wish to see it return in any form whatsoever and are therefore certainly dismissive of any claims that its ideals might still be with us. The former might be construed as a kind of Romantic fatalism, and the latter as a kind of cultural nihilism that often favors either a return to some version of classicism or a revived defense of postmodernism. In the second category, by contrast, there are, on the one hand, those who see the avant-garde as a continuing placeholder for a revolutionary and postcapitalist cultural program, and, on the other hand, those who view it more pragmatically as a category that, far from being dead, remains vitally alive through its constant rearticulation and readaptation under very different social and political circumstances. Indeed, the very notion of something as historically transformative as the avant-garde coming to an end before its implications are developed and worked through is, from this latter point of view, vulgarly historicist; just as modernism didn't end in 1900, so the post-Soviet historic avant-garde didn't end in 1935.

This antihistoricist position has had a huge influence on the development of the category of the neo-avant-garde since the early 1990s, when Hal Foster published his essay "What's Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde?"[1] Foster quite rightly attacks the mixture of Romantic fatalism and "endism" that characterizes Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974),[2] the first major appraisal of the critical legacy of the avant-garde in the light of postwar modernism. The weakness of Bürger's historicism lies in his overidentification of the critical fate of the art of the 1920s and 1930s with its conditions of production, as if the critical horizons

and ideals of the art of the period could only be articulated in relation to their immediate social and political horizons. Bürger, then, tends to see the art produced in the name of the avant-garde after the 1950s as a falling away from these horizons into pastiche or social irrelevance, given the socially antipathetic conditions for avant-garde practice in the West.

Now, to be fair to Bürger, there is no constructivism and productivism without the revolutionary transformations which they are a response to, and product of. And in this sense there is no avant-garde without the world historical transformations of the Russian Revolution. This is a given: the avant-garde as a distinct set of social and cultural ideals (rather than a name given by late nineteenth-century French commentators to that which is notionally "advanced" artistically) is indivisible from the rupture of the Russian Revolution. But to assume that the avant-garde dies with the Stalinist and Nazi counterrevolution and, therefore, that it is overwhelmingly a "failed project" (a term favored by advocates and critics of the avant-garde alike) holds the avant-garde ransom to social and political forces that were outside of its control, as if the avant-garde were responsible for its own counterrevolutionary destruction. Consequently, how art theory mediates this notion of failure is crucial to the way in which avant-garde art after the 1950s is able to construct an afterlife for itself under advanced capitalism. This is why Bürger's sense of an ending is not strictly coterminous with the counterrevolution itself, as if for him authentic practice and thinking ends in 1935. Rather, for Bürger, in its mediation of its own failure, the renewal and development of the avant-garde in the form of the neo-avant-garde has to cope with the unprecedented power of the postwar art institution, and its absorption and repressive toleration of the radical transgressions of art. The outcome is that the afterlife of the failure of the historic avant-garde is now positioned as internal to the structures of the art institution, separate—in the language of the Frankfurt School—from the collective participation in, and transformation of, the lifeworld itself.

This notion that the ideals of the avant-garde fail with the counterrevolution and its liberal adaptation in the postwar art institution is an abiding theme of Thierry de Duve's *Kant After Duchamp* (1996),[3] but also of Jacques Rancière's recent "neo-avant-gardism,"[4] a view that sits comfortably with both writers' anti-Hegelianism, anti-Marxism, and anarchist inflexions. But the avant-garde was not a *failed* project at all, if by failure we mean an outcome that leaves no exploitable artistic resources, no intellectual and cultural supplement. If the avant-garde was a set of practices that was determined by the immediate social and political demands of the Russian Revolution, it was also a project that *exceeded* these demands, insofar as its emancipatory claims about art and social

life existed far in advance of what was conceivable in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and early 1930s. In this sense its "failure" is precisely its open-ended success: in operating at some distance from the instrumental and practical requirements of revolutionary transformation, it put in place the parameters for a number of research practices and questions on art, labor, value, and the public sphere that survived the counterrevolution. If the avant-garde "fails" in the Soviet Union, it fails *constructively*.

This is different from saying, as in Bürger, that despite the failure of the avant-garde, some of its strategies managed to survive in a weakened form in the postwar art institution. Rather, the avant-garde survives be-cause of the substantive questions the failure of the Soviet avant-garde puts to art and the art institution. Indeed, it is precisely because of the far-reaching questions it asks of itself that the Russian avant-garde re-mains the overarching model of all avant-garde practice, irrespective of whether new art is directly indebted to it or not. For what it provides is a sense of the avant-garde as a category reflective on its own conditions of possibility. Thus, for example, when the Soviet avant-garde too eas-ily accommodates itself to the Party's positivistic adaptation of the new machino-technical culture—when productivism enters the factory system and actively subordinates itself to the discipline of factory management and the labor process—the theoretical gains from these experiments far outweigh any a priori dismissal of such "non-artistic" collaborations. What productivism learns from these forays is that art's possible role in the qualitative transformation of the relations of production is severely constrained under the factory system and the law of value, and that art cannot therefore dissolve or ameliorate the alienation of labor inside this system so readily, even in favorable revolutionary conditions.[5] Rather, art's value lies in the way that it harnesses its free labor to the critique of the division between intellectual labor and manual labor, artistic labor and productive labor, in conditions of free exchange. This is why Boris Arvatov, the leading productivist theoretician in the Soviet Union in the 1920s, soon realized the limitations of this form of factory intervention-ism, arguing for a productivism that extended the interdisciplinary and collaborative horizons of the avant-garde into environmental design, architecture, and street dramaturgy.[6]

It is at this point of self-reflection and self-critique within the space of the avant-garde itself that Foster's antihistoricism becomes relevant. Es-sentially, the avant-garde is recovered as a heuristic category, or research program, that, in the spirit of Imre Lakatos's philosophy of science, still has an unsurpassable central core of experimental potential, precisely *because* of the program's contradictions and hiatuses.[7] Therefore, despite the Soviet avant-garde's precipitous historical identity, and despite the

delimited social and political circumstances for the development of its core program, the Soviet avant-garde nevertheless is still able to put the most demanding and relevant questions to art and its institutions: What is an artist? What is an artwork? What constitutes value in art? What part is artistic labor able to play in the emancipation of productive labor generally? What are the progressive possibilities and limitations of art's relationship to nonaesthetic reason?

Foster's heuristic definition of the neo-avant-garde, therefore, has entered into a working alliance with the widespread rise of new forms of sociability and praxis in art since the mid-1990s, what I have called elsewhere the rise of "secondary Productivism."[8] This is the idea that the neo-avant-garde, as an adaptation of some of the key precepts of the critical program of the avant-garde, shares a pragmatic sense of art as a shifting testing ground for various social interventions, experimental forms, and transformative actions and events, with the participatory, interdisciplinary, and nonartistic collaborations of the new art. Much of this has a digital basis, in which activist modes of art and forms of communal interaction are grounded in the network possibilities of the new media technologies, generating a flexible and mobile model of avant-garde interventionism that is no longer based on the primary idea of productivism as the transformation of the relations of production inside the factory, but on a digital extension of Arvatov's interdisciplinary model to multiple social locations. The indeterminacy, nomadism, and interrelationality of the new digital artistic practices converge, technically and affectively, with the new forms of computer-based production in the workplace to create a productivism of flow and tactical improvisation across a range of social and cultural sites.[9] Indeed, these new forms of sociability, exchange, and digital praxis have come to fill out this notion of the neo-avant-garde as a space for social experimentation in exactly the antihistoricist fashion demanded by Foster (although, it has to be said, as the participatory and collaborative mandate of the new art has expanded, the use of the nomenclature "neo-avant-garde" has tended to recede, as if what counts for artists is not the act of naming itself, but the critical spirit of the program). Yet there is a clear sense in which most contemporary art *is* precisely neo-avant-gardist in these terms, insofar as it rearticulates the break of the historic avant-garde with the painterly modernist object in favor of a definition of art as interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, multifarious postobject work; an ensemble of techniques and practices that at all time exceeds the bounded aesthetic limits of the discrete modernist object.

Aesthetic Reason and Nonaesthetic Reason

However, if Foster and the new participatory art recalibrate the category of the avant-garde through a heuristic defense of art's socially experimental possibilities, this is won at the cost of the pathos of Bürger's account of the avant-garde. The neo-avant-garde may provide new research conditions for the avant-garde, but the questions posed by this research program are inseparable from the revolutionary process that originally defined and structured its possibilities. The critique of Bürger, therefore, carries with it certain intractable historical problems. What defines the avant-garde in its neo-avant-garde form is the fact that it is a counterrevolutionary, post-Thermidorian category, *all the way down.* Political defeat is constitutive of its program of readaptation. There is no way, then, of avoiding the historical realities of what is actually lost to the production of art in any neo-avant-garde mediation and extension of its continuities. Whatever continuities the neo-avant-garde may establish with the core program of the historic avant-garde cannot gainsay the fact that what the Soviet avant-garde managed to accomplish was as a result of the public institutions, political mobilization, and social networks established by the Russian revolutionary process. Admittedly, Foster and other defenders of the neo-avant-garde acknowledge this, or something like it, but these emancipatory aims are not built into the category as a limit-horizon of the research program, or as a condition of its continuing possibility. Consequently, the category of the neo-avant-garde tends to float freely from its counterrevolutionary formation and history, as if contemporary art is able to choose all the best bits of the avant-garde legacy without all the other messy political stuff getting in the way. Although the neo-avant-garde is not exactly defined positivistically as a neutral research program in the manner of the hard sciences, this writing tends to assume that the experimental possibilities of the new art are freely available or can be pursued without the political precepts that shaped the historic avant-garde's core program.

This is why, in those practices that derive their thinking from the neo-avant-garde, there is a general desire to be free of revolutionary pathos altogether, as if the gap between the actual and the ideal were an unnecessary and fussy excrescence on the legacy of the avant-garde. This is partly a manifestation of the continuing philosophical influence of postmodernism (the avant-garde is best thought of, if at all, as wholly separate from any grand narrative of universal human emancipation), but also the result of the easy alliance that the new art makes between a residual cultural nihilism (history has no determining effects on agency in the present) and the notion that after modernism, after postmodernism,

art is a freely available democratic technique: everything is possible culturally, and artists and their nonartistic allies can play a progressive role.

This intoxicating mix of voluntarism and affirmative praxis has become hegemonic in the extensive reaches of the new art beyond the official channels of the art world, and is certainly influential in those social practices that operate inside the public gallery and museum system. Relational aesthetics and postrelational aesthetics, the new community-based and participatory forms of art practice, and the widespread forms of digital interactivity and intervention, all subscribe in various ways to the new ethos: art is no more and no less than an ensemble of diverse artistic and nonartistic practices and skills that find their expression as socially constituted moment of exchange between producer and audience in a continuum of other socially constituted exchanges.[10] In these terms, the new democratic ethos has tended to identify art's participatory advance with art's general expansion into the realm of nonartistic practices and nonartistic knowledges, or what we can call nonaesthetic reason.[11] Indeed, it is the interdisciplinary relationship between art and nonaesthetic reason that marks out and determines the new art's possible social advance and transformative capacities.

Now this, of course, is where the neo-avant-garde practices of the moment share their key precepts with the core program of the historic avant-garde: art's utility lies, in the image of Walter Benjamin's famous notion of the author as producer, in its capacity to address or intervene in real-world problems, be they practical or ideological.[12] But for much of the contemporary neo-avant-garde (participatory forms of art as social praxis, activist and digital forms of exchange and intervention), the notion of the artist as producer becomes indivisible *from* the activist and technician. Benjamin's concept of the producer was certainly coextensive with the notion of the artist as activist and technician, but he also famously resisted the notion that the artist's skills were simply interchangeable with those of nonaesthetic practices. For to dissolve the function and utility of the artist into that of the activist or technician is to remove the singularly critical function of his or her place as a producer in art's advanced relations of production: his or her capacity to produce noninstrumental "thought experiments" without direct utility and, as such, to reinvest aesthetic reason with universal emancipatory content: free, unalienated labor.

The new participatory and social-activist forms of neo-avant-garde activity forget this fact, pushing art directly into the realm of nonaesthetic reason in order to secure what they hope will be art's "maximum" utility or effectiveness. All this does, however, is submit the artist to the dominant instrumental interests of the culture in the name of a left or democratic

utility, weakening the fundamentally decisive role of aesthetic reason under capitalism: art's embodiment of noninstrumental forms of labor and cognition as a negation of dominant modes of (in)attention and their circuits of power and knowledge. To defend art's powers of negation, then, is to refuse to submit art prematurely, in Hegel's language, to its absolute or ideal conditions of emancipation before these absolute conditions are historically achievable. In turn, therefore, the unwillingness on the part of the new art to fully assimilate the post-Thermidorian condition of the neo-avant-garde dissolves the revolutionary pathos attached to any working understanding of the avant-garde under mature capitalism. Without distance and negation, without a structural sense that art loses what marks it out (contingently) as "not-of-capital" by sublating itself into the capitalist everyday, the neo-avant-garde becomes effectively either a form of social decoration or a form of social work. In this sense it is more productive to talk about the avant-garde in the present period as a *suspensive* category.[13]

The Suspensive Avant-Garde

By "suspensive avant-garde," I mean that what now distinguishes the avant-garde as a productive category is how and under what terms, and to what ends, it negotiates the pathos of its post-Thermidorian condition. That is, in what ways is the avant-garde up to the task of realistically assessing its condition and prospects? If collapsing artistic technique into nonaesthetic reason weakens art's powers of negation and reduces the role of the artist to that of a neobureaucrat or civil servant, then the alternative of fully embracing the destructive legacy of the avant-garde as a permanent war of *ressentiment* leads to madness, despair, and delirium. Admittedly this second position is fairly marginal these days, but it still carries enough force for those who are attracted to romantic fatalism to think of the artist above all as a prophet and sentinel. This is the avant-garde mythology of "end times." Equally problematic, however, is the aestheticization of the avant-garde: the reduction of the avant-garde to the subtractive resequencing of its historic formal moves as a way of holding onto and revivifying the "revolutionary" artistic languages of the past. This is one of the problems with Alain Badiou's recent move into the debate on the avant-garde.[14] Dismissing the convergence of politics and art in the historic avant-garde as the Romantic dissolution of art into what it cannot possibly change—the collective political process— Badiou argues that the revolutionary function of art lies in its fidelity to the negative strategies of its original formal aesthetic program (abstrac-

tion) that establish a nonrelational and self-distancing relationship to the capitalist everyday. This position leaves the avant-garde as nothing more than an academic form of autopoiesis.

Thus, if the avant-garde is to retain some continuity with its core ideals and precepts and if it is to think of itself as an open-ended research program, it must recognize that the issues and questions it confronts and the problems it sets itself are structurally governed by art's delimited place within bourgeois culture. In other words, in nonrevolutionary periods the avant-garde is necessarily positioned *between* the forces of total revolutionary praxis (or, rather, the memory of these forces) and the pragmatic exigencies of autopoiesis. It is locked, therefore, into an active but *subordinate* relationship to the historic forms of its core social and political program. And this, essentially, is what I mean by the constitutive place of revolutionary pathos in the post-Thermidorian avant-garde. What is achievable socially and politically in the name of art is mediated by the determinate loss resulting from this process of subordination. This is why the crucial issue for the avant-garde in its avoidance of either a transgressive psychosis or aesthetic or bureaucratic submission is the question of *how* it negotiates this process of subordination. In other words, how does it establish an autonomous place for its research programs across the division between aesthetic and nonaesthetic reason, on the basis of a *maximalization* of its limited critical resources and capacities? For in submitting art either to aesthetic reason (purity of disengagement) or to nonaesthetic reason (direct utility), the intellectual and cultural manoeuvrability of art is foreshortened. What is required, in contrast, is a position on art's autonomy that is nondualistic and nonidentitary, a position that recognizes that the strength of art in the epoch of its total administration lies precisely in its resistance to the opposing routes of "social effectivity" and aesthetic sublimity.

Consequently, what marks out art's autonomy under these strictures is the extent to which it is able to sustain its passage between aesthetic reason and nonaesthetic reason as the redefinition and expansion of the relations between these two spheres. For one of the critical functions possessed by the artist in our culture is that he or she is able to incorporate and utilize various artistic or nonartistic practices without *fully* investing ideologically and socially in these activities. This ideological disinvestment is crucial, because art is thereby able to secure its autonomy and the open-endedness of its research programs on the basis of the contingent distance it is able to establish from both the reification of aesthetic reason and art's assimilation of nonaesthetic reason. Thus what distinguishes art from other practices—whether social, scientific, philosophical, or artisanal—is that it is the only practice that operates

out of a direct sense of its own impossibility and impermanence. That is to say: physics or weaving or engineering, for example, do not seek to escape the legitimizing traditions and institutional supports of physics, weaving, or engineering in order to define their (provisional) place in the world and the conditions of their own future possibility. They may provide an immanent critique of their own guiding precepts and traditions, but they do not seek their future in an exit from "physics," "weaving," and "engineering." Art, however, given its powers of infinite ideation, of transcendental overcoming of itself, is never identical with those traditions that give it value and legitimacy. Indeed, it defines its possibilities in terms of its own eventual dissolution as a category and seeks, therefore, as a condition of its freedom, an exit from the historically delimited category of art as such.

This is because, as the embodiment of free labor in an alienated form (the commodity form), the labor immanent to art carries the promise, in Theodor Adorno's sense,[15] of a world of productive labor and of social relations transformed in the emancipatory image of a liberated aesthetic reason. And, therefore, it prefigures a world in which the hierarchical division between productive labor and artistic labor, intellectual labor and manual labor, the artist and nonartist, is dissolved. This is why artistic labor as the embodiment of infinite ideation is quite unlike any other practice: art's sovereignty as free labor continually puts to the test the claims to truth of those who would reduce art's emancipatory significance to either "aesthetics" or "social utility." And this is also why the free labor of art represents not only a critique of instrumental accounts of freedom subscribed to by positivistic models of nonaesthetic reason, but also of those traditions and institutional arrangements of art that would limit art's transcendental overcoming of itself as an overcoming of its own alienated status. Consequently, art necessarily operates "out of joint" with the cultural and social contexts and institutional arrangements that bring it into being, as a matter of its self-definition and self-determination. In this sense art's autonomy is better understood, not as another name for the distance art takes from the world, but as cognate with a notion of determinate negation. That is, art's liminal identity—its capacity to move across aesthetic reason and nonaesthetic reason, art and nonart—is the *very condition of its renewal.* And this, in turn, is what I mean by the suspensive function of the avant-garde. The post-Thermidorian avant-garde systematizes the nonidentitary function of art as the necessary condition of its open-endedness, or powers of infinite ideation.

Thus recognizing the real structural limits of total revolutionary praxis in the current period does not mean the rejection of the place of

nonaesthetic reason in art *tout court*, just as the destabilization of aesthetic ideology through art's necessary assimilation of nonaesthetic reason does not mean the end of the pleasures of aesthetic distance constitutive of spectatorship and artistic judgement. Rather, the transformative actions, "thought experiments," critical interventions, and symbolic reinventions of the contemporary avant-garde become, in their speculative labors, *placeholders* for the historic ideals and achievements of the historic avant-garde. This thereby sets up an interesting mnemonic identity for the avant-garde in our own time: the avant-garde is revolutionary precisely through its fidelity to its *futures past*. But, significantly, this is not simply a promissory space, or a "holding operation." On the contrary, the avant-garde may be suspensive in these terms, but what now distinguishes it from its historic forebears, and recent neo-avant-garde relations, is that its suspensiveness is a condition *of* its explicit anticapitalist and oppositional character. That is, the avant-garde today has passed into what we might call a "third space": neither the space of revolutionary transformation as such (the building of a revolutionary culture; the production of "thought experiments" as part of a mobilization of the working class), nor the pragmatic adjustment of critical and radical art to the new postwar administration of modern art (the neo-avant-garde), but the concrete implication of artistic practices in the critique of capital, the state, labor practices, and the official institutions of art.

In this sense, the political outcomes of the knowledges and strategies employed by the suspensive "third" avant-garde are quite different from those of its predecessors, insofar as its "thought experiments," symbolic manifestations, and social interventions function as integrated parts of art's place in a critique of the *totality* of capitalist relations. There is here a decisive shift away from the counterhegemonic model of the 1980s and early 1990s, which focused principally on the art institution. Politics in art are no longer attached simply to a triangulated counter-representational model (race, sexuality, and gender)—as overwhelmingly embraced by the neo-avant-garde of the 1980s—but to the mobilization of collective artistic energies in alliance with practices of cultural self-determination, a politics "from below" and research and development of counter-informational knowledge, as means of modelling a place for art in new forms of sociability. Some of this work goes under the name of postrelational aesthetics, some of it under the nomenclature of digital and Internet art,[16] and some exists in fluid and temporal sites of production and reception outside the official art world altogether, in the "dark matter" of the unofficial economy of occasional artists, part-time activist-collectives, and various hit and run ecopractices.[17] Most of these group practices are unnamed and dissolve once the political struggle has moved on.

Now, as I have stressed, these forces are predominantly attached to what I have previously described as the hegemony of nonaesthetic reason in the new art. And, as such, as I have also shown, these approaches set up innumerable pressures for the collapse of this work into instrumentalized forms of activity, particularly at those points where, by dint of the fact that it is divesting itself of the circuits of the official artworld, it believes itself to have escaped from these instrumental pressures. But, nevertheless, what this collective push towards nonaesthetic reason produces is an extraordinary repoliticization of the category of the avant-garde, as art submits its energies to a totalizing critique of art, praxis, and labor. In this sense, this "third space" produces not just an intellectual, but an active and practical relationship to the notion of the avant-garde as placeholder for futures past. Consequently, I want to focus, in my final section, on one group that I believe best represents this "third" avant-garde, the Russian group Chto Delat? (What is To Be Done?). Although it has contributed enormously to the political energy of this emergent cultural space, it has not done so at the expense of a relationship to the exigencies of revolutionary pathos and the autonomy of art. Indeed, the group is exemplary in this respect.

Chto Delat? and the Third Avant-Garde

Chto Delat? have been in existence since the beginning of the new millennium and comprise an expanding and contracting personnel, centered currently on three core members: the artist, writer, and filmmaker Dmitry Vilensky, the philosopher Alexey Penzin, and the writer, translator, and editor David Riff. In addition Vilensky and Riff are the main editors of the group's newspaper *Newspaper of the Engaged Platform "Chto Delat?"* published out of St. Petersburg in Russian and English. The publication presents and develops many of the projects Vilensky—in particular—collaborates on (film and video work, archival and ethnographic work), but also acts as a theoretical forum for others inside the group or on its fringes and supporters of its aims. In this respect the newspaper is properly constituted as a partisan and polemical literature of intervention into the group's own praxis and the praxis of others; it is not an academic "journal" or a review. On this basis, it represents one of the most sustained efforts over the last ten years to develop the language of a research program inside the space of the avant-garde by drawing on the shared interests of the group in alliance with its critical supporters.

Hence, many issues of the newspaper have taken up core questions and problems of the historic avant-garde. In what ways is it possible to

continue the avant-garde as a proletarian project today? What would the real, sensuous (not decorative) utility of theory be like?[18] What forms might a progressive art take as part of a totalizing program of social and political critique?[19] How can progressive art remain committed to the project of *Bildung* (the process of individual development through aesthetic education)?[20] Yet, if these classic questions of the historic avant-garde are familiar enough, their position within a "third" avant-garde framework removes them of any nostalgic or purely redemptive character. This is because the group, despite its political engagement and outward-looking nature, is quite clear about the necessarily suspensive character of the new avant-garde. Thus, in a special issue of the newspaper on the avant-garde in 2007, Vilensky and his coauthor Zanny Begg argue: "The radicality of art . . . cannot be reduced to its connection to social or political imperatives nor to formal stylistic innovation but must also be understood through its poietic force; its ability to question and destabilize the very notion of the political, cultural and artistic. The avant-garde is a coup d'etat against history, making visible new possibilities in both art and politics."[21] That is, artists have to speak "in their own name" as part of collective political transformation. Moreover, in contradistinction to the historic avant-garde, the new avant-garde "necessarily has the negation of capitalism's totality as its point of departure. At the same time, it strives to connect this negativity with aesthetic method, adequate to the study of the world in which new subjectivity arises, not only as something destructive, but as something that produces social life."[22]

In this light Chto Delat? divide their new avant-garde model into three categories or principles: realism as critical-modernist method in the spirit of Bertolt Brecht (mapping as a form of resistance, counternarrativization and counterhistoricization, montage, subversive affirmation, the carnivalesque, fictional reenactment); fidelity to the revolutionary impulse of the historic avant-garde as totalizing critique; and a defense of artistic autonomy as a principle of self-organization. These principles place the group, then, at a certain distance from the prevailing nonaesthetic orthodoxy. First: in terms of the group's primary fidelity to the memory of the Russian Revolution and the Soviet avant-garde, and second: in terms of their resistance to the dominant model of the sublation of art *into* life. The "point is not art's dissolution into life, but its crystallization in life as a constant re-discovery, beyond our reactionary times, of the possibilities of new forms of life (yet) to come."[23] Indeed, the majority of art-as-social-activism practices end up creating only a self-inflicted barrier to future progressive transformation and alliances. As Vilensky says in conversation with Alexey Penzin: "These practices take the form of producing service packages for normalizing the lives

of problem communities. That is, for us, they are of 'little interest' to us because at bottom they are normalizing in nature."[24]

Chto Delat? are a small group and are, therefore, utterly marginal in terms of the machinery and hierarchies of the official artworld, particularly given that they operate out of one of the far-flung outposts of contemporary art: Russia. Yet, something real and transformative is in development here that marks out the notion of the "third" avant-garde as a placeholder for the memory of total revolutionary praxis. In other words, the key issue that needs addressing in relation to what the avant-garde means today lies in how such initiatives (which may emerge from any social location) mediate the revolutionary pathos of the historic avant-garde—the gap between the actual and ideal—as *active and productive*. The primary function of the new avant-garde's totalizing critique, then, is not to generate a utopian acceleration away from the world, but, on the contrary, to seek out those points and fissures in actuality where new cultural relations and forms of organization are possible or emergent. This means that it is precisely the pathos of the avant-garde, its role as the cultural memory of loss and defeat, that will direct and shape this potentiality.

<div align="right">

UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON

</div>

<div align="center">

NOTES

</div>

1   Hal Foster, "What's Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde?" *October* 70 (1994): 5–32.

2   Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (1974; Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984).

3   Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

4   See Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007) and *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009).

5   Maria Gough, *The Author as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2005).

6   Boris Arvatov, *Kunst und Produktion* (1926; Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1972).

7   Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979).

8   John Roberts, "Productivism and its Contradictions,'" *Third Text* 23, no. 5 (2009): 527–36.

9   See in particular, Geert Lovink and David Garcia, *The ABC of Tactical Media*, available online at http://www.ljudmila.rg/nettime/zkp474.htm.

10   See in particular, Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (1998; Dijon: Les Presses du Reel, 2002).

11   Grant H. Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community: Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of Califorrnia Press, 2004).

12   Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in *Thinking Photography*, ed. Victor Burgin (London: Macmillan, 1982).

13   For a further discussion of the suspensive avant-garde, see John Roberts, "On the Limits of Negation in Badiou's Theory of Art," *Journal of Visual Arts Practice* 7, no. 3 (2008): 271–82 and John Roberts, "Avant-Gardes After Avant-Gardism," *Newspaper of the Platform "Chto Delat?/What is to be Done?"* (2007)

14   See for instance, Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity, 2007) and "Destruction, Negation, Subtraction—on Pier Paolo Pasolini," Graduate Seminar, Art Center College of Design, Pasedena, February 2007, available at http://www.lacan.com/bapas.htm

15   Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984).

16   See Julian Stallabrass, *Internet Art: The Online Clash of Art and Commerce* (London: Tate Publishing, 2003).

17   Greg Sholette, *Dark Matter: Art and Politics in the Age of Enterprise Culture* (London and New York: Pluto Press, 2010).

18   See Alexey Penzin and Dmitry Vilensky, "What's the Use? What is the Use of Art," *Newspaper of the Platform "Chto Delat?"* (2007).

19   Dmitry Vilensky, publication to the exhibition, "Make it Better," April 9–17, 2003, St. Petersburg State Museum, *Newspaper of the Platform "Chto Delat?"* (2003).

20   Penzin and Vilensky, "What's the Use?"

21   Vilensky and Zanny Begg, "On the Possibility of Avant-Garde Composition in Contemporary Art," "Debates on the Avant-Garde," *Newspaper of the Platform "Chto Delat?"* (2007).

22   Vilensky and Begg, "On the Possibility."

23   Vilensky and Begg, "On the Possibility."

24   Penzin and Vilensky, "What's the Use?"

Postcolonial Agitations: Avant-Gardism in Dakar and London

Elizabeth Harney

O N THE OPENING NIGHT OF SEVEN STORIES about Modern Art in Africa, a much-anticipated exhibition held in conjunction with africa'95, the British art world's year-long "celebration" of African arts and cultures, a hushed audience gathered in one dimly lit end of the Whitechapel Gallery to watch three men perform a solemn ritual of mummification. These privileged few were witness to a performance that sought to educate them in (and initiate them into) the workings of vanguard practice within Senegalese modernism.[1] This particular exhibition and performance space was separated from the larger halls by high makeshift walls, constructed from thin sheets of rusted and corrugated metal that were battered, stippled, and perforated to produce the faintest profiles of human figures.

Unlike the surrounding conventional spaces, this one demanded a heightened commitment and engagement from the visitor, as it was only accessible through a small door, hung with swaying strips of burlap rice sacks that pulled roughly against skin, hair, and clothing. Once inside, the visitor was greeted with a mix of highly mannered, abstract paintings alluding to the stormy seas around the infamous slave-trading site of Goreé, Senegal. These heavily oiled canvases were interdispersed on walls and ceiling with roughly painted burlap sacks and translucent, elegant compositions produced on Mylar. Partially obscured by the density of hanging materials, a wooden stage rose up at one end of the gallery, home to a collection of found objects (shop mannequins, brooms, quotidian kitchen tools, masks, and costumes) and detritus transported to the London gallery from the courtyards and streets of Dakar.

The eldest of the three men read aloud from the headlines of the French newspaper *Libération* in increasingly agitated tones that approximated the syncopated cadences of chanting. He spoke largely in French and Wolof, at times seeming to read directly from the newspaper, at other moments, to recite learned or remembered scripts. The second man stood silently upon a roundel of a satellite photo focused on the continent of Africa, avoiding eye contact with the crowd pressing into the

gallery space around him, as a third man wrapped his body in layers of white gauze. He sweated profusely, twitched with agitation, and drooled at the mouth. After his transformation was complete, his mummified (bandaged) and silenced body served as a screen onto which modern paintings from 1960s and 1970s Senegal were projected.

With this performance, entitled *S.O.S. Culture*, the Laboratoire Agit-Art, a self-proclaimed vanguard group operating since the 1970s in Dakar, Senegal, entered the orbit of the London art crowd. But what was the metropolitan viewer to make of this performance? For those with little or no knowledge of the sociocultural and historical context within which the Laboratoire had emerged, the act of mummification could be read allegorically as a sign of any number of deaths, silences, or losses. Was it signaling the demise of the modernist canon in Senegal, the end of an era of postindependence euphoria, or the continued silencing of the African continent on the world stage? Could the emphasis on theatricality, found object, and audience engagement indicate familiar vanguardist challenges to the strictures of modernism? Only those closest to the performers would have known that in addition to all these possible interpretations, the performance was also intended to commemorate the founder of the Laboratoire Agit-Art, Youssouf John, who had died suddenly of a recurrent case of malaria only two weeks before the London event.

In the accompanying catalogue, the curator and artist El Hadji Moussa Babacar Sy wrote of creating a "*mise-en-éspace* in the gallery through an opera of dramatic and visual objects"—what he called "illustrative objects, theatricalised objects, objects used in play."[2] As a long-standing vanguardist group in Dakar, the Laboratoire had made critical interventions into local modernist practice while maintaining a loosely defined form (operating in courtyards, cafés, in the markets, and on the streets) to avoid both censorship and institutionalization. And yet it seemed clear from the words of the British organizing curator, Clémentine Deliss, that the Laboratoire's appearance in London was viewed as a kind of reenactment of an original set of situated practices—the representation of its activities would test the relevance and efficacy of its propositions in a larger, transnational art world. In her opening catalogue essay she confidently asserted,

While the original Laboratoire carries years of patina and traces of encounters, the curatorial transformation of its precepts in the gallery is an appropriate transference in today's setting. You shift site, and in dislocating the stage, you tighten its propositions and question the contraflow between local cultural context with its own audiences, and the new engagement that may be possible with visitors to the gallery.[3]

In any event, it would seem that the performance that night failed to engage the viewers as hoped. Rather, it was met largely with blank stares and subsequently with complete silence on the part of mainstream London art critics. As I will discuss below, it was only within the art-critical forums concerned with Africa that heated discussion arose.

In 1995, Western art critics had a long way to go in considering how the synthetic, mediated, at times highly ambivalent dialectics of colonialism were manifested within non-Western modern art scenes. To at least some of the London audience then, the forms, processes, and stated aims of Senegalese modernism would have read as a blind mimicry of European sources, enacted inappropriately and belatedly. By extension, a vanguard critique of its productions would suffer from the same contamination by foreign forms. In fact, the Seven Stories exhibition was aimed specifically at refuting such long-standing, Eurocentric readings of African modernisms and their vanguards.

Numerous studies of the activities of the historical avant-garde in Europe have discussed its multiple acts of formal or conceptual appropriation and translation. European artists in the classic avant-garde often positioned the cultural artifacts and practices of colonialism's non-Western "others" as foils in their own searches for a reintegration or reconfiguration of art and life. One might then logically ask, why could similar appropriative practices on the part of non-European artists not be viewed in the same way? In part, one answer would surely be to point out that the persistence of the project of "coloniality" makes it impossible to see African modernist experimentations with foreign forms simply as mirrored images of the choices of the European primitivists.[4] As I hope to show, the political, economic, and cultural stakes remain fundamentally dissimilar, requiring us to rethink pat interpretations of modernist and vanguardist activities in local African scenes. In particular, this essay will address the limitations of traditional Western theories of the avant-garde, with all their attendant measures of authenticity and efficacy, when applied to practices in Africa. These interpretative challenges have been most evident in instances when avant-gardist practices from Africa have been represented or reenacted within metropolitan exhibition spaces.

The transfer of the Laboratoire's improvisational, ludic activities to a contemporary metropolitan gallery was roundly denounced by several of the most widely read voices in the field of modern and contemporary African arts. Proclamations of "failure" predictably echoed the classic laments of the death of the avant-garde, where this death is seen to result from processes of incorporation into, or legitimization by, the institutions of the status quo. For example, artist/critic Everlyn Nicodemus called

the Senegalese component of Seven Stories "a fatal miscarriage"[5] while critic/curator Okwui Enwezor claimed that the "pretentious, shallow and dunder-headed translocation of the site-specificity of Dakar's Laboratoire Agit-Art's active environment to an enclosed space was simply a travesty."[6] There was an overwhelming sense in these responses that the ephemeral event of the Laboratoire performance, and the gallery show that it informed, were not only culturally "untranslatable" but were also being inappropriately reenacted in an inauthentic or even insulting fashion. The "anti-packaging approach"[7] of the "original" avant-garde had been neatly packaged and served up to a devouring metropolitan crowd in an act not only of decontextualization, but also of desecration.

These Africanist critics viewed Laboratoire's relocation to London as a dislocation, stripping the performance of the meaning it would have carried in its "own" context. But while this criticism rightly attempted to locate Laboratoire's avant-gardism as emerging from a particular historical and political juncture, it did so by reinforcing the territorialism and historicism that has afflicted Western analyses of artistic vanguardism. It is, in fact, possible that Laboratoire's performance (and its cosmopolitan sources) anticipated shifts in art practice, criticism, and curation.

As I will suggest below, while in the mid-1990s it was still possible for even the most perceptive of Africanist critics to argue that a particular avant-garde intervention could not remain meaningful in another context, by the beginning of the twenty-first century Okwui Enwezor himself was mounting interventions demonstrating that transnational approaches had become central to the renewed visions of avant-gardism.[8]

Almost a decade after Seven Stories, in 2002, Enwezor was responsible for presenting the "platforms" of Documenta 11, the fifth and final of which was a major international exhibition.[9] Central to the framing of this exhibition as a whole was a sustained examination of shifting relations between postcoloniality and neoliberalism, artistic activism and radicalism, and globalism and the historical avant-garde.[10] Writing in his essay for the Documenta catalog Enwezor asked, "What, then, is the fate of the avant-garde in this climate of incessant assault upon its former conclusions?" He insisted that "while strong revolutionary claims have been made for the avant-garde within Westernism, its vision of modernity remains surprisingly conservative and formal . . . The propagators of the avant-garde have done little to constitute a space of self-reflexivity that can understand new relations of artistic modernity not founded on Westernism."[11] The opacity of Enwezor's text here makes it difficult to determine whether, as one critic suggests, he is deliberately aligning and eliding avant-gardism with "Westernism" (perhaps in order to harness a subaltern politics) or is calling (and perhaps hoping) for a revaluation

of postcolonial vanguardisms that leave the myopic tendencies of the classic avant-garde behind.[12]

Although Documenta's postwar raison d'être determined that it would be a site at which politics and artistic expression frequently met, for Enwezor it had remained primarily a staging ground for universalist agendas that rarely moved beyond narrow definitions of globalism or late modernist celebrations of the artist. By decentralizing the format of Documenta 11 (hosting wide-ranging discussions and events in so-called "platforms" across the former colonial world) and treating the mega-exhibition as simply one of a number of critical intellectual and political interventions, Enwezor redefined the process of curating along vanguardist postcolonial lines.[13]

This politics of decentralization acknowledged the importance of contemporary artistic practices (and their histories) in non-Western cultural centers. The age of global biennales was firmly in place. Most importantly for our purposes, the Dakar-based Dak'Art: Biennale de l'art africain, one of the biggest and best-attended of these gatherings, had reached maturity after a decade of activities. This venue encouraged African collaborations and south-south dialogues and played no small part in establishing a flourishing postcolonial marketplace for African contemporary arts.[14]

In his attempt to deterritorialize spectatorship, artistic practice, and critical discourse, Enwezor also included a number of "avant-gardist" groupings hailing from the African continent. Huit Facettes and Le Groupe Amos are perhaps the most interesting to consider in relation to historical notions of vanguardism, the current politics of global exhibitions, and Enwezor's own conclusions about the supposed failure of Laboratoire's London début years before. The former calls itself a visual arts collective. It organizes workshops and lends artistic guidance to rural Senegalese villages. Empowerment, through creativity and collective action, lies at the center of its mission. Similarly, Le Groupe Amos, operating in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), identifies itself as an activist organization, made up of clergy, laymen, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals, which employs visual materials, amongst other tools, to improve human rights and democratic freedoms in the central African region. In contrast to the offerings at the Whitechapel a decade earlier, these two groups did not stage performances in galleries, but assembled traces of their past activities in the gallery space. "Evidence" of their creative and social work came by means of visual archiving—as posters, flyers, videos, photographs, and manifestos.[15] Perhaps believing, as he did in the case of Laboratoire, that the actual performance could not be translocated, Enwezor relegated the performative nature

of these site-specific collectives to spatio-temporal zones outside the gallery space. It is not at all clear that this resolved the central problem, which was to convey these groups' (site-specific) avant-gardist messages in the face of the implacable Westernism of this (transnational) audience. For example, in his *New York Times* review of Documenta 11 Adam Shatz wondered about the inclusion of Huit Facettes and Le Groupe Amos in a show of contemporary fine art, "Huit Facettes . . . is a group of Senegalese visual artists who conduct workshops in rural villages. Most of their work comes in the form of slides, videos and photographs documenting the workshops. Le Groupe Amos, an association of ministers, lawyers, doctors and professors in the Congo, makes videos, radio broadcasts and pamphlets promoting human rights, sexual equality and nonviolence. There's not an artist among them."[16] Shatz seems to miss the point that their inclusion in Platform 5 confers artistic status upon them, no matter what their originally stated aims. More importantly, it is precisely the translations or borrowings they may pursue of historical forms of artistic radicalism, however tangential, foreign or local, that allows Enwezor to include them.

Reviews of Documenta 11 have read Enwezor's intellectual project as an indication of the "sociopolitical realignments established by globalisation" that push for "a political agency of art."[17] However, the irony of Enwezor's position (and role) within the international art machine was not lost on those convinced of the impossibility of radical and transformative artistic practice in the face of global capital. In this regard, it is surely necessary to reexamine the parameters of the historical avant-garde in light of the continuing work on the textures and variances of "modernity at large," on plural modernisms as they developed in localized settings throughout the globe, and on our understandings of the "contemporary" dimensions of global art practices.[18]

Are the issues raised in Enwezor's Documenta and in the significant debates on art and its sociopolitical efficacy that followed any different than those that characterized earlier revivalisms or searches for authentic or fresh vanguards?[19] In a number of his writings, Enwezor has argued for understanding the activities of African avant-garde groups as expressions of new modes of subjectivity and articulations of voice, as examples of renewed activism or even radicalism in a contemporary moment he calls the "postcolonial constellation,"[20] a historical juncture which demands "a whole different set of regulatory and resistance models . . . to counterbalance Empire's attempt at totalization."[21]

Enwezor's dismissal of the translocation and incorporation of the Laboratoire in London, almost a decade before, relied upon an expected link between site (that is, Dakarois context) and authenticity. Didn't *S.O.S.*

Culture have meaning and effect beyond the "site-specificity" of Dakar or a particular "historical juncture?" Paradoxically, the swift and negative reaction to it suggests that perhaps it did; whether in the uncomfortable way in which it made its metropolitan viewers realize the limits of their own horizons or, perhaps more importantly, in the ways it challenged the historicist assumptions of African arts scholarship.

Why would Enwezor lament the decontextualization of Laboratoire almost a decade before but find the activities of Huit Facettes and Le Groupe Amos appropriate for Western consumption in 2002? Did the decision to document their performances rather than present them make a critical difference or were the transnational nature and interests of Huits Facettes categorically different from those of Laboratoire?

This comparison is enlightening, not only because it asks us to consider the different formulations of syncretic or hybrid vanguard practices in postcolonial Africa but also because it asks us to take notice of the means through which the scholarship, curation, and reception of parallel modernisms and transnational forms have shifted at the start of the twenty-first century. How might the efficacy of vanguards that draw their form and their potential from both international and domestic registers be understood at different historical moments? And how might different approaches to framing their activities in transnational exhibition platforms allow us to think through the legacies of avant-gardism in sites inside and outside the West?

Global Modernisms, Glocal Vanguards[22]

Any discussion of avant-gardisms "outside" the West must first locate these practices within a moment defined by local, syncretic modernities. The language of modernism in Africa was deeply imbricated in the mechanisms of modernity itself—the rise of the nation-state, rapid urbanization processes, struggles over political, economic, and cultural neocolonialism (and later the highly destructive repercussions of structural adjustment measures and Cold-War politics), mass media in globalized and local forms, and varying degrees of adherence to identity-formation discourses such as pan-Africanism, African socialism, Négritude, Nasserism, and the like.

In the period from the 1950s to the 1970s when anticolonial struggle and independence were immediate and hard-won goals, artists often saw their role as being the mouthpiece of a new nation. As Frantz Fanon, Anthony Appiah, and Chinua Achebe, amongst others, have suggested, emerging nationalisms on the African continent often drew from nos-

talgic reconstructions or reimaginings of mythic, precolonial traditions that would serve to counteract the negatives of colonial experiences and assert a sense of cultural pride and uniqueness.[23] These assertions have been understood as modes of reverse discourse, evidence of the dialectical relationship between center and periphery determined by the colonial project. In the case of Senegal, this nation-building and modernization agenda took a very particular flavor and the arts became key components in the story.[24]

Under the robust patronage of Léopold Sédar Senghor, who was not only the first president of a newly independent nation but also a philosopher and poet of Négritude, Senegal's artists pursued an active role in shaping modernism. In his writings, Senghor was primarily concerned with defining a place for blacks worldwide, identifying and celebrating a perceived common cultural heritage and consciousness, or what he called an *âme nègre*. In his role as patron of the arts, he encouraged artists to craft a visual vocabulary that freely mixed local and foreign forms and iconographies, drawing upon pan-Africanist motifs and European modernist techniques and materials.

Soon critics and patrons alike were speaking of an École de Dakar, thought to exemplify in visual form the tenets of Négritude philosophy. European critics either quickly dismissed the products of this école as aesthetic dross or uncritically celebrated its primitivist mimicry.[25] And while appropriative practices by European primitivists were typically interpreted in terms of confluences or affinities, artworks produced in the postcolonies that appeared to "borrow" or translate metropolitan sources were understood as evidence of contamination, losses of cultural authenticity, and misguided attempts to copy the mastery of European originals (a common charge that Partha Mitter has most recently labeled the "Picasso manqué Syndrome" and that still afflicts countless postcolonial artists).[26] As one Senegalese scholar and critic, Ery Cámara, lamented, "The West seems to believe that it alone is capable of assimilating other cultures without ceasing to be itself . . . The African artist can, without losing his identity, adopt elements of Western civilization, which, without us, would not be as it is today."[27]

Much postcolonial scholarship has focused on expanding the understanding of modernity's reach beyond Europe's borders and on complicating the perceived narratives of development (in art and elsewhere) that exist within the metropole. When it was first introduced, the notion of "alternative modernities" seemed a liberating turn in scholarship, allowing clusters or centers of modernism with distinctive histories to be located in various global sites. [28] However, as Timothy Mitchell has suggested, the notion of otherness implied in the discourse of alternative

modernities left in place Eurocentric assumptions about the existence of a universal, singular form of modernism to which all "other" or lesser forms could be compared through measures of difference, variation, or lack.[29]

Work on theories of translation, hybridity, in-betweenness, and third-spaces by scholars such as Homi Bhabha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty aimed to complicate and problematize previous readings of the syncretic forms that emerged both during and in the aftermath of colonial encounters. These interventions have played a critical role in enabling more nuanced discussions of pluralist modernisms and the intellectual complexities of postcolonial experiences. For instance, Chatterjee has written poignantly of the ambivalences or ambiguities of postcolonial intellectual life as engendering a bifurcated stance: "On the one hand, a persistent complaint about being excluded from or discriminated against in the matter of equal access to the supposedly universal institutions of knowledge; and, on the other hand, an insistence on a distinctly Indian form of modern knowledge."[30]

And yet, one must carefully weigh the applicability of postcolonial theories of syncretism and liminality that have emerged, for the most part, from the experiences of postcolonial intellectuals transplanted into exile or living within the tensions of diaspora. In her work on Egyptian modernisms, Jessica Winegar questions "whether dominant trends in translation theory . . . can . . . account for the shifting complexities of art made by nondiasporic artists living and working in the postcolony—many of whom try to resolve, rather than celebrate experiences of 'in-betweenness,' and whose practices of translation usually emphasize 'rooted' entities or 'invented' traditions?"[31] Certainly the complicated layering of sources, indigenous (reimagined or invented) and foreign, within the Senegalese milieu provides us with similar evidence of attempts at resolution or restructuring in order to make a meaningful modernism for the burgeoning nation.

Perhaps theories of avant-gardism are so irrevocably tied to European notions of art, autonomy, and progress that they are not useful when studying the distinctive forms of experimental art within varying national matrices. It is, however, undeniable that many artists across the globe have repeatedly engaged in the histories, tenets, and problematics of the avant-garde as it has been modeled, discussed, or even discredited in the West. And while it may be true that postcolonial maneuvers stressing the ambivalence and fluidity of notions of belonging and identity do focus our attention on the spaces of diaspora or exile, the realities of globalization (and, indeed, the universalisms inherent in the colonial project) point to a continuous movement of ideas, objects, and images in an ever

more layered cosmopolitan world. In other words, simply because a set of artistic practices seems "rooted" in the national soil of a postcolony does not mean that such practices exist in a closed intellectual space.[32]

Since the mid-twentieth century, European and American critics have been discussing the contours of, and predicting the death of, the avant-garde. These discussions have been exceedingly narrow in their under-standings not only of who might qualify as an avant-garde artist but also of the temporal and spatial parameters that gave birth to avant-gardism and that led to its purported demise.[33] Peter Bürger and Renato Poggioli have produced the most widely cited accounts of the workings of the historical European avant-garde, while other critics such as Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, and Andreas Huyssen have reexamined early Frankfurt School concerns about art, autonomy, and the effects of the culture industry.[34] However, it is in Geeta Kapur's incisive response to Hal Foster's attempt to legitimize the postwar neo-avant-garde as more than simply a series of "paradigm repetitions" that one finds an entry point to histories and understandings of avant-gardism "elsewhere." [35]

While Kapur is by no means the only scholar to give serious attention to avant-gardism outside the usual European orbit, her engagement with Foster's work represents one of the first serious attempts to converse directly with the long and prolific history of avant-gardist theory, and as such makes clear that to be truly effective this theory must include "a poetics of colonial or postcolonial experiences."[36] She argues that any attempt to use the concept of the avant-garde to describe moments or movements outside of Europe and America cannot rely upon a single explanation of the historical avant-garde as committed to the project of destroying the false autonomy of bourgeois art, noting that "if the avant-garde is a historically conditioned phenomenon and emerges only in a moment of real political disjuncture, it will appear in various forms in different parts of the world at different times."[37] Drawing from Hal Foster's desire to recuperate postwar and contemporary art practices as avant-gardist and to rescue successive vanguards from the charge of derivativeness, Kapur opens up the possibility that recapitulation does not work in the same way as reproduction and that the "return of the avant-garde" (often referred to in the larger literature as neo-avant-garde) could be viewed as more than a simple reenactment or a repetition without a difference.

While Foster challenges the historicist bent of avant-gardist theories, Kapur also challenges its spatial frames through what she terms "a delib-erate deflection"—one in which "the successive form of the vanguard is extended to include hitherto unlogged initiatives. This deflected argu-ment will rebound as a critique of Foster's own (Euro)Americanism, of his

indifference to nonwestern ideologies of plural modernities/alternative vanguards."[38] It allows us to see that "non-Western" avant-gardisms are responding to both plural and particular histories, offering a framework within which to consider the broader logics of cultural translation, the postcolonial politics that underlay searches for vanguardism at Documenta 11, and the African art historical conservatism at play in the critiques of, and hostility towards, the Laboratoire's presence and supposed demise in the London gallery.

Agitations and Theaters of Action: The Workings of the Laboratoire Agit-Art and the Village des Arts

In the months leading up to the Whitechapel début of the *S.O.S. Culture* performance, Seven Stories' chief curator, Clémentine Deliss, ran an artists' workshop in the former capital of Senegal, St. Louis. Its aim was simple: to provide an intense two-week opportunity for a small selection of artists from throughout the African continent and its diasporas to meet, exchange ideas, work side by side, and prepare for the happenings to follow in London. Envisioned as a means of "turning the curve back to Africa," this workshop, known as Tenq (which in Wolof means "joint" or "articulation") was viewed by its organizers "as an attempt to break into new, experimental space where the parameters of individual work are confronted with a collective situation and where definitions and classifications as well as institutional framings are left in a state of flux."[39]

While the immediate model for the workshops was borrowed from one established by Anthony Caro in the Triangle Workshops of the 1980s in upstate New York, more recent transplants of this model to sites and situations in southern Africa had encouraged the organizers to attempt a multinational and multilingual gathering as the precursor to the London events.[40] But lest one conclude too quickly that Tenq was yet another importation and imposition of European modernist ideas, it should be pointed out that it had its own historical models within the Senegalese art world. In the late 1970s, El Hadji Sy had squatted in abandoned military barracks on the outskirts of a highly desirable, expatriate part of Dakar, founding the Village des Arts along with sculptor Aly Traoré. Operating a studio, gallery, and gathering place within the Village, El Hadji Sy gave annual opportunities for his fellow artists to exhibit their works within the original space called Tenq.

The Village des Arts was a loose but mutually supportive grouping of musicians, photographers, filmmakers, painters, sculptors, and come-

dians. In a collegial, fluid, and relaxed atmosphere, visual artists were encouraged to expand their understandings of aesthetic categories (mixing dance, performance, painting, and poetry, for example), of the properties and values of indigenous or surrounding materials, and of artistic practices (such as collaborative work and process of production, for example). At its height, between the years 1977–83, the Village des Arts numbered some eighty artists, yet the actual community was much larger as many settled their friends and families with them on the site.

Many visual artists of the generation coming of age in the second decade after Independence cite their years at the Village des Arts as the most formative; a time when they were able to break free of state patronage and expected aesthetic practices to experiment with new ideas and materials. As one long-time resident noted, "above all, the Village provided a setting for artistic crystallization; it was not an orchestrated structure, nor one that could be orchestrated."[41]

The Laboratoire originally operated amongst the artists' studios at the Village des Arts, functioning as an impromptu, experimental, and collaborative artists' group. In this sense, it did not seek to occupy a singular, physical site but rather to maintain a larger "presence" or profile within the Senegalese art world.[42] During this period, however, it became central within the workings of the Village site and, as such, veered dangerously towards institutionalization. Traces of its early performances, interventions, and gatherings were "housed" in various studios at the Village and destroyed when the government forcibly removed the squatting artists from the site. Perhaps it was this "site-specificity" to which Enwezor referred in his disapproval of the Laboratoire's transplantation to London or perhaps to a broader Dakarois context.

But from where, in 1970s Dakar, did the interest in collective, avant-gardist tactics emerge? How, in other words, does one account for the growth of this hitherto "unlogged initiative"? By the late 1970s Senegal had experienced one-party rule for over a decade and the autocratic nature of the Senghorian regime manifested itself clearly in the stagnation of the artistic arena and in the worsening of the economic climate. Faced with the harsh realities of structural adjustment programs, the failed utopian visions of the Independence era, and growing social unease and alienation in a struggling postcolony, younger artists found little inspiration in the aesthetic choices and artistic agendas of their elders. They were thus in search of, and open to, alternate forms of artistic expression and self-expression.

In this period, the Dakarois cafés became crucibles for the formation of groupings such as the Laboratoire—grassroots efforts on the part of visual artists, disillusioned civil servants, aspiring filmmakers, musicians,

thespians, and comedians. Though founded by comedian Youssouf John, leadership of the group soon passed to Issa Ramangelissa Samb (alias Joe Ouakam). The main goal of the workshop, as its full name would suggest, was to agitate against existing institutional frameworks (adopting a kind of nihilism typical of many avant-gardes). It was also, of course, a nod to agitprop precursors. Laboratoire Agit-Art sought ultimately to question the reigning tenets of the Ecole de Dakar by encouraging artists to adopt new approaches towards their work and the roles it could play in the functioning of a free society. As Samb noted in a critique of the coddled Ecole de Dakar painters:

Painters create a forum for self-expression which is a completely alien environment, totally cut off from their own environment. In this social isolation, their work is materially restricted, consisting only in producing an often abstract 'universality.' Its activity is dangerous in so far as this attempt aims, while claiming to be representative of Negritude, to pass itself off as a fighting force for fashionable political activity. In fact, the painters are now missing from the forums where, socially, decisions are made.[43]

For members of the Laboratoire, the definition of the modern African artist advocated under Senghorian patronage was antithetical to Senegalese social life and history.[44] Samb noted that "people had confused the solitary nature of creation with the need for solitude of the creator,"[45] insisting that "without collaboration and artistic exchange, the arts could not flourish."[46] Like many vanguards, however, its members often had their feet in more than one camp, as it were, accepting government commissions when needed and taking advantage of "official" spaces to stage their performances.

Furthermore, despite the emphasis in one section of the art academy (*Section de recherches en arts plastiques nègres* or Section for Research on Black Arts) on the exploration and celebration of African imagery, the techniques employed by the École de Dakar artists remained, for the most part, imported (oil painting, Aubusson-style tapestries). Presidential patronage also encouraged a hierarchy in the arts, with more attention given to theater, literature, painting, tapestry, and film, and much less to dance, reverse painting on glass (a very popular and longstanding practice in Senegal), graphic arts, sculpture, and music.

The Laboratoire hoped to promote a new kind of art that could be provocative and critical, disturbing in its imagery, political in its content, or abject in its appearance. The only means of demystifying the reigning ideology supporting the École de Dakar was through reconfiguring the social roles for art in society. In its primary task of "unlocking" or "deskilling" artistic creativities in Senegal,[47] it chose to operate through

the medium of theater, arguing that drama needed the most attention as
it suffered under the weight of officialdom. Moreover, the improvisational
nature of theater would allow the Laboratoire to avoid institutionaliza-
tion and death. In 1970s Senegal, where state rhetoric was aggressive, in
part to mask the worsening economic crisis and tightening of political
monopoly, any attempt on the part of the Laboratoire at developing a
formal structure would surely have led to its definition and destruction
as a politically subversive body.

The Laboratoire claimed to operate under a traditional African struc-
ture, with the guidance of a council or a group of *initiés*. Each workshop
had a leader (chief) equipped with a moral authority conferred on him
by his peers. The group mounted one large annual open-air production
and held a series of rotating workshops throughout the year. The an-
nual performances sought to involve, in one form or another, all parts
of the surrounding urban community. Activities purposely blurred divi-
sions between actor and audience, with the surrounding environment
and objects all becoming part of the experience. This turn towards a
different reading of traditionalism than that imagined through the lens
of Négritude rarely produced formal solutions comparable to those of
earlier École de Dakar artistic productions. Rather, in many works by
participating artists, or in collaborative stage sets used by the Labora-
toire's performances, one could detect only schematic, subtle references
to recognizable "traditional" forms.[48]

Members replaced a written script for performances with what they
called a language of gesture. Issa Samb referred to this arrangement as
la technique du cercle (a circle technique), which encompassed, literally
and figuratively, *l'ensemble du corps* (the whole body/community). By
insisting that the objects and individuals within this "manifestation"
had no existence except in relation to their environment, Samb and
his colleagues were able to place new emphasis on process rather than
product. This substitution of improvisation and gesture for written script
directly confronted the logic of the established Senghorian art world.

At first glance, the position taken by the Laboratoire in relation to
Senghor's patronage suggests a resistance to foreign forms, a straightfor-
ward rejection of imported products and modes of production. However,
Samb and his collaborators did not object to the assimilation or borrow-
ing of ideas, concepts, and images from abroad. Even as they spoke in
nativist tones, the members of the Laboratoire drew upon readings and
translations of the Russian Marxist critic Georgi Plekhanov, on the work
of Czech/German phenomenologist Eugen Fink on the importance of
play in society, and on the dramaturgy of Antonin Artaud.[49]

Sometimes these references were oblique. For example, Plekhanov's
essays in *Art and Society* (1974), in which the critic writes about the rift

between artists and their society, the functionality of art, and the importance of play in everyday life, enabled Samb, as director of the Laboratoire, to address the challenges facing Senegalese artists attempting to break free from the Senghorian field of production. In its process of reclaiming and inventing traditions obscured or overlooked by Senghor's nationalist, pan-Africanist vision, the Laboratoire produced cultural forms to suit its own reading of contemporary realities. In short, these translations allowed for a local adaptation of selective global sources.

At other times, the referencing processes were strikingly direct, "quotations" in the postmodernist sense. Samb's terms such as *langage des gestes, technique du cercle, l'ensemble du corps*, and *expression totale* resembled very closely those used by Artaud. As early as 1929, for example, Artaud had advocated the use of *spectacle totale* (all-encompassing spectacle), a method of communication and performance that would supplant the supremacy of the written text by emphasizing a new theatrical language based on gesture, lighting, surrounding environment, costumes, and music.

Of course, these borrowings from Artaud serve to highlight the ironies of cultural exchange, acts of appropriation, and narratives of primitivism during European high modernism and the colonial moment. Artaudian dramaturgy, on which the Laboratoire would base much of its radical critique of Senghor's exoticized, colonialist visions of Africa, was itself a result of the playwright's primitivist readings of Southeast Asian and Central American performances. In his *Theater of Cruelty* (1932), Artaud called for the development of "another form of civilization," taking his inspiration from the Balinese theater he attended in Paris, Cambodian theater in Marseilles, and observations he made of the customs of Tarahumara Indians during a visit to Mexico.[50]

The parallels between Laboratoire's recycling of materials and European modernist challenges to fine-art material and construction, exemplified in the production of ready-mades and the use of found objects, are more difficult to pin down. The practice of reusing, accumulating, and layering diverse and often disparate materials is not new to either African or European aesthetic practices.[51] The Laboratoire's use of recycling, known locally as *récuperation*, can be read, then, not as derivative but rather as syncretic; as both a distinctive articulation of modernist debates about distinctions between high and low, elite and popular inherent in Senghorian Senegal and as an intentional play on an international market that reads its works through modernist paradigms.

The hybridity and ambiguity underlying the Laboratoire Agit-Art's discourse of avant-gardism prohibits easy classification of its activities by critics in the Western culture industry. Some have suggested parallels to the anti-aesthetic performance arts of the 1960s in Europe and America.[52] While key members of the Laboratoire were most certainly

well versed in the history of European avant-gardism, the conception
of art they were trying to subvert and the social life they foresaw for the
artist was in direct contrast to local models of modernism promoted by
the Senghorian state, in which artists served the interests of the nation
through the production of canvases and tapestries with pan-African
iconography. It is also worth remembering that this vanguardist initia-
tive predated by two decades the rise of an international art market for
contemporary African productions and that, while open to varied local
and foreign sources, it was not aimed at a global audience.

Some critics have suggested that the controversial manifestation *Le
lait s'est-il caillé?* (*Has the Milk Turned?* [1983]) exacerbated the tense
standoff between government troops and residents, leading to the forced
evacuation, abandonment, and eventual demise of the Village des Arts.
This performance reenacted the story of a protestor—accused of plot-
ting to assassinate the French president, Georges Pompidou, during a
state visit—who was allegedly jailed, tortured, and killed by Senghor's
government in a Gorée prison.[53] Creatively the performance exempli-
fied the experimental nature of the group, epitomizing "new ways of
linking, on the one hand, oral expression and mime and, on the other,
the acting order and dramatic discourse."[54] No documentation of this
performance remains and it has always been referred to in vague terms
and hushed tones, emphasizing perhaps its continuing political sensitivity
and the enigmatic circumstances under which it occurred. The use of
mime illustrated the Laboratoire's interest in French dramatic forms but
also served as an apt visual metaphor for the silencing of the political
opposition, especially during the last years of Senghorian rule.

When the government bulldozers came to forcibly remove squat-
ters, they either destroyed or confiscated most of the materials housed
in the old barracks, including countless artworks and the papers and
"archives" of the Laboratoire. Some photographs of the group's various
manifestations during its time at the Village still survive, and a handful of
"props" remain, but for the most part the history of its agitations is now
transmitted through oral traditions. While a researcher might lament
the lack of written materials to trace its history, in fact, the improvised,
half-remembered, deliberately obfuscated narrative of its developments,
debates, tribulations, and even its membership create a powerful sense
of both mystery and anti-institutionalism.

Transnational Vanguards

It would be too simple, I would argue, to suggest that the demise of the
Laboratoire in London represented the "death" of yet another historical

vanguard, but perhaps it signaled the inevitable shift from a dialectics of radicalism based primarily on engaging the limitations of nationalist discourses (which, we must remember, were always already international in their framing) to a questioning of other frameworks of postcolonial identity and belonging. Without wishing to suggest that it is a direct descendent, it is important to note that Huit Facettes does share some personnel, notably El Hadji Sy and Fodé Camara, with the Laboratoire Agit-Art and is self-consciously structured on the same collaborative model.

And yet if we are to learn from Kapur or Foster, this "new" form of avant-gardism is not simply a reenactment or repetition of earlier forms. The historical, political, and ethical context in which it intervenes is different. The dominant discourse in Senegal is now no longer Négritude, but the suffocating consensus of neoliberalism.[55]

Contemporary avant-gardes, in Senegal as elsewhere, may now therefore be expected to frame their interventions as critiques of neoliberal patronage, which often takes the form of NGO "support for an aesthetic of recycling, the make-do, makeshift, and bricolage rather than invention, sophistication, and technologically sound transfer of knowledge."[56]

In this light, one might attempt to answer the question posed earlier about what made Okwui Enwezor believe that his inclusion of Huit Facettes and Le Groupe Amos in Documenta 11 avoided the problems that had transformed *S.O.S. Culture* into a "travesty." It is not just that he chose to frame them in a different way, documenting their interventions rather than staging them. It is also the case, perhaps, that there is a categorical difference between Laboratoire's globally inflected engagement with the local political and artistic history of the Senghorian era and Huit Facettes and Le Groupe Amos's local actions and responses to global, transnational forces.

One might regard the London performance of *S.O.S. Culture* as the swan song of the Laboratoire Agit-Art, in an era when the dynamics of the art world in Dakar had shifted, not so much as a result of the acceptance or the effectiveness of its manifestations, but as the weight of imperialism was replaced by the pervasiveness of new forms of global capitalism. The activities of Huit Facettes no longer focus upon the aesthetic superstructure imposed by the state on artistic practice, but rather upon the failure of the state to provide creative economic opportunities for people (particularly in its rural hinterland) in the face of global pressures. Moreover, Huit Facettes engages directly with relations of dependency and other "benevolent form(s) of control" that have stepped into the void left by the state and complicated localized histories of modernism and vanguardism.[57] In their own words, "To create South-South work relations is the opportunity to have access to choices, to a world of history and geopolitics that belongs to us."[58]

This is the space in which avant-gardes, both within and outside the West, now agitate, and the very transnationality of these forces makes their experiences and interventions inherently more translatable than was the case for Laboratoire Agit-Art in 1995. However, Enwezor's 1995 concerns regarding decontextualization remain germane and, if anything, are even more crucial, given the ease with which cosmopolitan elites are likely to identify with the transnational elements of contemporary avant-gardist practices without heeding their discrepant local histories and potentialities.

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

NOTES

1   El Hadji Sy, "A Story from Senegal," in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa* (Paris: Flammarion in association with the Whitechapel Gallery, London, 1995), 96.
2   Sy, *Seven Stories,* 96.
3   Clémentine Deliss, "7 x 7= 1: Seven Stories, Seven Stages, One Exhibition," in *Seven Stories*, 19.
4   Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2000).
5   Everlyn Nicodemus, "Art and Art from Africa: The Two Sides of the Gap," in *Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture* 33 (Winter 1995–96): 37.
6   Okwui Enwezor, "Occupied Territories: Power, Access and African Art," *Frieze: Contemporary Art and Culture* 26 (January/February 1996): 40.
7   Deliss, "Returning the Curve: africa'95, Tenq and Seven Stories" *African Arts* 29, no.3 (1996): 46.
8   For example, see arguments by T. J. Demos, "The Ends of Exile: Towards a Coming Universality?" speech delivered Tate Britain (June 28, 2008): *http://www.ucl.ac.uk/art-history/about_us/academicstaff/drtjdemos/furtherpublications/Demos-Exiles*
9   Sylvester Okwunodu Ogbechie, "Ordering the Universe: Documenta 11 and the Apotheosis of the Occidental Gaze," *Art Journal* (Spring 2005): 80–89.
10   Enwezor has continued to expand discussions on the effects of the postcolonial condition on artistic activity, largely in a concerted effort to define the larger "field" of "contemporary african art." See in particular his discussions of structural adjustment programs, globalization, and postcolonial subjectivities in his coedited volume, *Contemporary African Art Since 1980*, ed. Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu (Bologna: Damiani, 2009).
11   Enwezor, "The Black Box," in *Documenta 11 Platform 5: Exhibition* (Kassel: Hatje Cantz, 2002), 46.
12   Stewart Martin, "A New World Art?: Documenting Documenta 11," *Radical Philosophy: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Philosophy* 122 (November–December 2003): 7–19.
13   Martin, "A New World Art?: Documenting Documenta 11," 7–19.
14   Joanna Grabski, "Urban Claims and Visual Sources in the Making of Dakar's Art-World City," *Art Journal* 68 (Spring 2009): 6–23.
15   There is a certain irony in the extent to which these vanguard activities are represented in the exhibition through documentary photographs given the extent to which the evidentiary nature of these forms has come under such scrutiny in recent scholarship,

most recently by Enwezor himself in *Snap Judgments: New Positions in Contemporary African Photography* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2006).

16 Adam Shatz, "His Really Big Show," *New York Times*, June 2, 2002.

17 Anthony Downey, "The Spectacular Difference of Documenta XI," *Third Text* 17, no. 1 (2003): 89.

18 Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1996).

19 While there is continuing and widespread usage of the term "avant-garde" in art trade journals, it is a term employed more often than not in unmediated or acritical fashion, referring only to "newness" or the art world's sensationalist rhetoric of newness and discovery, with little or no sincere investigation of the discourse surrounding historical or neo-avant-gardist or anti-avant-gardist intitiatives. In relation to Africa, it has recently been used in such a fashion by Barbara Pollack, "The Newest Avant-Garde," *ArtNews* 2001 (April): 124–29, in which she refers to the sudden "burst" of a "new wave of artists" from Africa onto the "international art world's radar."

20 Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 4 (2003): 57–82.

21 Enwezor, "Postcolonial Constellation," 77.

22 Thierry de Duve, "The Glocal and the Singuniversal: Reflections on Art and Culture in the Global World," *Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Art and Culture* 21, no. 6 (2007): 681–88. The author suggests that while this term "glocal" has been used primarily in relation to ethical practices in agriculture, it could be applied effectively to culture in light of the spread of global biennales in an age of late capitalism, and it suits what seems to be the underlying utopian search for new forms of radicalism and accountability in Enwezor's *Documenta*: "The word glocal implies the bridging of a hiatus from the particular to the general, a conceptual jump across a discontinuity formulated in geo-political terms: the city, the world. In its own way, classical political theory registered this conflation, or an eighteenth-century avatar of it, with the word cosmopolitan-ism (from cosmos, world, and polis, city)" (683).

23 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1963); Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992); Chinua Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990).

24 Elizabeth Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal 1960–1995* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2004).

25 Harney, "Pan-Africanism in Paint and Textile," *In Senghor's Shadow*, 49–104.

26 Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *The Art Bulletin* 90, no. 4 (2008): 531–48.

27 Ery Camara, "Exchanged Glances, Crossroads," in *Otro pais: Escalas africanas* (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Centro Atlantico de Arte Moderno, 1995), 186.

28 Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2001).

29 Timothy Mitchell, *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 2000).

30 Partha Chatterjee, "The Disciplines in Colonial Bengal," in *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal*, ed. Partha Chatterjee (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1995), 14–15.

31 Jessica Winegar, introduction to *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2006), 331–32, footnote 22.

32 See also the work of Ashish Rajadhyaksha, "Realism, Modernism, and Post-Colonial Theory," in *World Cinema: Critical Approaches*, ed. John Hill (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000), 29–40.

33   Lorne Huston, "The Theory of the Avant-Garde: An Historical Critique," *The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 29, no. 1 (1992): 72–86.
34   Peter Bürger, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (1974; Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1994); Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1968); Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1986); Benjamin Buchloh, "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde," *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 41–52; Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).
35   Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant Garde" *October* 70 (Fall 1994): 5.
36   Most notably Guha- Thakurta, *The Making of New "Indian" Art: Art, Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, 1850–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992); Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 2000); Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2004); Jessica Winegar, *Creative Reckonings: The Politics of Art and Culture in Contemporary Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2006); Andrea Giunta, *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics: Argentine Art in the Sixties* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2007). See also Ann Gibson, "Avant Garde," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996), 164.
37   Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, 374.
38   Kapur, *When Was Modernism*, 374.
39   Deliss, "Returning the Curve: africa'95, Tenq and Seven Stories," *African Arts* 29, no. 3 (1996): 41.
40   In this sense Tenq could be seen as a precursor to Documenta 11 platforms although these did not focus at all on creativity and the plight of artists.
41   M'Bengue as quoted in Deliss, *Seven Stories*, 232.
42   Indeed its legacy seems to inform the spirit of *Huit Facettes* (some of its founding members were in both groups) although the Laboratoire focused on urban culture while the younger group is preoccupied with discrepancies between rural and urban access to resources.
43   Issa Samb, "The Painters of the Dakar School," reprinted in *Seven Stories*, 222–3.
44   Their assertions mirrored the concerns of Frantz Fanon in his lengthy discussions of the alienation of the native bourgeoisie in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove, 1968), 206–48.
45   Issa Samb, as quoted in Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow*, 107.
46   Samb as quoted in Harney, *In Senghor's Shadow*, 107.
47   I borrow this term from discussions by Hal Foster et al., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 531.
48   For a more extensive discussion of the history of the Laboratoire Agit-Art and its manifestations, see Harney, "Laboratories of Avant-Gardism," in *In Senghor's Shadow*, 105–48.
49   Let us not forgot that in the 1970s in the Western context scholars noted a revival of interest in the notion of an avant-garde. See particularly Nicos Hadjinicolaou, "On the Ideology of Avant-Gardism," *Praxis* 6 (1982): 38–70; Diane Belles James, trans. and Andreas Huyssen, "The Search for Tradition: Avant-Garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s," *New German Critique* 22 (Winter 1981): 23–40.
50   Eric Sellin, *The Dramatic Concepts of Antonin Artaud* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1968), 84.
51   Allen F. Roberts, "The Ironies of System D," in *Recycled Re-Seen: Folk Art from the Global Scrap Heap*, ed. Charlene Cerny and Suzanne Seriff (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc. in association with the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe, 1996), 82–101.

52 Ima Ebong, "Negritude: Between Mask and Flag; Senegalese Cultural Ideology and the Ecole de Dakar," in *Africa Explores: 20ᵗʰ Century African Art* (New York: Center for African Art, 1991), 198–209.

53 Gorée Island is site to the infamous *Maison des ésclaves* (house of slaves) that was the departure depot of a large majority of slaves en route to plantations in the new world.

54 As M'Bengue, "Recalling the Future" (1984 manifesto) reprinted in *Seven Stories about Modern Art in Africa,* 233.

55 For discussions of neoliberalism and broader civilizational projects, see Walter Mignolo, "The Many Faces of Cosmo-polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism," *Public Culture* 12, no. 3 (2000): 721–48.

56 Okwui Enwezor, "The Production of Social Space as Artwork: Protocols of Community in the Work of Le Groupe Amos and Huits Facettes," in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2007).

57 Mignolo, "Many Faces of Cosmo-polis," 741.

58 "Huits Facettes: Abdoulaye N'Doye, El Hadji Sy, Fode Camara, Cheikh Niass, Jean Marie Bruce, Mor Lisa Ba, Amadou Kane Sy (Kan Si)" in Documenta II_Platform 5: Exhibition. Short Guide (Hadje Cantz, pg. 114).

Resisting the Question, "What Is an Avant-Garde?"

Mike Sell

"WHAT IS AN AVANT-GARDE?" I don't think there is a more timely question scholars interested in the history and theory of radical cultural production can ask. More than a simple inquiry, it is an invitation to recalibrate our key term and review in critical spirit our theoretical paradigms, the historical narratives that frame our subject as an evolving sociocultural phenomenon, and the institutional and geopolitical positions that enable us to research, write about, and teach the avant-garde.

There's nothing new about asking, "What is an avant-garde?" or recognizing that doing so has broader implications than the mere meaning of a word. It is, to repeat, a timely question, a question that orients us towards contingencies of time and place, towards the conditions and horizons of our ability to know our subject. It is asked and answered—sometimes explicitly, more often tacitly—every time an artist writes a manifesto or a critic uses the word "avant-garde" to describe a poem or painting. Most of the time, the asking and answering fall within conventional understandings and applications of the term and its history. On occasion, however, they can spark a genuine "shock of the new" (to recall Robert Hughes),[1] unsettling assumptions, shifting paradigms, bringing to light formerly encrypted histories, and recasting disciplinary configurations.

For example, when French anarchist artists and art critics asked the question in the 1880s, they challenged the prevailing notion that avant-garde art was whatever most effectively abetted the socialist propaganda engine. Against that presumption, post-Impressionist painters and decadent poets asserted the right to explore form and content that were in no direct way at the service of political movements, but that, as they saw it, challenged the status quo nonetheless.[2] The consequences were remarkable: in the short term, movements such as neo-impressionism and decadentism devoted to the exploration of *L'art pour l'art*, journals, and a network of galleries to promote the new art; in the long term, the aesthetic theories of Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg,

which have proved so crucial to our understanding of the politics of aesthetic form.

A century later, to cite another example, feminist, queer, postcolonial, poststructuralist, and critical-race theorists asked the same question and, in so doing, unveiled the Eurocentrism, sexism, racism, and homophobia not only of the historical avant-garde but also of the academic discourses and institutions that had canonized it. When they asked "What is an avant-garde?" a rash of other questions followed: Why were there so few women and non-Europeans in the textbooks? Museum shows? Galleries? Why were so many vanguards cozy with fascists and sleazy marketers? And why had it taken so long to recognize these obvious inequities? The question now cast light on the reactionary politics that sometimes informed the historical avant-garde's radicalism, the scholarly discourses that described it, and the gallery and museum system that supported it. Further, the question drew attention to an aspect of the avant-garde sorely unattended by scholars and critics: that the avant-garde, in Paul Mann's words, was a "discursive economy" with all the vested interests that contour any system of circulation.[3]

These two examples—two of a bunch—show that to ask the question "What is an avant-garde?" is to be part of a venerable tradition, a tradition that, rather like the avant-garde itself, often turns on tradition itself to reveal and recast the conditions and horizons of tradition itself.

This essay is intended in that spirit. I will argue that our understandings of the avant-garde are tethered to perspectives that deplete our efforts to define, theorize, and historicize the avant-garde. Specifically, I will argue that we cannot answer the question, "What is an avant-garde?" until we better comprehend (1) the history of the field of avant-garde studies itself, (2) the contradictions inherent in any effort to compose a historical narrative of the avant-garde, and (3) the conceptual and historiographical limits that come into play when we define the avant-garde as an artistic, as opposed to a broader, cultural tendency. To illustrate this point, I will discuss a variety of avant-gardes, though paying particular attention to the Black Arts Movement, with which I am particularly familiar and which encompasses many of the most important issues facing the field of avant-garde studies today.

Ultimately, I will argue that, because of the nature of our subject matter as it relates to academic study, the dilemmas contouring any effort to write its history, and the epistemological limits of criticism amplified by our subject matter, the question is irredeemably contingent. My essay is therefore best understood as a study of the benefits of *resisting the question, "What is an avant-garde?"* And the answer that I'll suggest should be taken as a *resistant answer*. That is the only possible answer in an era when the avant-garde has achieved ubiquity.

The Institutions of Avant-Garde Studies

It behooves us to remember that the avant-garde is not a child of the university and has often taken a spirited stand against that institution and those who work in it. By the time avant-garde studies became a full-fledged academic field in the 1950s—dominated then, as now, by literary critics and art historians—the artistic avant-garde had been doing its thing for well over a century, accumulating a vast body of works, theories, galleries, scandals, and legends.

Criticism of the avant-garde has not always been the purview of the academic either. Baudelaire and Gautier weren't professors; they were working artists and public intellectuals. And though Ortega y Gasset's book on dehumanization in art, Greenberg's essay on kitsch, Benjamin's on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, and the Lukács-Brecht debate are staples of academic essays and syllabi, they weren't written with canons and curricula in mind. Their critiques were intended to guide the Left's cultural apparatus, a set of institutions and organizations of which university departments and their faculty were only a minor part.

It wasn't until the 1950s that the avant-garde got its professors, appropriately sober journals, curricula, and canon. It was during this same period that the capitals of the industrialized and industrializing nations (such as Brazil) saw the development of major museums dedicated to the avant-garde (in the United States, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim), dozens of retrospectives of movements and individual artists, and a robust system of galleries specializing in the marketing of their paintings and sculpture. The following decade was punctuated by the foundational scholarly works of Anna Balakian, Maurice Nadeau, J. H. Matthews, Michel Foucault, Hilton Kramer, Renato Poggioli, Jacques Derrida, Roger Shattuck, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Roland Barthes, Peter Bürger, Lucy Lippard, Donald Drew Egbert, and others. Those books and articles—and the publishers and editors who put them into print—established the avant-garde as a key term for academic study and a proper subject for the curriculum, at least in certain departments.

What is the avant-garde? For someone who first encountered the avant-garde as a student in the late 1980s—as I did—the answer to the question was obvious: surrealist films, expressionist dramas and paintings, futurist poetry, constructivist architecture, Dada collages. But there was an irony to that self-evidence, one aptly described by Fredric Jameson: as students, we experienced the shock of the new in a "set of dead classics."[4] This typically postmodern irony (at the time, colorized clips from *Un chien andalou* occasionally appeared on MTV) wasn't just character-

istic of my generation's first encounters with the art of the avant-garde.
When I began studying the subject in earnest, there was a canon of
scholarly work that was mandatory reading—Baudelaire, Gautier, Lukács,
Poggioli, Lippard, Bürger, Marjorie Perloff, etc. But there was also an
emerging discourse that was looking at both canons, at avant-garde art
and its criticism, with a different set of priorities. I think here of Teresa
de Lauretis, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Greil Marcus, Rosalind
Krauss, Sue Ellen Case, Hal Foster, Guy Debord (rediscovered, like Situ-
ationism more generally, in the 1980s), Thomas Crow, Gilles Deleuze
and Félix Guattari, Griselda Pollock, and Kristine Stiles.

There were two particularly exciting aspects of this new wave. For one,
it showed that we could no longer take for granted that "avant-garde"
was synonymous with progressive politics or liberatory aesthetics. How
could this idea be sustained in the face of the often Eurocentric, mi-
sogynist, homophobic, imperialist, and racist tendencies of surrealism,
Italian futurism, vorticism, and other classic avant-garde movements?
Equally exciting was how these writers approached the shortcomings
they identified. Earlier criticism generally took a single position on the
contradictions of a given avant-garde: it was either radical or reaction-
ary, "avant-garde" or not. The new approach was more dialectical and
dexterous, informed by a more nuanced understanding of power, ideol-
ogy, and institutionality. We learned that, because the avant-garde was
imbricated with hegemonic cultural, political, and social institutions,
it was *both* an agent of critical consciousness *and* ideological blindness,
both liberatory praxis *and* repressive authority. Within this more motile
critical framework, we could not only better appreciate the radicalism
of, say, André Breton's surrealist group, but also frankly recognize the
limits of its attack on imperialism, capitalism, white power, and patriarchy.

As exciting as these two ideas were, there was a third that was espe-
cially compelling: discussing the avant-garde wasn't enough—it also
brought into play the role of the critic and her institutions. Though I
disagree with much of Peter Bürger's argument in *Theory of the Avant-
Garde*, I take as gospel his assertion that the avant-garde's ability to be a
cultural agent depends in large part on how it relates to and thematizes
its enabling institutions.[5] However, where Bürger's critique falls short is
in his failure to incorporate into his critique the institutions that enable
his own labor as a scholar and critic. Though he demands that we map
and historicize the institutions of the avant-garde, there's not a word
about academia, as if scholars and teachers were beyond history and
power—and beyond the avant-garde. Yet the relationship between the
avant-garde and its scholars and critics is long-lived, both productive and
fraught, and determinant, to a degree, of both avant-garde praxis and

scholarship.[6] Leaving academics out of the picture all but ensures that we will fail to understand what the avant-garde is and why it matters.

As an illustration, consider the Black Arts Movement, the radical Afrocentric vanguard of the 1960s and '70s that catalyzed widespread changes in the way we think about race, power, and aesthetics. Its artists and activists targeted the institutions of primary and secondary education, believing them to be ideological institutions of racialized power in the United States. Dozens of independent educational and cultural centers were founded as alternatives to the institutionalized racism of those institutions. This does not mean, however, that BAM activists completely rejected the mainstream. Indeed, the movement played a leading role in the creation of academic Black Studies, transforming how Africa, the African diaspora, and African America are taught and their scholars funded in universities and colleges. Within those institutions, BAM activists not only altered academic discourse, but also took on tenure, promotion, and admission policies, attempting a thoroughgoing overhaul of departmental demographics and town-gown relations.

Of equal importance to the movement's critical interface with the institutions of higher education was how those institutions altered the movement. Because they worked in institutions that were increasingly concerned with homophobia, misogyny, anti-Semitism, and other forms of chauvinism, BAM artists and critics were forced to confront the movement's own shortcomings. At the same time, its more progressive sociocultural implications were also eliminated or diverted as it was disciplined via liberal arts curricula, the tenure and promotion process, and diverse discourses on racism and African-American culture. This institutional history is only just now being told, despite its palpable impact on how we understand the BAM, its significance, or its particular "avant-gardeness."[7]

A more sophisticated reading of the role of identity, place, and power in the institutions of avant-garde scholarship is not the only reason why we should ask and answer the question, "What is an avant-garde?" in a different way. Consider the issue of artistic medium. Until quite recently, when we spoke of "avant-garde art," we generally meant what RoseLee Goldberg has called the "solid arts": painting, film, poetry, sculpture. Though avant-garde music has enjoyed consistent attention from scholars, other performing arts—theater, dance, and performance art, in particular—have not. And even within the solid arts, certain media, such as textiles, have been marginalized, along with the artists who worked with them, a problem often compounded by issues of identity. Sophie Taeuber-Arp is a perfect example of such double marginality. Though she created compelling visual art, textiles, puppets, and dances and was

a founding member of the Dada movement, one could find little about
her in academic works published before 1983, except for the fact that she
was the lover or spouse of other avant-garde artists. Fortunately, this has
now changed, thanks to that year's Museum of Modern Art retrospective
(one of the first given by that museum to a female artist; sculptor Louise
Bourgeois was the subject of the very first retrospective a year earlier).
But even the MoMA show was biased towards the traditional solid arts,
focusing almost exclusively on Taeuber-Arp's sculptures, paintings, and
prints; that bias persists in more recent scholarship.

   A handful of live events in the history of the avant-garde are securely
canonical: the riotous premier of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*; the cabarets
of the Zürich Dadas; the *serate* of the Italian futurists; Stravinsky and
Nijinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*; Erik Satie, Pablo Picasso, Jean Cocteau,
and Sergei Diaghilev's *Parade*; Chris Burden's *Shoot*. But these speak
neither to the diversity nor the ubiquity of performance in the avant-
garde. Addressing the issue twenty-five years after the publication of
her truly groundbreaking survey *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present*,[8]
Goldberg asks,

Is this disconnect from history an inevitable component of performance, because
the practice is by nature ephemeral? Or is something else at issue—lack of ac-
cess to and familiarity with the hundred-year history of "live art"? Though the
value of access to the "real thing" in museums should never be underestimated,
young painters learn a great deal by looking at reproductions in magazines or
slide projections in lecture halls. Their real advantage, therefore, seems to be the
existence of the century-old autonomous discipline of art history whose agreed-
on vocabulary and range of theories—formal and social—support and contex-
tualize the Story of Art. For the artwork that leaves nothing or little behind, we
lack the kind of shorthand taken for granted in discussions of the "solid arts."[9]

James Harding and John Rouse would add that it's not just a question of
record keeping and archival access, but of the dominance of the models
and methods of literary studies.[10] For example, Bürger discusses Friedrich
Schiller at length, but he not only fails to mention the latter's highly
influential work as a dramatist, but also frames the discussion wholly in
terms of Hans-Georg Gadamer's text-based hermeneutic method. While
Harding and Rouse don't deny the utility of that method, they also make
clear that it is insufficient when considering the nontextual dimensions
of performance or the widespread antitextuality of avant-gardes and
their productions.[11] The benefits to correcting the antiperformance bias
are theoretical, historiographical, and institutional. Harding and Rouse
assert that if we recognize "the avant-garde gesture as first and foremost
a performative act," then we can "shift away from the Eurocentrism that
has dominated avant-garde studies almost since its inception."[12]

In sum, because the avant-garde so often implicates the institutions and discourses that frame it, the vanguard challenge will perennially play on the limits of academic criticism.[13] So, while it is always timely to pose the question, "What is an avant-garde?" we should also always ask, "Which questions are we *not* asking about the avant-garde?" and "From where do we ask about the avant-garde?"

Writing the History of the Avant-Garde

What are the storylines we use to tell the tale of the avant-garde, to situate its gestures of rebellion and resistance meaningfully across time and place? How do those storylines "dramatize" our subject, to recall the terminology of Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives*? How do they frame the avant-garde as an agent, as something that acts within a specific sociocultural situation, as something with a distinctive purpose?[14] How do our assumptions about the avant-garde inflect our analysis of historical evidence?

In a meticulous study of the historical documents and the critical scholarship on the legendary Théâtre de l'Œuvre's production of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, Thomas Postlewait describes a pattern of erroneous claims and commentary about Jarry, about the riot that supposedly broke out at the play's premier (including the persistent failure to recognize that there were, in fact, two premiers), and about the event's significance in the history of the avant-garde and modern theater. "We want the event to be the origin of a radical break in culture and values," he writes. "But in order to establish our preferred narrative, we must repress a significant part of the historical record."[15] There are many more things for us to learn about the touchstone events that festoon the existing histories of the avant-garde. Some of these discoveries will force a significant reorientation of the field, as we learn from scholars such as Postlewait, Kimberly Jannarone, and others who are finding remarkable materials in the archive, altering how we think of Antonin Artaud, Italian futurism, George Balanchine's choreographies, and other such topics.[16]

Putting aside questions of historical documentation and interpretation for the moment, is there just one story to tell about the avant-garde? Because their agency, situations, and purposes are different, a group of draft-dodging artists hiding out in Zürich during World War I and, say, a Malaysian playwright in the 1980s, are avant-garde in distinct ways. Malaysian dramatist Kee Thuan Chye wrote and produced his play *1984 Here and Now* to challenge the hegemony of ethnic and linguistic groups in his country. To do so, he had to negotiate a local matrix of publishing, theatrical, and legal institutions, as well as the assumptions

and expectations of those who attended English-language theater in Malaysia (that is, the nation's elite). Kee's "scene" was also shaped by U.S. neoliberalism (a major source of income and authority for English-speaking elites in Malaysia) and the European literary canon (including the historical avant-garde and, of course, George Orwell).[17] Both a legacy of the European avant-garde and a unique, innovative, independent manifestation of cultural resistance rooted in a singular situation, Kee's work is a perfect illustration of the many "rough edges" of avant-garde history, as Harding has called them: places of contestation, "simultaneous articulation," and "apostate adaptation."[18] Along such rough edges, the unitary, linear, Eurocentric concept of avant-garde history breaks down.

This kind of fracturing or "roughing up" of the story is particularly apparent when we look at the avant-garde in a more global way, but is also apparent in individual movements, as is clear when we turn again to the Black Arts Movement. For sure, the BAM possessed characteristics that align it firmly within the classic avant-garde tradition. The art and criticism of the movement are peppered with approbative references to Dada, surrealism, and futurism, as well as to the political vanguards of China, Cuba, and other decolonizing nations. Just take a look at Amiri Baraka's "Black Dada Nihilismus" or his manifesto "The Revolutionary Theatre" with its many references to Artaud.[19] The historical avant-garde was an inspiration and a rich conceptual and creative resource for conscious Black artists and their audiences.

But the artists and critics of the BAM also pitched their labors explicitly *against* that tradition, viewing it as elitist, Eurocentric, imperialist, and racist. Playwright Ed Bullins was in plentiful company when he expressed his disdain for the "so-called Western avant-garde." As Bullins writes in respect to avant-garde drama,

These "avant-garde" movements are not attempts, in most cases, to break or separate from Western theater's history, conventions, and traditions, but are efforts to extend Western dramatic art, to perpetuate and adapt the white man's theater, to extend Western reality, and finally to *rescue* his culture and have it benefit *his* needs. [20]

Scholars and critics of the time, white and nonwhite alike, were regularly taken to task by BAM members for failing to account for the distinct experiences of the minoritized and marginalized. BAM theorists like James Stewart, Charles Fuller, and Larry Neal decried assumptions about aesthetic objectivity in arts scholarship and funding that denied a fair hearing for the diversity of African-rooted aesthetic expression (an issue I'll return to below).[21] In this respect, the BAM was decidedly *anti*-avant-garde.

But the BAM was not defined by its relationship to the Euro-U.S. avant-garde—it also shaped itself and its modes of expressive critique in ways that had nothing to do with the avant-garde. Neal and Baraka resurrected and revised West African ethical/aesthetic systems; Stephen Henderson found philosophy in the grassroots tradition of cultural production carried by blues musicians from the jook joints of the South to the rent parties, night clubs, and bohemian poetry clusters of the North. A similar urge motivated BAM fellow traveler Cedric Robinson, who shows in his magisterial *Black Marxism* that the "Jacobin imaginary" and its fantasy of vanguard agency has distorted the historical record, denying an accurate account of the role that the African-American masses—not elites, not parties, not avant-gardes—have played in the destruction of racist colonialism.[22]

This "pro-con-and-other" attitude is not a symptom of hypocrisy or naïveté. BAM artists and critics had to sustain a high level of theoretical and practical mobility to survive and succeed in a situation that was, to say the least, complicated. Maintaining a motile and ambivalent position vis-à-vis the Western avant-garde tradition empowered black artists and intellectuals to engage that tradition on a variety of fronts and from a variety of perspectives, intervene in its scholarly apparatus (that is, the creation of Black Studies), and alter the sociopolitical and discursive conditions that governed the emergence and development of avant-gardes. Simultaneously following, disavowing, and independent, the BAM was something of a "quantum avant-garde." In Burke's words, the BAM's vanguardism depends on how we portray its agency, its acts, its scenes, and its purpose.

This trickster-like quality isn't only characteristic of "new" vanguards like the BAM or Kee Thuan Chye. The radicalism of Breton's surrealist group, for example, appears quite different when viewed from within conventional understandings of vanguardist cultural production than it does from the perspective of, say, René Crevel or Suzanne Césaire. Both were minorities within the group (Crevel was bisexual; Césaire was black, female, and a colonial subject). Both called into question the move-ment's racism, sexism, homophobia, Eurocentrism, and privilege. They showed that the vanguardism of surrealism was dependent, contingent upon specific, historically and culturally situated structures of power and representation. They did not disparage the surrealists when they raised such questions nor dismiss the surrealist critique by recognizing its rootedness in European history. Rather, they expanded the scope of surrealism, identified problematic assumptions and aporias in its theory and practice, and sharpened its challenge to power within conditions beyond those of its creators.[23] From the perspective of the racialized and sexualized minority, the French surrealist group led by André Breton both

was and was not avant-garde. Situated within a history that accounts for gender, sexuality, colonialism, and the singular conditions that govern challenges to power, surrealism is also a quantum vanguard.

An additional issue: the role of "Europe" in avant-garde historiography is in need of more critical attention. The usual presumption is that the avant-garde began in Europe and evolved towards its current, global phase through a sequence of exchanges, ruptures, and reactions, each with Europe as its origin and ultimate referent. This is the narrative promulgated by the key historical works of the field (Poggioli, Matei Călinescu, Egbert), and by most of those attempting to think of the avant-garde in a more global, transnational fashion. While it would be foolish to deny clear and hardy developmental lines within avant-garde history that originate in, and orient around, Europe, or to deny that Europe and Europeans have played a dominant role in the history of the avant-garde, there are other lines worth considering, and other origins.

Andrea Flores Khalil, in a fascinating study of the poetry, film, and visual art produced by French-speaking Arab artists in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt during the twentieth century, constructs a multidirectional chronology in which North African artists, inspired by their encounter with European avant-garde art, reflected critically on what brought them to that encounter and, doing so, were alerted to alternative possibilities and timelines of the avant-garde. Attempting to counter both damaging Western notions of progress and modernity as well as the orthodoxies of Islamic culture, these artists and their works did not simply reject the past in the Poundian sense of "making it new." Though certainly seeking the new—they were as conscious of the vicious atavisms in their societies as their European comrades were of theirs—these writers also recognized themselves in light of indigenous cultural modes that pre-dated European influence and provided robust formal and theoretical resources for the Arab artist in his effort to move beyond European hegemony and articulate a more empowering modernity.

And here the question of the avant-garde's European lineage comes into play. According to Khalil, writers like Abdelwahab Meddeb and filmmakers like Moncef Dhouib perceived their European influences, paradoxically, *as both precursors and followers*. These artists came to understand that there was no European modernity without Arab modernity, no Arab modernity without the European. As Khalil puts it, there is "a strange, circular, temporal effect" that must be accounted for when considering such history, a sense that the avant-garde is "always returning and moving ahead simultaneously."[24]

Recent work in modernist studies has found a similar kind of circularity, showing that modernity and modernism have not only signified

differently in Africa, China, and Latin America than in Europe and the United States, but that these concepts may not be uniquely or originally European. We've learned that modernity has signified differently for racialized minorities *within* Europe and the United States (that is, Crevel and the BAM) than it has for the more privileged and secure.[25] It is certainly true that vanguards have developed most often when and where European systems of trade, warfare, and intercultural communication have intruded into sociocultural situations that were formerly unaffected by those systems. And such intrusions inevitably carry with them ideas of the "new," the "radical," and the "experimental" that are rooted in European culture. But those ideas are always localized, transmuted to greater or lesser degree, and they often catalyze reflections on local dynamics of new and old, modern and traditional.

In this context, Richard Schechner writes,

There is no area, be it Micronesia, the Pacific Rim, West Africa, the Circumpolar Region, or wherever, which does not have artists actively trying to use, appropriate, reconcile, come to terms with, exploit, understand—the words and political tone vary, but the substance doesn't—the relationships between local cultures in their extreme particular historical development and the increasingly complex and multiple contacts and interactions not only among various cultures locally and regionally, but on a global and interspecific scale.[26]

This does not mean that any cultural activist who positions him or herself in this fashion is avant-garde. The point is that vanguards come into being in sociocultural situations that may or may not be the consequence of a common stimulus (that is, European modernity) and are distinct in terms of how they articulate the past, present, and future and how they conceive and practice cultural activism within that articulation. Schechner's comment alerts us to other contingencies, suggesting that the avant-garde is a situated practice and a situational concept. Indeed, the avant-garde—again, as both practice and critical concept—is dependent upon varying conditions of production, circulation, and reception. In those terms, the question, "What is an avant-garde?" is not the most useful question to ask. Very much like Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's description of "hegemony," I would argue that the avant-garde is "not the majestic unfolding of an identity but the response to a crisis."[27]

Though I'm not against the effort to think about what the avant-garde *is*—I do it all the time and enthusiastically encourage others to do the same—I'm more interested in thinking about how others have asked and answered the question and what that tells us about our own discourses and institutions, which are often implicated in the very crises that catalyze vanguards. How did Baudelaire ask and answer the question? Or Islamic

radicals in the dungeons of Gamal Abdel Nasser? Or socialist poets in the salons of 1920s Mexico City? Or agitprop playwrights in apartheid-era South Africa? Or the artists and audiences of the tent theater movement of 1960s Tokyo? When we sustain the avant-garde as a *question*, when we conceptualize it as a *critical contingency* rather than a *substantive agent*, we open our discourse to a range of agencies, acts, scenes, situations, and purposes—open that discourse to "a critical reassessment of the historical functions of the term *avant-garde* itself."[28]

The Avant-Garde Beyond Art

The avant-garde began as a military strategy. It received one of its most influential formulations from Henri de Saint-Simon, a man concerned at least as much with the avant-gardes of industry and science as with art, and whose disciples carried his ideas not only to art schools but to the leading military, medical, and engineering schools of France and, from there, to France's colonies. The term is as ubiquitous to political history as it is to art, as anyone familiar with the theories of Bakunin, Lenin, Mao, Castro, Debord, et al. is aware. A casual Internet search shows that it is embraced not only by artists and scholars, but by industrial design firms, advertising companies, recording studios, tattoo artists, investment bankers, and a host of others with little obvious concern with art. Yet, despite this rich and suggestive variety of meanings and histories—a true ubiquity—most scholars presume that any answer to the question "What is an avant-garde?" will primarily concern art and aesthetics (understood broadly as the domain of sensibility and representation), even if that answer is grounded in careful historical research, thorough analysis of discursive frameworks, and a meticulously constructed sense of institutionality.

The most obvious reason for this presumption is, I would think, disciplinary. Most of those who study the avant-garde belong to academic departments whose focus is primarily aesthetic objects: literature, visual art, theater, and so on. We like art best, so that's what we write about. And though academics are increasingly open to interdisciplinary approaches, in practice, it is difficult to carry out interdisciplinary research and not always obvious when such work should actually be attempted. But the assumption has roots that run deeper than the contingencies of our likes and dislikes or the organizational structures of universities. I would argue that there is also a problem with the way we think about the "politics of form" and about avant-garde studies itself: its methods, purposes, and possibilities. Three decades ago, Raymond Williams

wondered why "[n]o full social analysis of avant-garde movements has yet [been] undertaken."[29] Essaying such an analysis two decades later, Barrett Watten argues that the "lack of an adequate connection between avant-garde negativity and the larger social logic" in which vanguards and their creations circulate hampers our ability to properly delineate the "politics of form."[30] While such a politics is most apparent in art— and has been best addressed by those who specialize in the analysis of aesthetic objects—Watten asserts that the question of form is not an exclusively artistic question.[31] He writes,

> Avant-garde negativity is quite variously articulated in relation, particularly, to gender and nationality at specific historical moments. There is no "one" avant-garde, defined by the paradigmatic example of the historical avant-garde; a much wider range of cultural politics . . . continues to emerge from social formations that engender formal experiment.

Within a conception of the avant-garde that understands it as articulating a cultural politics within a wide range of social formations, the avant-garde can be approached as a varying, situational articulation of the "politics of form." Such an expanded field enables us not only to bring more subjects into the purview of avant-garde studies, but also allows us to consider the cultural productions of already accepted avant-gardes in more sophisticated fashion.

What would such an expanded field look like? Again, the Black Arts Movement provides a useful case, giving us an opportunity to assess the limits of an art-focused reading of the avant-garde and understand Watten's notion of the "politics of form." In his influential essay "The Black Arts Movement," Larry Neal characterized the BAM as the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept." This sibling relationship was built around the fact that "the Black Arts and the Black Power concepts both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood." [32]

The key issue for Neal is representation, which he understands in both its political and aesthetic sense. He writes, "A main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for black people to define the world in their own terms." To this end, African-Americans must wage a "cultural revolution,"[33] a comprehensive program that would, in the words of one of Neal's comrades, the Revolutionary Action Movement's Robert Williams, "destroy the conditioned white oppressive mores, attitudes, ways, customs, philosophies, habits, etc., which the oppressor has taught and trained us to have." Williams concludes by advocating, "on a mass scale, a new revolutionary culture."[34] This revolutionary culture would certainly be comprised of empowering, incisive, memorable paintings, poems, plays,

and dances. But Neal and Williams's concept of culture is not limited to "high culture" alone.

Consider a cornerstone of that cultural revolution, the affirmation "Black is beautiful!" On the face of it, this would seem to be an aesthetic matter, one best addressed by creating compelling, empowering counterimages to those that would portray the African-American as unvirtuous, undeserving, and inhuman. However, one of the reasons why the affirmation of black beauty resonated so deeply with African Americans was because black abjectivity wasn't only communicated by paintings and poems—indeed, art was only a minor part of the equation. The ubiquitous advertisements for skin lighteners, hair straighteners, and nose narrowers in the back pages of African American publications such as *Ebony* is only one piece of evidence that demonstrates how the ideology of self-hatred was promulgated through a range of psychological, cultural, economic, and social formations. Indeed, as George M. Fredrickson shows, classical conceptions of beauty were integral to the efforts of white Europeans to define a hierarchy of being in order to justify slavery and empire. Victor Courtet de l'Isle, one of the most influential theorists of racism in the 1800s, argued that "the races could be measured through an assessment of how closely the faces of each type approximated the Greek statues of Apollo."[35]

For this reason, black artists who challenged the racism of the mainstream art world had to do more than change art. Though the hegemonic formalism of 1960s art culture in the United States did not depend on magazine ads or Greek statuary to affirm its aesthetic principles, it nevertheless affirmed the neoclassical notion that great art was timeless and humanist. This view was perceived as patent hypocrisy for those on the wrong side of the color line. Black artists understood, as Mary Ellen Lennon writes, that

the aesthetic standards used to judge "great art" long assumed "natural" and "universal"—*everyone knows Shakespeare was a genius*—were fundamentally *subjective* and racist at their core. There was no "raceless" or "universal" experience in America, they argued. . . . Far from being a simple byproduct of white oppression, art and the Euro-American aesthetics used to police the boundaries of "great art" were instead "major tools of black oppression" and indispensable bulwarks for the white American power structure. This "Euro-Western sensibility" denied the black experience.[36]

Thus, black artists, in line with Neal and Williams's encompassing visions of the black revolution, had to take on the "*de facto* segregation of the art world in all its institutionalized forms," including art journals and textbooks, art criticism, curricula, faculty recruitment and retention,

tuition and scholarship structures, and gallery and museum program-
ming.[37] But even this thorough-going institutional engagement was not
sufficient, since the very way that "art" was conceptualized and marketed
by art-world institutions and intellectuals marginalized certain kinds
of cultural producers and cultural products that had always "engaged
the totalizing implications of black beauty." These producers were little
known and now largely unremembered. "Too good to quit," as Lorenzo
Thomas characterized them, these anonymous artists had worked for
decades in quotidian media like sign painting, fashion design, hair style,
cuisine, and street-corner oratory, keeping alive a resistant, empowering,
historically conscious street-level Afrocentric culture. Their very exis-
tence riled the authorities; this "underground of unknown artists . . . .
was purposely denigrated and misrepresented in both black and white
critical media."[38] For these artists, a positive sense of self, community,
and history were inseparable from economic, political, and cultural
independence and empowerment. They gave the movement street-level
credibility and popular energy.

In sum, the Black Arts Movement's attack on racist standards of beauty
demanded a comprehensive—if not totalizing—engagement with white
power, combining representational strategy, media politics, institutional
intervention, discursive recalibration, economic development, and an
altered, consciously "black" practice of everyday life. Within such an
encompassing concept of black beauty, a painting was no more (or less)
significant than a deftly turned barroom toast, a poem than a compel-
ling streetcorner oration, a jazz composition than the sharply turned
brim of a porkpie hat or the syncopated gait of a church-going couple.[39]
And none of these would be relevant if they had not been created and
circulated within a complex, historically grounded, geopolitically ar-
ticulated network of practices that, in Neal's memorable formulation,
would serve as a "bridge between [the creators] and the spirit . . . . an
affirmation of daily life and the necessity of living life with honor."[40]
"The Black Arts Movement," he writes, "believes that your ethics and
your aesthetics are one."[41]

This leads us to an issue that is germane not just to the expansive
politics of form explored by the BAM, but to two basic methodological
questions that arise if avant-garde studies is to embrace a similarly ex-
pansive mode. First, within such an expanded framework, can't virtually
everything, in principle, be considered avant-garde? Do we now equate,
say, demi-fascist Tea Party rallies with Italian futurist *serate*? Experiments
with low-temperature vacuum cooking in a northern Spanish restaurant
with Vsevold Meyerhold's constructivist spectacles? A new fad in body
piercing with the growling cabaret performances of Emmy Hennings?

Yes and no. For it is one thing to claim that something *is* avant-garde, another to approach something *as if* it were avant-garde. The former is an assertion, the latter a step towards critical analysis and careful argument. This distinction between *is* and *as if* is an important one for performance studies, a field that also employs an expansive, situation-oriented methodology, what Richard Schechner calls a "broad spectrum approach."[42] Explaining the difference, he writes, "There are limits to what *is* performance. But just about anything can be studied *as* performance. Something *is* a performance when historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition say it is."[43] This distinct intellectual process can be differentiated from the more speculative process of considering something *as* performance: "What the *as* says is that the object of study will be regarded 'from the perspective of,' 'in terms of,' 'interrogated by' a particular discipline of study."[44] In other words, when pursuing the question "What is an avant-garde?" we can consider in critical fashion both those subjects already recognized as valid by the field of avant-garde studies, but also those that, while not now recognized, are "open" to the established criteria of investigation and criticism.

A similar question faced black activists in the 1960s. While there was general agreement that a cultural revolution had to be based in a comprehensive approach to African and African American culture (that is, anything African and African-American should be considered *as* black), there was spirited argument concerning the validity and value of specific aspects of that culture for the empowerment of African Americans and the waging of the cultural revolution. In other words, there was much argument about what *is* black. The blues, for example, was a widespread object of debate, with one side arguing that it promoted submissiveness (this being the position of Maulana Ron Karenga), the other that it was a mode of historically grounded subversion and radical epistemology (that being Neal's perspective). Reflecting the dynamic tension between the *as* and the *is* of blackness, Kimberly Benston defines it not as something that can be essentialized or abstracted from the situation, but rather a site of "multiple often conflicting implications of possibility."[45] We might usefully characterize the avant-garde in just such a fashion.

A Resistant Answer to the Question, "What Is an Avant-Garde?"

However, if debate over what *is* avant-garde is to be meaningful, we need criteria to guide that debate. Such criteria need to be expansive enough to encompass the "multiple often conflicting implications of

possibility" of the avant-garde's politics of form (that is, to energetically embrace the *as*), but also draw our attention to the need for the kinds of critical self-reflection that I've advocated in this essay. I would suggest three such criteria.

First and fundamentally, the avant-garde *challenges power*. That challenge is as varied as the stratagems and technologies of power itself. Indeed, one of the more noteworthy contributions of the avant-garde is a more sophisticated understanding of how power works, whether it be the mechanical and imaginative power of the internal combustion engine embraced by the futurists or the interpersonal power of the mantra "the personal is political" deployed so effectively by civil rights and feminist activists in the 1960s and '70s. This criterion mandates a situational approach to the avant-garde, since every avant-garde challenges power somewhere, sometime, within a singular conjunction of people, ideas, institutions, discourses, technologies, and things. Further, to understand the challenge, we must attend not only to its situation but our own position within or relative to that situation.

Second, to be avant-garde, one must be a *minority*. This criterion anchors our understandings of the avant-garde firmly to the avant-garde's historical origins in the military, where it designated a small group of soldiers that went in advance of the main body. It also acknowledges the historical contributions of minorities to the avant-garde tradition. Finally, it alerts us to varied forms of institutional interface, since minorities can be vested, as is the political minority in the U.S. Congress. It reflects a sociologically grounded concept of small-group identity. The avant-garde is *different* from the majority—an avant-garde painter paints differently, an avant-garde military group fights differently.

Difference isn't always a choice, of course. The French surrealists, almost all of whom were children of privilege, had the freedom to choose to identify themselves against the majority. The activists of Black Arts Movement had no such choice; as African Americans, mostly poor or working-class, living within a racist society, they were always already a minority. Again, the technocrats who advocated Saint-Simon's model of the avant-garde in the 1840s were graduates of elite French educational institutions and they put the model into practice against subalterns, most notably in Algeria. Avant-gardes can be down-pressed, degraded, subaltern minorities, too, such as the women who run Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya (a women's collective in Chiapas, Mexico) or the queer activists of ACT-UP.[46] Regardless of their specific position vis-à-vis the hegemonies of their societies, vanguards take an *antimajority stance* and, in so doing, gain forms of power, perspective, and productivity that are unavailable to the majority. As with the challenge to power, the criterion of minority

requires careful analysis of the specific situation within which the vanguard is articulated, as minority status is always a differential calculation.

Third, to challenge power from a minoritarian perspective, the avantgarde must work with and within *culture*. Culture is fundamental to modern power and it is medium and lifeblood to the avant-garde, the stuff it shapes, the ethos within which it lives, a site of "multiple often conflicting implications of possibility," the material and context for the avant-garde's politics of form. "Culture," as we know, is as contentious a term as "power" and "minority." Indeed, as Terry Eagleton points out, it is one of the most complex and debated terms in the English language. Eagleton suggests "the complex of values, customs, beliefs, and practices which constitute the way of life of a specific group."[47] As with power, the avant-garde has often been the creator and inspiration of varied kinds of cultural "complexes." Indeed, as I've discussed in detail elsewhere, the avant-garde was one of the crucibles out of which came the very idea of "cultural politics."[48] As with the criteria of power and minority, culture also requires a meticulous calibration of analysis and situation; specifically, we must attend carefully to the ways in which a specific avant-garde defines culture and develops a critical praxis in order to instrumentalize some aspect of culture so as to transform relations of power.

Thus, in response to the question "What is an avant-garde?" and the issues I've raised regarding the field of avant-garde studies, the problems of historiography, and the politics of form, I would suggest the following formulation:

The avant-garde is a minority formation that challenges power in subversive, illegal, or alternative ways; in particular, by challenging the routines, assumptions, hierarchies, and/or legitimacy of cultural institutions.

One virtue of this open-ended answer is that it lets us spread our disciplinary umbrellas wider. The effects of this alternative definition have been apparent in the research writing classes I've taught at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, classes themed around the issues and methods of avant-garde studies. Because they form part of IUP's liberal arts curriculum, I have to be cognizant of the knowledge and goals of students who come from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines. Indeed, my interest in a broadened concept of the avant-garde was very much the child of necessity.

Because these students have little, if any, knowledge of the avant-garde, we spend several weeks learning what "historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition say" the avant-garde is. We read selections from Poggioli and Călinescu, discuss Bürger and De Lauretis, define and apply the three criteria I've described, and engage classic

avant-garde art such as Duchamp's ready-mades, Dalí and Buñuel's *Un chien andalou*, Kurt Schwitters's *Ursonate*, performative texts by Yoko Ono, and protest documents by the Guerrilla Girls. Having familiarized ourselves with the conventions of avant-garde discourse, we then move on to unconventional subject matter; say, the molecular gastronomy of Spanish chef Ferran Adrià and the radical Islamic theology of Sayyid Qutb. I choose these topics because those who write on them regularly deploy the term "avant-garde." In that sense, Adrià and Qutb have already been recognized *as* avant-garde by others. It is the job of my students to analyze this discourse and do the work of deciding whether Adrià or Qutb actually *is* avant-garde. They do so by deploying the three criteria I've suggested: examining the particular methods with which these figures challenge power, how they articulate and animate their difference from the majority, and how they conceptualize and engage "culture." The results of that process and the discussions it informs vary from course to course; indeed, I try to promote such variety, as this kind of open-ended, research-grounded debate prepares my students for their own research projects.

Given the presumption of the class that anything might be considered *as* avant-garde, student projects often go to surprising places. I've read essays about the founder of the Hilton hotel chain, competitive swimming pool design, the rock band Smashing Pumpkins, breast augmentation, Gatorade, and many, many other topics. Frankly, most of these topics don't pan out. While there is an argument to be made about the topics *as* avant-garde, I was left unconvinced that the makers of Gatorade or breast enlargement surgery really are avant-garde. But every semester I receive papers that are entirely convincing, altering the way I think about, for example, bohemian subcultures, education reformer Maria Montessori, right-wing evangelical movements in the United States, or the photographs of Ilse Bing.

The fact is that my ultimate goal is not to be convinced that this or that subject *is* avant-garde. While I want my students to learn how to make a convincing argument, the answer to the question, "Is X avant-garde?" is far less important than the process of asking and answering it. In the end, my students (hopefully) leave my class with a better understanding of the significance of power, minority, and culture in a given situation and the ways that individuals and groups have been able to articulate power, minority, and culture to change the world in some way, small or big. These are good goals for avant-garde studies, too.

Thus I would rather *not* answer the question, "What is an avant-garde?" Or, more precisely, I would prefer to ask that question in a different, resistant fashion. The avant-garde's pluralistic and contingent nature, the complexities of its relationship to institutions, the biases inherent to

academic specialization and social identity, and the limits of theory and historiography in an era of prolonged and unpredictable transformation suggest that any answer to that question is a bad bet.

But I'll continue to ask it. As far as I'm concerned, "What is an avant-garde?" is the most important question those in the field of avant-garde studies can ask.

INDIANA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

NOTES

1   Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New* (New York: Knopf, 1991).
2   Donald Drew Egbert, "The Idea of 'Avant-Garde' in Art and Politics," *American Historical Review* 73, no. 2 (Dec. 1967): 339–66.
3   Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991).
4   Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1991), 4.
5   Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984).
6   See Mike Sell, introduction to *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2005); Sally Banes, "Institutionalizing Avant-Garde Performance: A Hidden History of University Patronage in the United States," in *Contours of the Theatrical Avant-Garde: Performance and Textuality*, ed. James Harding (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2000); Diana Crane, *The Transformation of the Avant-Garde: The New York Art World, 1940–1985* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989); Joan Marter, *Off Limits: Rutgers University and the Avant-Garde, 1957–1963* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1999); and Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, "Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed," *Art History* 4, no. 3 (September 1981): 305–27.
7   On the BAM and academic Black Studies, see Mike Sell, "Don't Forget the Triple Front! Some Historical and Representational Dimensions of the Black Arts Movement in Academia," *African American Review* 42, no. 3–4 (2008): 623–41.
8   RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2001). The original edition of this book was titled *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present*.
9   RoseLee Goldberg, "Performance Anxiety," *Artforum International* 42, no. 8 (2004): 54.
10   James Harding and John Rouse, introduction to *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance*, ed. James Harding and John Rouse (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, 2006), 6.
11   Harding and Rouse, introduction, 7. For further discussion of the limits of the textual model, see Dwight Conquergood, "Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research," *TDR* 46, no. 2 (2002): 145–56; and Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), especially the chapter "Constructing Meaning."
12   Harding and Rouse, introduction, 1–3.
13   See Sell, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism*.
14   Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1969).

15 Thomas Postlewait, *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press: 2009), 74.

16 See Kimberly Jannarone, *Artaud and His Doubles* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan, 2010) and Mike Sell, ed. *Avant-Garde Performance and Material Exchange: Vectors of the Radical* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

17 Wan-Li Chen is exploring these aspects of Kee's work in her dissertation "Politicizing and Pluralizing the Domain of English-Language Literature: Avant-Garde Approaches to Linguistic 'Rough Edges' in Global Drama, Performance, and Literary Canons" (Indiana Univ. of Pennsylvania, forthcoming).

18 James Harding, "From Cutting Edge to Rough Edges: On the Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance," in *Not the Other Avant-Garde*, ed. Harding and Rouse.

19 Amiri Baraka, "Black Dada Nihilismus" in *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (New York: Thunder Mouth's), 71–72.; Amiri Baraka, "The Revolutionary Theatre," *Liberator* (July 1965), 4–6.

20 Ed Bullins, "The So-Called Western Avant-Garde Drama," *Liberator* (July 1967): 16–17.

21 See Sell, "The Black Arts Movement: Performance, Neo-Orality, and the Destruction of the 'White Thing,'" in *African American Performance and Theatre History: A Critical Reader*, ed. Harry Elam, Jr., and David Krasner (Cambridge: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001).

22 Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2000).

23 For discussion of Césaire and Crevel's critique of surrealism, see Suzanne Césaire, "1943: Surrealism and Us," in *Refusal of the Shadow*, ed. Michael Richardson, trans Michael Richardson and Krzysztof Fijalkowski (New York: Verso, 1996); Franklin Rosemont, "Notes on Surrealism as a Revolution Against Whiteness," *Race Traitor* 9 (Summer 1998): 19–29; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2002), 170–71; René Crevel, "The Black Woman in the Brothel," trans. Samuel Beckett, *Race Traitor* 9 (Summer 1998): 61–66; Myrna Bell Rochester, "René Crevel: Surrealist Critic of White Patriarchy," *Race Traitor* 9 (Summer 1998): 55–60; and Sell, *The Avant-Garde: Race Religion War* (Kolkata, India: Seagull Books, forthcoming).

24 Andrea Flores Khalil, *The Arab Avant-Garde: Experiments in North African Art and Literature* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), xxi. See also the discussion of the work of Peter J. Chelkowski, who writes on Iranian culture, in Marvin Carlson's "Avant-Garde Drama in the Middle East," in *Not the Other Avant-Garde*, ed. Harding and Rouse.

25 The literature on "alternative modernities" is large and growing rapidly. See, for a start, the special issue on literary history in the global age edited by Ralph Cohen, *New Literary History* 39, no. 3 (2008); the special issue on global modernism edited by Simon Gikandi, *Modernism/modernity* 13, no. 3 (2006); and *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2001).

26 Richard Schechner, "The Five Avant-Gardes or . . . [and] . . . or None?" in *The Twentieth-Century Performance Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts (New York: Routledge, 2002), 354, 352.

27 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (New York: Verso, 2001), 7.

28 Harding, "From Cutting Edge to Rough Edges," 38.

29 Quoted in Barrett Watten, *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2003), 152.

30 Watten, *The Constructivist Moment*, 155.

31 Watten, *The Constructivist Moment*, 154.

32 Larry Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," in *Visions of a Liberated Future*, ed. Michael Schwartz (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1989), 62.

33 Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 63.

34   Quoted in Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon, 2003), 90. Neal was a member of BAM's Philadelphia section.

35   George M. Fredrickson, *Racism: A Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2003), 67–68.

36   Mary Ellen Lennon, "A Question of Relevancy: New York Museums and the Black Arts Movement, 1968–1971," in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, ed. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Natalie Crawford (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2006), 95.

37   Lennon, "A Question of Relevancy," 93.

38   Lorenzo Thomas, *Extraordinary Measures: Afrocentric Modernism and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: Univ. of Alabama Press, 2000), 137–38.

39   Sell, "The Black Arts Movement," in *African American Performance & Theatre History: A Critical Reader*.

40   Larry Neal, "And Shine Swam On," in *Visions of a Liberated Future*, 16.

41   Neal, "The Black Arts Movement," 64–65.

42   Richard Schechner, "Performance Studies: The Broad Spectrum Approach," *TDR* 32, no. 3 (1988): 4–6.

43   Richard Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 30.

44   Schechner, "Performance Studies", 34–35.

45   Kimberly Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4.

46   For more on the avant-garde as minority, see the chapter on race in Sell, *The Avant-Garde: Race Religion War*.

47   Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 34.

48   For more on the "cultural turn" of the avant-garde, see Sell, "Bohemianism, the 'Cultural Turn' of the Avant-Garde, and Forgetting the Roma," *TDR* 51, no. 2 (2007): 41–59.

Avant-Garde Poetry as Subcultural Practice: Mailer and Di Prima's Hipsters

Benjamin Lee

Tнis essay is about the birth of the cool in postwar U.S. po-
etry. More broadly, it's about how avant-garde movements in the
mid-twentieth century embraced subcultures as active and influ-
ential sites of experimental style and aesthetic practice. As my primary
example, I examine hipsterism in the early writings of Diane di Prima,
particularly those collected in *Dinners and Nightmares* (1961). Like Nor-
man Mailer's writings of the period, to which I compare them, di Prima's
poems and prose sketches represent hipsterism quite self-consciously as
a contemporary vanguard movement. Striving to document the lived,
improvised, and emotionally complicated stances that hipsters fashioned
in response to social contexts and urban stimuli, *Dinners and Nightmares*
provides an especially vivid example of the kinds of subcultural energies
that helped reshape U.S. poetry after World War II.[1] Mailer's writings,
though they assume a different tone and attitude towards collectivity, are
equally invested in the avant-garde vitality of the hipster; they further
underscore the widespread influence that hipness—as an affective stance,
argument about originality, and new fusion of art and life—exerted in
U.S. culture in the 1950s and 1960s. The literature of hipness presses
us to consider all those avant-gardes constituted not simply through
formal experimentation or antibourgeois rhetoric but also by way of
their dynamic engagement with historically specific vernacular styles.
Moreover, as I hope to show, a consideration of di Prima's work requires
us to rethink some of our conventional critical assumptions about the
masculinity of hipness and the gendering of cool.

U.S. experimental poetry after World War II, sometimes called "The
New American Poetry" in tribute to Donald Allen's influential 1960 an-
thology, has often been read as a set of overlapping literary subcultures,
with strong accents placed on the poetic communities that coalesced
in and around New York, San Francisco, and Black Mountain College.[2]
My emphasis here, however, falls not on poets' affiliations with literary
communities but rather on their identifications with specific musical,
sexual, and countercultural groupings.[3] Di Prima's hipsterism stands as

an especially vivid example of the intersection between a subculture and the movement towards "open" form in postwar U.S. poetry, though it's certainly not the only one. One thinks, for example, of Allen Ginsberg's importance to the Beats and to other postwar revivals of bohemia, Amiri Baraka's melding of Beat and Black Mountain concepts with a dedication to experimental style forged among bebop aficionados at Howard University and in the Air Force, or Frank O'Hara's use of campy voicings to invoke queer counterpublics in pre-Stonewall Manhattan.

This version of literary and cultural history, in which subcultures challenge postwar consensus and "open" forms reinvigorate a poetry dulled by New Critical formalism, has been challenged often enough to bear some defending. Such histories have by now inspired skeptical responses from avant-garde theorists and cultural historians, not to mention literary critics stingy about granting decisive breaks or significant innovations to postmodern poets. Peter Bürger, to cite one influential example, finds it misleading to apply the term avant-garde to experimental movements of the 1950s or 1960s; such a gesture, he argues, constitutes just one more melancholy reminder of the historical avant-garde's failed efforts to overcome the separation between art and life in bourgeois society. For once the European avant-garde movements of the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s had, in Bürger's well-known formulation, revealed the central social and ideological underpinnings of the institution of art—dissociated from practical life, individualistic in production and reception, dedicated to an aesthetics of complex organic unity—it was presumably useless to repeat their protests in different places or subsequent historical contexts.[4]

Bürger's dismissals of midcentury avant-gardism are echoed, though with very different conclusions, in Marjorie Perloff's recent attempts to reorient poetry criticism around commonalities between "early modernists" and "a second wave of modernism" embodied in the work of late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century poets loosely affiliated with Language poetry. Like Bürger, Perloff emphasizes art's fundamental transformation by experimental modernism and evinces skepticism about midcentury claims to anything resembling a postmodern break from previous aesthetic forms and ideologies. "[F]rom the hindsight of the twenty-first century," she writes, the "fabled 'opening of the field'" we associate with Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* "was less revolution than restoration: a carrying-on, in somewhat diluted form, of the avant-garde project that had been at the very heart of early modernism."[5] Perloff's narrative effectively discounts a whole series of U.S. experimental poets, from Charles Olson to Sonia Sanchez, not to mention entire decades of avant-garde writing. It tends to reduce all of avant-garde poetics to a singular goal, that of revealing and reveling in

the materiality of language and the radically constructed nature of texts. Though Perloff and Bürger disagree on many things, they are united in their attempt to offer their own forceful and distinctive—but also quite narrow—theory of the avant-garde, one that privileges particular figures, aesthetics, and historical moments and discourages serious consideration of the wide diversity of vanguard cultures.

From yet another skeptical perspective, poets like di Prima, Ginsberg, O'Hara, and Baraka sit just on the cusp of the consolidation of subcultural rebellion as a permanent feature of global capitalism. Rebelling against stodgy academics, cataloging the revolutionary exploits and alternative lifestyles of their generation, celebrating the favorite musicians and fallen divas of their time, these poets captured cultural logics that by now seem unsurprising and ripe for parody. They played their own modest parts in what Thomas Frank describes as "bohemian cultural style's trajectory from adversarial to hegemonic" and "hip's mutation from native language of the alienated to that of advertising."[6]

In response to such criticisms, this essay sets out to recapture hipsterism's initial force as an avant-garde practice and its full complexity as a felt, intellectual response to everyday life. It sees hipsters occupying a central position within a larger dynamism of postwar subcultures hoping to transform or at least comment on the standard shape and schedule of work, sleep, and pleasure in the decades following World War II. I respond to Perloff's characterization of the New American Poetry's significant shift in approach as "less revolution than restoration" by insisting on both the transformative effects of subcultural poetics and the vivid sense among postwar experimental poets that they were indeed returning to—and reimagining—preexisting avant-garde strategies.

Among other things, Perloff's recent arguments ask us to ignore the specifics of the cultural field to which the New American Poets were responding. The same historicizing instinct that leads Perloff to want to recapture the avant-garde force of early T. S. Eliot by placing "Prufrock Among the Edwardians" requires us to consider a poem like "Howl" in the context of 1950s literary assumptions.[7] In an era where an influential, if admittedly misleading, version of Eliotic impersonality and high formalist allusiveness had risen to the level of cliché, Ginsberg's long lines and performative self-revelations must have felt at once profoundly shocking and original, as many commentators have asserted. The same could be said for the improvised camp of O'Hara's "Poem" ("Lana Turner has collapsed!"), or, as I will go on to explore in this essay, the bohemian argotic rhythms of di Prima's *Dinners and Nightmares.*

Meanwhile, corporate America's success in commodifying various forms of minoritized dissent, pleasure, or refusal should not lead us to underestimate the historical importance of these forms, any more than

it should blind us to their experimental qualities. In the particular case at issue here, the rapidity with which the white hipster was parodied in the popular press or made infamous on television should not outweigh hipsterism's initial force as a lived and aesthetically fascinating commentary on many of the central concerns and historical conditions defining U.S. culture in the 1950s and early 1960s.[8]

This essay thus approaches postwar subcultural poetics as one of many potential heirs to the historical avant-garde, whose strategies it reinvents during an era in which the ideology of high art's separation from everyday life had vigorously reasserted itself and mass culture had become even more ubiquitous than in the years surrounding World War I. These strategies include the continual crossing of lines between high and low art, or between lyric abstraction and everyday language, as well as the attachment to objects and architecture rendered shabby or dilapidated by the abrupt pace of commodity culture and constant modernization. Moreover, looking closely at di Prima's poetry allows us to develop a fuller picture not only of the often neglected roles women played in midcentury avant-gardes but also of the gendered inflections of cool. Both champions and critics of cool have portrayed it as an essentially masculine stance, one based on a disdain for sentimental attachments and committed to moving continually through streets, shops, bars, clubs, and crash pads and avoiding the more stable—and inevitably feminized—space of home and nuclear family. This basic profile, and the gendered assumptions it entails, underwrote the failures of early and influential subcultural theorists to consider the roles played by women in the groups they studied; it lives on in critical and theoretical approaches that, as Susan Fraiman argues, make critique, opposition, and originality feel like "masculine" activities while associating oppression, domination, and traditional thinking with women, mothers, and domesticity.[9] And yet cool genealogies that, in returning to postwar culture, placed di Prima next to male literary hipsters like Mailer or Baraka might offer us a different set of possibilities, not to mention a more expansive account of gender and experimental aesthetics.[10] In de Prima's recoding of cool, as with midcentury avant-gardes more generally, we encounter a repetition that is also a difference.

Reading hipsterism in the late 1950s and early 1960s as what one might call an avant-garde "structure of feeling" allows one to emphasize how unmistakably this term depends on "feeling," a word Raymond Williams employs suggestively but never really theorizes in his influential account of the phrase. Williams writes:

We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling

against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in living and interrelating continuity. We are then defining these elements as a "structure": as a set, with specific internal relations, at once interlocking and in tension. Yet we are also defining a social experience which is still in *process*, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis . . . has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies.[11]

Feeling, Williams suggests perceptively, helps give shape and substance to those "characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone" that remain a fundamental part of social experience, though they are often overlooked in favor of fixed and explicit institutions, social formations, and ideologies. It does so, furthermore, both at the moment an experience is in process, "in living and interrelated continuity," and after the fact, as a matter of theory and analysis. Subcultures, as I hope to suggest in my readings of hipsterism in Mailer and di Prima, are related to yet never precisely synonymous with structures of feeling. Critics call upon both terms to describe the continual inventiveness and political charge of style, or to capture the collective improvisations of social groups not yet recognized as such. And yet subcultures tend to contain multiple and even contradictory structures of feeling, as is the case with hipsterism in the late 1950s. One might go so far as to argue that affect becomes a primary point of interest and sign of discord among hipsters, who define themselves through their everyday emotional postures.

* * *

For avant-garde poets and their contemporaries in the 1950s and early 1960s, popular hipster figures like James Dean and Miles Davis captured something larger and more dispersed than the various subcultures and social identities with which these poets identified. Davis and Dean represented a generalized search for stylistic innovation in a culture of conformity, for the invention of a style that would signify not just for an elite group of artists and intellectuals but for anyone on the street hip enough to recognize this new, more popular form of genius. "Alone / in the empty streets of New York / I am its dirty feet and head / and he is dead," O'Hara writes in "For James Dean," an elegiac tribute to Dean's "unnatural vigor" and the "invention of his nerves."[12] "And yet, where would we be without . . . / Bye bye blackbird, as Miles plays it, in the 50's," di Prima asks in "Goodbye Nkrumah," looking back on the postwar hipster from the early 1970s.[13] One could describe Miles's muted tones in "Bye Bye Blackbird"—in which hesitations and slurs are

as expressive as moments of clear, bright sound—as elegant versions of James Dean's weighted silences and mumbled, nonverbal articulations of dissatisfaction and desire in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). Dean and Davis's performances—at once fierce and guarded, brash and distant—embody a contradictory structure of feeling that runs through so many of the modes of hipster rebellion that flourished among the mass-cultural products and mass-marketed poses of the postwar era. There is always something vague about hipness, a fact exemplified quite brilliantly by the album title of Davis's *Birth of the Cool* (1957). The title manages to seem at once apt and mysterious, and to imply the revolutionary, epochal force of Davis's art and personality without defining explicitly the style, state of being, or attitude to which his new postbop ensemble was supposedly giving birth.[14]

No postwar poet rang changes on the affective performance of hip with more dedication than di Prima, whose notorious *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969) offers commentary on the game of "cool" as it defined social and sexual interaction in bohemian New York of the 1950s, and whose early poetry takes both its voice and its subject matter from this same milieu. Her early works are sprinkled with precisely the sorts of slang phrases, unmistakable characters, and distinctive settings that made these new bohemian subcultures so unforgettable and culturally influential. Here are jazz musicians hooked on heroin, roach-infested apartments, injured ballet dancers, painters reading up on Picasso while standing in line at the cafeteria, French lovers and love triangles. Here are lines so succinctly resonant as to explain why Hollywood moved quickly to adopt the beatnik as a standard type: "Shit man I said nearly everybody's bisexual"; "No I said I guess we don't know 31 people who work"; "I like Pollock said Betty."[15]

And yet di Prima's bohemian sketches refuse to be read as one-dimensional or flatly affirmative portrayals of hipsterism. Di Prima chooses rather to mix a genuine faith in the freedoms promised by new bohemian lifestyles with moments of trenchant criticism of her own hip stances and coolly utopian investments. She stands out as both a clever, creative representative of the hipster and a protofeminist critic of hipsterism as embodied in the writings of other postwar artists and commentators. Both her incipient feminism and her hipsterism, furthermore, can be read as other names for her late avant-gardism, an avant-gardism without a specific political program and yet decidedly antibourgeois, dedicated to crashing art into life and to privileging creative processes over the works that result—to doing "what will *not* work / in living / as in poems" (*SP* 65, emphasis added). Her writing can seem unashamedly sloppy, awkward, multigeneric, and inconsistent, set against ideals of formal

precision and careful construction of the poetic artifact and invested instead in the constant and spontaneous record of daily life, thought, conversation, emotion. At their best, di Prima's early writings seem to be hunting down those words, images, and rhetorical occasions that might manage to allegorize a particular affective experience.

In early poems and prose, and particularly in *Dinners and Nightmares*, di Prima reproduces an affective stance with genealogical links to the nineteenth-century dandy, who exhibits what Baudelaire describes as an "unshakeable determination to remain unmoved."[16] Like other mid-twentieth-century hipsters, however, she reconfigures slightly the dandy's stylish, cosmopolitan distance: his technique of remaining emotionally disengaged from the social confusions and endless exchanges of modern urban life by being, or affecting to be, blasé. White hipsters in postwar U.S. cities replace the dandy's aristocratic identifications with a jazz-inspired, racially inflected version of populist elitism that nonetheless serves the same function as the dandy's aristocratic pose. It allows one to protect profound attachments by maintaining an emotional distance from the shocks caused by rivalry and competition with lovers and friends and by the many anonymous confrontations entailed in moving through urban space. Like the dandy, the hipster's overarching need "to combat and destroy triviality" and "to create a personal form of originality" takes precedence over any particular encounter or disappointment. Di Prima's hipster, like Baudelaire's dandy, savors "the pleasure of causing surprise in others, and the proud satisfaction of never showing any oneself."[17] For di Prima in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the potential advantages and particular challenges of playing it "cool," both in print and in person, reside in the general assumption that such play—from the dandy to the hipster, from Mezz Mezzrow to Miles—was largely the province and artistic property of men.

* * *

Case in point: in the late 1950s, no spokesperson for hipsterism was more infamous, at least in New York intellectual circles, than Norman Mailer, whose "White Negro" was first published in *Dissent* in 1957. His six-part essay, subtitled "Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," begins with an overwhelmingly pessimistic evaluation of the historical mood in the shadow of World War II, whose twin spectacles of state-sponsored genocide—by concentration camp and atomic bomb—have wreaked "psychic havoc . . . upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years."[18] Mailer goes on to describe what he identifies as

a new, avant-garde cultural response to a repressive and desperately repressed historical moment: a rebellious, violent, creative, orgasmic, and individualistic response which at once clashes with and substantiates di Prima's hipsterism.

"In such places as Greenwich Village," Mailer famously asserts, "a ménage-à-trois was completed—the bohemian and the juvenile delinquent came face-to-face with the Negro, and the hipster was a fact in American life" (*AM* 340). The Negro, as suggested by Mailer's title, becomes the central figure in this transaction, the "sexual outlaw" (*AM* 348), primitive, and pleasure-seeker whom Mailer invents and then reinterprets by way of his own idiosyncratic combination of existentialism and psychopathic hedonism. These characteristic romanticizations of black masculinity have been critiqued since Mailer's essay first appeared, with a deftness and complexity inaugurated by James Baldwin's initial response, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy." They have been dismissed as racist and then reclaimed (though never quite rehabilitated) as influential articulations of a long tradition of imitation and homosocial attraction, in which white men since the mid-nineteenth century have projected social and sexual fantasies onto black male bodies and styles of performance.[19]

Such responses underscore the extent to which hipness as a vernacular practice was invented within African American communities and then reinvented continually as it was taken up by writers such as Mailer, di Prima, Jack Kerouac, Robert Creeley, and Thomas Pynchon, not to mention white performers from Elvis Presley to the Rolling Stones. White hipsters of the 1950s thus play their part in what Andrew Ross describes as "that long transactional history of white responses to black culture, of black counter-responses, and of further countless and often traceless negotiations, tradings, raids, and compromises."[20] This history is further complicated over the course of the 1960s, as corporations embrace hipness as a marketing strategy and begin to tie advertising campaigns to the newest version of countercultural chic. As hipness attaches itself to a seemingly endless series of cool poses and consumer products, it becomes more and more difficult to remember the moment during which the idea of cool itself seemed like an emergent structure of feeling—"visibly alternative," potentially "oppositional" (*ML* 124), and racially explosive.

"The White Negro" in fact invokes something very close to Williams's "structure of feeling," what Mailer refers to once as "abstract states of feeling" and another time as "the curious community of feeling in the world of the hipster" (*AM* 340, 342). Like Williams, Mailer implies that this structure is only tenuously and imperfectly available to us. As is clear from his general emphasis on "feeling" and his specific emphasis on the psychopathic emotional profile of the hipster, Mailer turns to

affect as one way of approaching this state, structure, or community that he designates "Hip." Another, overlapping, strategy he uses as he attempts to describe this community is that of cataloging—or of simply invoking and repeating—hip slang. As he works to construct his new, instinctively critical, sexually charged identity, he becomes obsessed with "the language of Hip." He seems desperate to own, categorize, and stabilize hip slang, an undertaking that contradicts his emphasis elsewhere on process, growth, and constant movement. "But let us see," writes Mailer tentatively. "I have jotted down perhaps a dozen words, the Hip perhaps most in use and most likely to last with the minimum of variation. The words are man, go, put down, make, beat, cool, swing, with it, crazy, dig, flip, creep, hip, square" (*AM* 349).

All of Mailer's hip vocabulary words appear in di Prima's early writings, along with a number he fails to register, such as "goof," "drag," and "chick." "So here I am the coolest in New York / what don't swing I don't push" (*DN* 119), she writes, giving credence to the idea that, without employing a specific argot, it remains impossible to give expression to the "abstract state of feeling" that is hipness. Cognizant of the African American roots of hipness, di Prima is less invested than Mailer in its continued association with black criminality and seems willing to let it float free and attach itself to white bohemian collectivities. Like Mailer, however, di Prima's early poems start with the assumption that the postwar hipster lives in an atmosphere of generalized institutional oppression and state-enforced conformity. She would have agreed, one suspects, with Mailer's emphasis on "the general anxiety" of living in "a partially totalitarian society" (*AM* 339), though she tends to approach this anxiety with at once a deeper sadness and greater sense of irony. Such is the case with her sequence of thirteen "Nightmares," in which the everyday alienation of dealing with state or corporate bureaucracies (the post office, the unemployment office, the power company, the public health clinic) is presented in dreamlike, mock-paranoid tones. Likewise, the public harassment of various bohemian characters ("people over 21 in dungarees or ancient sneakers, / men with lipstick, / women with crew cuts, / actors out of work, / poets of all descriptions / . . . Junkies and jazz musicians" [*DN* 49]) is dealt with in the self-ironizing form of faux conspiracy theory, allowing di Prima to make her point about state-sanctioned violence while simultaneously implying that she mistrusts or feels slightly detached from her own critique. Di Prima's early poems often revolve around melancholy or cartoonish psychological profiles, and they tend to represent rhetorical and interpersonal exchanges that allow her to outline the hipster's emotional procedures. Like Mailer, she defines hipsterism by way of affect and slang, and yet there are wide

disparities between the ways they imagine and represent the hipster.

Indeed, di Prima's early writings undercut Mailer's hipster mythology more frequently than they reinforce it. Mailer's hipster is inordinately sensitive and ready to respond to the slightest provocation with violence, a readiness for which Mailer provides lengthy justifications. "Hip," he writes, "which would return us to ourselves, at no matter what price in individual violence . . . requires a primitive passion about human nature to believe that individual acts of violence are always to be preferred to the collective violence of the State; it takes literal faith in the creative possibilities of the human being to envisage acts of violence as the catharsis which prepares growth" (*AM* 355). This emphasis on the psychopathic emotional state and immediately violent engagements of the hipster is directly contradicted by di Prima's hipster stance, with its preference for performed indifference and blasé impassivity. Instead of imagining individualized and creative acts of violence as the catharsis necessary for more widespread growth and emancipation, di Prima again and again assumes a pose of disengagement that, paradoxically, allows her to protect and maintain emotional attachments.

While sometimes this disengagement takes the form of exaggerated paranoia, as in the "Nightmare" poems, it can also take the form of a dreamlike, exaggerated revolutionary desire. "The day I kissed you . . . / The UN abolished prisons," she writes in one of her "More or Less Love Poems," "and the Pope / appointed Jean Genet to the College of Cardinals." "The day we made it," she continues, "Pan returned; / Ike gave up golf; / the A&P sold pot" (*SP* 16). In this and similar moments in her early work, ironic humor is deployed in support of a deeply felt but vulnerable devotion to utopic longing. Di Prima's insistence on including dreamy and comedic elements in her poems expands the hipster's aesthetic and emotional procedures along lines set forth by the surrealists, for whom, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, nonliterary genres ("demonstrations, watchwords, documents, bluffs, forgeries") provided illuminating textual models, and for whom "the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away."[21] Yet di Prima's integration of longings and fantasies into her writing never imply a confidence in either revolutionary transformation or the immediate success of impassioned action. While Mailer's hipster strives for total revolt and liberation and favors direct, immediate, and violent expressions of frustration and desire, di Prima's hipster operates at a slight but perceptible distance from emotional events and urban stimuli that seem potentially debilitating, even when those events and stimuli promise something like joy, sexual pleasure, or hope. Among the potentially debilitating events di Prima evokes in her early writing are the disappointed dreams of a love that

once felt like social transformation, the state-sponsored acts of violence that Mailer despises, and the individual acts of violence he celebrates.

* * *

A violent and potentially debilitating event comes immediately into focus in di Prima's "The Poet," which appeared first in *Dinners and Nightmares* and was republished soon after in *The Moderns* (1963), Baraka's decidedly hip anthology of new experimental prose. In clipped, conversational textures, "The Poet" sketches a brief scene in which a male poet pressures di Prima's female narrator to endorse his stated commitments to love and empathy while they stand together, "watching this cat beat up his chick in the street" (*DN* 76). Creating an abrupt, back-and-forth structure that juxtaposes the poet's impassioned address with the narrator's passive responses, di Prima's sketch undermines the poet's creative ideology and lazy idealism. Throughout the piece, he reiterates his devotion to the emotional labor of being sad—and of loving and weeping for "the lost children"—while never once commenting upon (much less intervening in) the scene of violence he witnesses. But what good, the narrator seems to suggest, are vague gestures towards "the lost children" in response to domestic abuse as it spills out onto the streets? More broadly, what use is old-fashioned sincerity when the constant shock and confrontation of urban life threatens to destroy our receptiveness to the world around us? With a hipness suggested by her vocabulary, the narrator meets the male poet's active statements and insistence that she accede to his emotional posture with passive resistance, responding to his prodding with "sure man" and "great," and breaking away from their conversation in order to narrate the street scene that plays out over the course of their exchange.

While di Prima's representation of physical abuse in "The Poet," in its seeming pointlessness and misogyny, can thus be read as an indirect critique of Mailer's psychopath, there is more at stake here than being for or against individual acts of violence. In this bohemian sketch, as in other early works, di Prima seems to offer something like a different representational approach to the mundane yet sometimes violent shocks of urban experience. For Mailer, the experience of living in a modern, technologically mediated, partially totalitarian society feels violent in a way that invites immediate passion and active participation. Violence in *Dinners and Nightmares*, on the other hand, is both less predictable and more difficult to respond to directly. It tends to be threatened but then deferred indefinitely, or, if it does happen, to be witnessed passively

and at an emotional remove. Further, even while embracing irony and emotional detachment, di Prima's hipster seems somewhat self-critical in "The Poet" and unsettled by her own practice of disengagement. As "the fuzz . . . pull[s] up to dig the scene" (*DN* 77), the quasi-hip detachment of the police officers and the crowd starts to suggest a critique of disengagement, a critique that touches the speaker herself, who seems to identify with the assaulted chick and yet does nothing to help her.

Such complications recur throughout *Dinners and Nightmares*, in which characters and poetic speakers perform myriad versions of cool or "uncool." Taken together, these performances might be said to constitute what Williams describes as "thought as felt and feeling as thought: practical consciousness of a present kind, in living and interrelated continuity." Speakers comment incisively on "the affective elements" of their "consciousness and relationships," on those shared elements of style and philosophy that draw them together, and on the larger historical conditions shaping their choices (*ML* 132). Sketch after bohemian sketch in *Dinners and Nightmares* represents something like felt reflection on a city full of opportunities for sex and friendship, the gift of cheap apartments and enough sporadic employment to scrape by on rent and food, the frequent shocks of violent confrontation or romantic disappointment, and the ubiquitous spur and confusion of a world in which art and experience are increasingly mediated by technology (the record player, the telephone, the movie projector). Di Prima's poems and prose are shot through with a sense of collectivity, combined with the understanding that the "structures of feeling" shared here are still in process, tense and contradictory, just barely taking on the aspects of a social formation.[22]

As she has outlined in her memoirs, di Prima's early work recalls a midfifties moment just before white, bohemian hipness was articulated publicly in texts such as Mailer's "White Negro" and Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956). "As far as we knew," she writes about the months before Ginsberg's poem appeared in print, "there were only a small handful of us—perhaps forty or fifty in the city—who knew what we knew: who raced about in Levis and work shirts, made art, smoked dope, dug the new jazz, and spoke a bastardization of the black argot. We surmised that there might be another fifty living in San Francisco, and perhaps a hundred more scattered throughout the country." The vanguard collectivity di Prima describes is distinguished by its shared style of dress, language, and social practices. Central to these practices is the shared intellectual work of defining a "cool" stance towards the dominant culture, that "terrifying indifference and sentimentality" that surrounds them.[23] This work remains a process rather than a task that one might complete, a practice

of charged but nonviolent conflict and of ironic reversals. Characters in *Dinners and Nightmares* willing to describe themselves as "uncool" are invariably much cooler than those who perform hipness too aggressively, and who thus reveal themselves as misunderstanding the specific tones and forms of restraint that, for di Prima and others, insinuate hipsterism as a collective style.

These tones are captured brilliantly in "A Couple of Weekends," the final prose piece in later editions of *Dinners and Nightmares*.[24] "A Couple of Weekends" represents a milieu that Mailer too will plumb a few years later in *An American Dream* (1964). Both texts portray late-night intersections between writers, gangsters, drug users, jazz musicians, and minor celebrities; both create narrative momentum by way of sexual tensions and the threat of violence, though di Prima avoids Mailer's infatuation with the most extreme and sensational plot elements.[25] Indeed, violence never erupts in "A Couple of Weekends," a fact that, as I have already suggested, is not inconsistent with hipsterism as di Prima imagines it. Being "cool" here, as elsewhere in *Dinners and Nightmares*, implies an awareness of harm and harassment as a constant threat, yet it depends equally on one's capacity to live with this threat without losing interest or responding with violent acts of one's own. In this sense, hipsterism for di Prima remains an art of suspension and passive resistance, of refusing indifference without succumbing to sentimentality. Less obviously in "A Couple of Weekends," the structure of feeling di Prima's narrator occupies entails a wary, quizzical relationship to new technologies and discourses of publicity.

All this is suggested in the story's opening paragraph, which reads as follows (eschewing capitalization): "we were working for some kind of publicity man, when somebody asked us if we wanted to go to a jam session. actually, i was the one who was working, lynn olsen just sat on the couch and knitted afghan squares. she sat with her legs crossed and her toes sticking out of her sneakers, and we both looked very tough and inseparable and nobody ever asked me what she was doing there" (*DN* 154). These three casual sentences capture the tone and central themes of the sixteen paragraphs to follow. Among other things, they address the exciting and vaguely sinister qualities of publicity, the bohemian ambivalence about working for a living, and the need to perform toughness as a means of masking vulnerability. The narrator is working for "some kind of publicity man," and the curious details that emerge about this employer and his home office are as engaging as anything in the story.[26] "[H]e stayed in bed a lot," di Prima's narrator tells us, "while all his guests got drunk, and listened to them over the rigged intercom system" (*DN* 155). The intercom—still a relatively new term and suddenly

a widespread technology in the early 1960s—is used along with "pocket wire recorders" to record the conversations of guests to the apartment in order to blackmail them for money or favors.[27] Later in the story, there is suddenly "too much traffic with wire recorders back and forth to some private detective's office," a technological bad omen that leads the narrator to decide to quit her job and hang out elsewhere. The "investor types and the showgirls" who once frequented the home office now are outnumbered by "gangster types," whose "menacing" attitude helps explain the "very tough and inseparable" demeanor that the narrator and her friend and lover, Lynn Olsen, have assumed from the outset (*DN* 156). "A Couple of Weekends" thus extends di Prima's meditations on mundane decisions and practices, and on the attitudes one assumes in order to avoid serious confrontation while retaining one's enthusiasm for moving through the streets, going to work, and spending time with lovers. All of these activities make art possible for the hipster-poet, just as they become art's primary subject matter.

But "A Couple of Weekends" is also about the jam session the narrator and her partner are invited to in the story's first sentence, and about the little world of unpublicized scenes and vanguardist practices that, like hipster slang, help produce and consolidate a sense of shared subcultural belonging:

when we got to the session it was friday night and nobody was playing. they had all stopped to drink and I think to turn on but they did that someplace else and didn't invite us. after a while they started and it was like all young white jazz of the early fifties with just the trappings of bebop and nothing happened. but we liked being there, and watching the people, and we sat and listened or talked and drank tumblers of gin. when it got to be light some people went to sleep. we went to sleep around noon on saturday and when we got up there was still the music. a girl had come who sang and she was singing, and there was a new guy playing alto sax. (*DN* 156)

There are resonances in this scene of so many studies of subcultures and their emphasis on extended evenings and weekends, on living, as Dick Hebdige writes of British mods, "in the pockets of free time which alone made work meaningful."[28] The narrator and her partner arrive on Friday night and slip into a seemingly different temporality, affected by drug use (heroin for the musicians and alcohol all around), lack of sleep, and extended attention to the music and its many lulls and shifts in mood or quality, which are in turn affected by changes in personnel—the girl who starts singing, for instance, or the "new guy playing alto sax." They have also slipped into a different model of publicity, joining a romanticized counterpublic sphere advertised only by word of

mouth and special invitation. Indeed, even more finely differentiated levels of invitation are at issue here: the narrator and her partner have been invited to the session, for instance, but not to "turn on" with the musicians.

By way of intentional subtlety and restraint—hipsterism at the level of narrative tone and technique—"A Couple of Weekends" circles around the sexual politics of "the sessions" and the melancholy drift of the characters we meet there. Repetitions at the beginning of paragraphs create an understated narrative arc, a sense of time passing and characters drifting together and apart with great feeling but without much fanfare: "we went to a lot of sessions and sometimes they showed up"; "we went to a lot of sessions and then we stopped"; "one day i heard of a session somewhere and i went" (*DN* 156, 158). New characters are introduced—the girl singing, the new guy on saxophone, the drummer—who form a love triangle that parallels the narrator's own tense involvement with Lynn and Cliff Callanan. A complicated yet never spectacular love story emerges from di Prima's sketch of a particular milieu, one which culminates not with the ultimate confrontations with death and courage that conclude Mailer's *An American Dream,* but rather with a final, melancholy coupling after the last session. With Lynn suddenly absent, the narrator attends a final session alone, after which she makes love with the young saxophonist on the floor of the loft he once shared with the singer.

* * *

Mailer and di Prima both embrace hipsterism and situate themselves within the same bohemian subcultures: bisexual, interracial, resistant, dedicated to social and artistic experimentation. Yet their structures of feeling are not just different but are in fact strongly contradictory. Mailer's vision of hipness is immediately active, reactive, rebellious, and violent. Di Prima's hipster draws back rather than reacting immediately, responds to both violence and pleasure with detachment, and expresses both rebellion and critique ironically. Mailer's individualized, violent resistance immediately seems self-indulgent (personally aggressive rather than collectively ambitious), while di Prima's attempts to stay engaged through blasé disengagement seem to be more about survival (the survival of emotional attachments, the survival of utopic longing, the survival of direct abuse) than they are about social transformation.

One might also suggest that di Prima approaches hipsterism as both a structure of feeling and a resulting subculture, whereas Mailer works to

characterize the structure of feeling without caring so much about the specific collectivities it might produce. Though his version of cool begins with a set of subgroups (racial, criminal, and musical, for instance) it moves quickly to delineate an existential conundrum that everyone will face and most will fail to master. "One is Hip or one is Square," Mailer writes, "(the alternative which each new generation coming into American life is beginning to feel), one is a rebel or one conforms, one is a frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life, or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society, doomed willy-nilly to conform if one is to succeed." "No matter what its horrors," he adds, "the twentieth century is a vastly exciting century for its tendency is to reduce all of life to its ultimate alternatives" (*AM* 339, 357). Di Prima, on the other hand, resists Mailer's turn towards individualism and "ultimate alternatives"; she remains in the realm of everyday social life and continually invested in collectivity. Her approach manages to chart more intimately than Mailer's the beginnings of a shared, neobohemian approach to life and art, focused on illuminating the everyday and maintaining open and insistently creative attachments in a world full of rigged intercoms, sporadic violence, and coercive ideology.

The usefulness of the idea of structures of feeling as I've deployed it here is quite different from that of other recent theories of affect, which sometimes refer to Williams's term as suggestive but of little help for the task of theorizing specific emotions. "Williams is not analyzing emotion or affect," as Sianne Ngai puts it, "but, rather, strategically mobilizing an entire register of felt phenomena in order to expand the existing domain . . . of social critique."[29] It's precisely the looseness of Williams's term that has allowed it to be so useful, in that it suggests the emotional contours of social postures without providing an extended theory of affect. To the extent that di Prima represents hipness as a structure of feeling rather than a specific subculture, she never presents it as an emotion per se, but rather as a specific modulation of strong feeling. Hipness anticipates and reacts to the potentially powerful emotional reactions—of desire, disappointment, discomfort, intense annoyance—that might emerge from a specific encounter. In managing such feelings, di Prima renders identifiable a strategy and structure, a recognizable pattern and vernacular philosophy of "impulse" and "restraint," a specific disposition.

As I've tried to suggest, to invoke di Prima's hipsterism is to invoke all at once an historically specific subculture, a structure of feeling, and an aesthetic approach to everyday life. Her hipsterism reinvents for the postwar moment a set of long-standing avant-garde strategies for living with and representing the constant shocks and stimuli of the urban environment in an era of mass publics and commodification. My argu-

ments thus underscore the claim, well articulated within other debates but well worth repeating in the context of postwar American poetry, that subcultural poses and struggles over vernacular style have long been central to the story of the avant-garde. "Dadaism was an ancestral vein of cool," Peter Schjeldahl proposes in a recent review of MoMA's Dada exhibit, a proposal I have tried to revisit from the other direction, reading hipsters as descendants of Baudelaire's dandy and emphasizing their tendency to adopt and revamp avant-garde strategies for making and publicizing new art.[30] Subcultures and structures of feeling were, from the outset, vital aspects of the historical avant-garde's projection of a politics of aesthetic resistance into the sphere of everyday life, dress, speech, and bodily movement. This was, after all, one of the primary goals of the "historical avant-garde," which attempted to merge art and life and thus refuse the bourgeois insistence that art occupied a separate sphere. Subcultural practice, represented in this case by the hipster's devotion to reimagining everyday life as the primary locus for aesthetic, creative, stylistic activity, could well be described as the predominant avant-garde gesture of the postwar moment.

It is not surprising, then, that U.S. avant-garde writing in the 1950s and 1960s was significantly transformed by its engagements with sub-cultures, and by the vernacular practices (hipness and camp foremost among them) these subcultures generated, precisely as a way of making creative sense out of a mass culture that would soon begin to use them for its own ends. It is perhaps also unsurprising that influential accounts of the twentieth-century avant-garde have so frequently overlooked or undervalued these subcultures, along with the poems, prose, and theat-rical works they energized. Such texts and experimental practices tend not to fit neatly into avant-garde theories dedicated to imagining clean breaks with bourgeois ideology, or to documenting a single, coherent, avant-garde ethos. They speak instead of everyday vanguard cultures, all wrapped up in the messy details of particular times and places and willing to improvise—even to celebrate—their own awkward fusions of art and life, thought and feeling, good taste and bad.

<div align="right">UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE</div>

NOTES

1   Recent essays on di Prima include Timothy Gray, "The Place Where Your Nature Meets Mine: Diane di Prima in the West," in Timothy Gray, *Urban Pastoral: Natural Currents in the New York School* (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 2010), 151–74; and Anthony Libby, "Diane di Prima: "Nothing Is Lost; It Shines In Our Eyes," in *Girls Who Wore Black: Women Writing the Beat Generation*, ed. Ronna C. Johnson and Nancy M. Grace (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 2002), 45–68.
2   Part of the influence of Allen's anthology stems from its introduction of poetic and geographical groupings—Black Mountain, the San Francisco Renaissance, the Beats, and the New York School—that continue to orient discussions of postwar American poetry. Donald Allen, *The New American Poetry, 1945–1960* (1960; Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1999). Subsequent investigations of poetic communities on the East and West Coasts have complicated and added depth and detail to Allen's original categories, while also underscoring the historical importance of New York and San Francisco as places where poetic communities, at once practical and imaginary, were grounded. See, for instance, Andrew Epstein, *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006); Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989); Daniel Kane, *All Poets Welcome: The Lower East Side Poetry Scene in the 1960s* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2003); Timothy Gray, *Gary Snyder and the Pacific Rim: Creating Counter-Cultural Community* (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 2006); Johnson and Grace, *Girls Who Wore Black*; Libbie Rifkin, *Career Moves: Olson, Creeley, Zukofsky, Berrigan, and the American Avant-Garde* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2000); and Lytle Shaw, *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* (Iowa City: Univ. of Iowa Press, 2006).
3   Critics both invested in and skeptical of youth subcultures' subversive potential seem to agree that their rise helps mark and define the cultural upheaval we associate with the 1960s. See, for instance, Dick Hebdige's still influential *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Methuen, 1979) and Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997).
4   Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984), 57–59 and elsewhere.
5   Marjorie Perloff, *21ˢᵗ-Century Modernism: The "New" Poetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 2–3, 5.
6   Frank, *The Conquest of Cool*, 8.
7   See Perloff's "Avant-Garde Eliot," the opening essay of *21ˢᵗ-Century Modernism*, especially pages 14–28. Perloff has of course read Ginsberg quite brilliantly in cultural and literary-historical context; see, for example, "A Lion in Our Living Room: Reading Allen Ginsberg in the Eighties," *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1990), 199–230.
8   These concerns and historical conditions include debates over the extent and effects of American affluence, racial tensions and aspirations, threats of violence and calls for nonviolence, the continued expansion of consumer culture, and anxieties over new forms of social conformity. Andrew Ross's "Hip, and the Long Front of Color," from *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 65–101, remains an essential introduction to the cultural politics of hipness. Scott Saul's *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't: Jazz and the Making of the Sixties* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 29–96, updates and expands previous discussions of hipsterism as vernacular art form and cultural strategy. Howard Brick's *Age of Contradiction: American Thought and Culture in the 1960s* (1998; Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2000) offers cogent discussion of U.S. cultural and intellectual history leading up to and throughout the 1960s.
9   Susan Fraiman, *Cool Men and the Second Sex* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003). For early, influential critiques of the masculinist blind spots of subcultural theory, see

the essays collected in Angela McRobbie's *Feminism and Youth Culture* (1991; New York: Routledge, 2000).

10 A more complex and expansive account of experimental aesthetics in relation to gender and postwar culture has, of course, already begun to be written. See, for example, Michael Davidson, *Guys Like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2004) and Lynn Keller, "'Just one of/the girls:—/normal in the extreme': Experimentalists-To-Be Starting Out in the 1960s," *differences*, 12, no. 2 (2001): 47–69.

11 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977), 132 (hereafter cited as *ML*).

12 Frank O'Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O'Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (1971; Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1995), 228–29.

13 Diane di Prima, *Selected Poems 1956–1975* (Plainfield, VT: North Atlantic Books, 1975), 153 (hereafter cited as *SP*).

14 Scott Saul's juxtaposition of the different versions of "cool" exemplified in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Miles Davis's *Birth of the Cool* is illuminating; see Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't*, 55–60.

15 Diane di Prima, *Dinners and Nightmares*, (1961; San Francisco: Last Gasp, 1998) 93, 66, 68 (hereafter cited as *DN*).

16 Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, trans. P. E. Charvet (1972; New York: Penguin, 1992), 422.

17 Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life," 420–21.

18 Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), 338 (hereafter cited as *AM*).

19 Saul nicely summarizes reactions to Mailer's essay by a range of artists and intellectuals, including James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, and Lorraine Hansberry; see Saul, *Freedom Is, Freedom Ain't*, 67–72. Eric Lott's *Love and Theft: Black Face Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1993) helped consolidate our understanding of the deep tradition of racial fascination behind twentieth-century performances by "white negroes" from Mailer to Mick Jagger.

20 Ross, *No Respect*, 67.

21 Benjamin, *Reflections*, 178, 179.

22 The fact that these hipsters lack institutions of their own (bookstores, theaters, or nightclubs, for instance) does not mean that there were not institutions—from the Museum of Modern Art to the Art Student's League Institute—that provided important support for di Prima's bohemian cohort. See, for instance, di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969; New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 143–45.

23 Di Prima, *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, 175; also quoted in *Recollections of My Life as a Woman* (New York: Penguin, 2002), 135.

24 "A Couple of Weekends" is dated 1961 but was first published in the expanded edition of *Dinners and Nightmares*.

25 These include but are not limited to murder, incest, interracial conflict as embodied in the narrator's romantic rivalry and bloody fight with Harlem jazz singer Shago Martin, and the narrator's demonstration of courage in a death-defying walk around a parapet high above Park Avenue. Norman Mailer, *An American Dream* (New York: Henry Holt, 1964).

26 Called "Johnnie" in "A Couple of Weekends," the same character is referred to in *Memoirs of a Beatnik* as "a public relations man named Ray Clarke" (154); the three jazz musicians from the jam session also appear in *Memoirs*, 159–61.

27 Merriam-Webster dictionaries date the shortening of "intercommunication system" to "intercom" at 1940.

28 Hebdige, *Subculture*, 53.

29 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), 360, n. 28. For other recent discussion of "structure of feeling," both as Williams originally intended it and as it's come to be understood, see Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2008), 24–27; and Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 10–14.
30 Peter Schjeldahl, "Young at Heart: Dada at MOMA," *The New Yorker*, June 26, 2006, 85. Schjeldahl suggests perceptively that Dadaism now strikes viewers less as an identifiable style than as a way of performing publicly (and thus publicizing) a new relationship to art, one shared by a group of insiders. Celebrating the work of these insiders, one heralds the arrival of a new movement.

Moments and Temporalities of the Avant-Garde "in, of, and from the feminine"

Griselda Pollock

WHY HAS MODERNIST CULTURE BEEN so unable imaginatively to integrate women's creativity into its narratives of creative radicalism, innovation, dissidence, or transgression? Women are generally missing from conventional stories of the avant-garde. In the recently published landmark volume, *Modern Women*, MoMA curators and invited contributors have finally produced a monument to the design, theater, film, photography, graphic arts, architecture, painting, sculpture, and contemporary media forms created by radical modernist women, drawn from the collections of the Museum of Modern Art.[1] In my introductory essay, I point to two paradoxes. One was the institutionalization of avant-garde practices as the curated culture of the modern through musealization itself. The other was that this process was so retrograde, and so antimodern in its outright sexism. "Gender trouble"—to borrow Judith Butler's now famous phrasing—must be acknowledged as one of the central symptoms and neuralgic points of modernity itself. Yet the initial institutionalization of modernism not only failed to acknowledge the centrality of gender to both modernity and its modernisms; it actively fabricated a monogendered, selective narrative of modern art, even in the living presence of the women who defined their moment of modernity through their massive participation in all areas of culture. While personally acquainted with many of these women artists, museum curators and art historians produced a heroic and exclusively masculine legend of the avant-garde that is only being rectified institutionally in 2010.[2]

I want to propose that, in losing an understanding so finely explored by Clement Greenberg himself in one of the founding American theoretical analyses of the avant-garde, of the avant-garde as a structural position placing itself aesthetically at a distance from the very bourgeois society on which it, nonetheless, depended economically, the curators of the modern museum could also make no sense of the place or meaning of women, or of the radicality of sexual difference, in the avant-garde.[3] In other words, the fate of the avant-garde and the fate of women as artists

can now be seen to be closely connected. My real question, therefore, is structural: how is "the feminine" implicated in the avant-garde at the level of both theory and practice?

In this essay, I shall examine this question from two perspectives. Challenging the linear temporality associated with the avant-garde as the progressive as well as transgressive agency of modernist culture, I suggest there were diverse and discontinuous avant-garde *moments* at which the defining collision of social and aesthetic radicalisms occurred. While women generally participated in canonical avant-garde moments, there were also some more specific moments particularly attentive to gender and sexual difference. One of these arose in the encounter between feminism and art circa 1970, which must be understood as a distinctive political moment in a long history of feminism—when it addressed the politics of the body—intersecting with a radical moment in art's modernist histories.

I then take this rewriting of avant-garde moments in two directions.

In the company of several contemporary sociologists, Zygmunt Bauman contests the thesis advanced by Fredric Jameson and other Marxists that postmodernity is a new phase in late capitalism, in succession to, and a displacement of, modernity. Arguing instead that modernity has entered into a self-reflexive phase, in which its contradictions are being played out, Bauman names the currently destabilized and shifting conditions of contemporary globalizing consumer culture *liquid modernity*.[4] Liquid modernity exhibits a different logic from the solid-melted-resolidified phase of modernity's nineteenth-century emergence, which was characterized by revolutionary interruptions and consolidated new states or forms of government, in which the modern opposed itself to the traditional with the progress-oriented aim of replacement. Vanguardism was a symptom of modernity's faith in social engineering directed towards a permanent destiny, even while several stages might be needed. Remember the originating formulation of the idea of the artist as avant-gardist lay in utopian political theory as announced by Henri de Saint-Simon at the end of his life.[5] No longer fueled by a (contested) progressive destiny, liquid modernity now modernizes for its own sake, that is, changes merely for the sake of changing, powered by the raw logic of commodification and consumption. Liquefying modernity erodes the solid ground (tradition or dominant political or cultural forms) against which progressive avant-garde transgression alone made sense. In the internally destabilized changefulness of the conditions of liquid modernity, any understanding of avant-garde transgression and its specific gender politics as represented by the latter's encounter with feminism shifts to uncertain ground.

Facing this dilemma, I revisit Julia Kristeva's conjoining of historical-materialist and semiotic-psychoanalytical theories of the literary avant-garde. By bridging socioeconomic and psychosymbolic levels, Kristeva argued that an avant-garde first emerged in the later nineteenth century to challenge the historically specific articulation in bourgeois society of economic, social, and symbolic forces. As an effect of the bourgeois triangulation of state, family, and religion—linking modes of production, reproduction, and symbolic production—gender/sexual difference emerged as a central question in avant-gardism, in the form of a psychosymbolic and metaphorical engagement with "the feminine" and specifically the maternal as the site of a creativity/generativity emancipating itself from the logic and discipline of patriarchal, familial, capitalist production. This "feminine" is not synonymous with socially existing women, and as such, the symbolic negativity of "the feminine" (opposing itself to the phallocentric Symbolic and patriarchal law) was, according to Kristeva, appropriated by men as much as by women as a basis for a positional self-definition as avant-gardists. Yet, while the masculine artist could distance himself from bourgeois culture in the fiction of autogenesis through hysterical identification with/appropriation of the maternal-feminine, which was then folded into the creative masculine bachelor-subject, women artists had to negotiate the mythic artist-mother fantasy in relation to an all too concrete, socially authorized notion of woman-mother. This psychopositional difference between the son-mother and the daughter-mother plays through the complex politics of gender and sexual difference in both avant-garde practice and its playful identities (Marcel Duchamp comes to mind) and avant-garde socialities which were often marked by sexist, misogynist contradictions (André Breton's surrealist circle comes to mind). The social dislocation of women in bourgeois society—having to escape from its novel forms of social confinement and intellectual impoverishment—also accounts for the temporal disjuncture of the belated emergence of a "feminist" avant-garde moment (1920s/1970s).

Challenging American and French equal-rights feminism (women seeking to belong within the bourgeois state) in 1977, Kristeva elaborated a thesis on "Women's Time." She distinguished the linear time of national histories, modes of production, and emancipatory politics (a temporality within which we can place most notions of the avant-garde in general) from monumental time. The latter is the time of sexual difference and modes of reproduction (rather than production) expressed in terms such as patriarchy or phallocentrism that, therefore, impinge on symbolic production, on subjectivity, and on what she names *aesthetic practices*.[6] Kristeva adds a cyclical time associated with, and often metaphorically

represented by, the cycles of female reproductive fertility without be-
ing bound to their actuality. Cyclical, repeating time (associated with
afterwardness, memory, repetition) in turn qualifies the usual idea of
revolution, theorized as a rupture in linear historical time, by remind-
ing us that it shares an etymology with the idea of revolving—of planets
and tides, patterns of life and death, the time of species rather than
political being. Thus Kristeva posits a counterpoint between sequence/
language (linear) and repetition/body (monumental/cyclical) to stage
a profound and long-lasting cultural drama with sexual difference and
sexuality at its heart that emerged into historico-symbolic significance
at the moment of the first historical avant-garde that challenged state,
family, and religion in bourgeois society, placing gender symbolically on
its agenda at the same time as bourgeois society placed specific obstacles
in the path of thinkers/artists/writers who were *women.*

For Kristeva, religion functions as the socially permitted space for what
is excessive to socioeconomic production, namely the body, pain, and
pleasure. Religion has been—notably in the Catholic Marian imagery that
once dominated the Western imagination and its visual cultures—one
of two sites of discourse on the maternal-feminine; the other is science.
The avant-garde not only challenged bourgeois ideologies binding state,
politics, family, and gender; it also competed with religion for that excess
to the sociosymbolic order that touches materiality, corporeality, and the
genesis of symbolic forms. Avant-garde practices thus focus on sexuality
and play aesthetically with various media's own materialities. It is in this
Kristevan perspective that we can read the emergence of a delayed *femi-
nist avant-garde moment* in the 1970s marked by a conceptual, cinematic,
literary, and artistic attention to the maternal-feminine.

Not only has the emergence of the *liquid* phase of *modernity* deprived
avant-gardist transgression of its opposing, solid ground, but another
dimension of modernity has substantially and historically disabled it in
a different and unforeseeable way, introducing yet another temporality:
traumatic time. I am referring here to the catastrophic rupture at the
heart of the twentieth century, whose long-term and traumatic effects
have only been belatedly registered in culture.[7] That the Holocaust
be understood within the logic of modernity is another of Zygmunt
Bauman's major sociological revisions. "Auschwitz," the egregious and
negative (in the photographic sense) face of modernity—can also be
read as the most conservative, homophobic, and antifeminist assault on
the radical political deconstructive values of the avant-garde as Kristeva
had defined it. "Auschwitz" has also changed the conditions of aesthetic
practices, an effect we are belatedly acknowledging. That delay is the
mark of trauma, and explains our current cultural attention to what we
can name the oxymoron of "traumatic time." Trauma both is without

time, being unrecognized by its subject whom it haunts relentlessly, and is typified by a structure of delay, belatedness, and displaced return.[8] Trauma necessitates a different concept of time akin to the monumental/cyclical. It also, however, demands ethical responsibility that, I shall suggest, queries the ethics of a certain masculinist mode of destructive, Oedipal transgression associated with an avant-gardism, which, in the face of such massive twentieth-century and contemporary trauma, risks becoming merely parodic.

I shall attempt to show how, in seeking ways to understand a differentiating history of a nonheroic avant-garde "in, of, and from the feminine," we retrieve an important legacy from the rereading of modernist avant-garde moments, and from drawing into visibility once again the deeper structural effects of the historical avant-gardes with regard to the "passions of life, death, ethics and narcissism." My argument weaves historical materialism, psychoanalysis, and feminist theories of aesthetics and sexual difference, contesting the rapid shifts in intellectual fashion typical of liquid modernity that are seeping into the academy and leading to premature abandonment of certain intellectual-political projects. For all the dangers and complexities of thinking about "the feminine" in any form at all, and certainly now, when high feminist theories of sexual difference are apparently so *démodé*, I shall hope to show how this troubled and troubling concept is still historically significant and theoretically relevant to rethinking the avant-garde.

Theoretical Moves

I first worked on the avant-garde in 1980 in collaboration with Fred Orton when, as rookie social historians of art, we took on the official modernist versions of the history of art to challenge the identification of the avant-garde with a selective canon of modern art, whereby this exclusive canon valorized, furthermore, as an inevitable historical trajectory the move of advanced artistic practice from Europe to the United States.[9] In place of the manifest destiny thesis applied to the history of modern art by leading American art historians of the time, Fred Orton and I proposed a way of defining the avant-garde as a series of self-differentiating identifications that formed avant-garde *moments*:

An *avant-garde* does not simply emerge "readymade" from virgin soil to be attributed *à la mode*. It is actively formed and it fulfils a particular function. It is the product of self-consciousness on the part of those who identify themselves as, and with a special social and artistic grouping within the intelligentsia at a specific historical conjuncture. It is not a process inherent in the evolution

of art in modern times: it is not the motor of spiritual renovation and artistic innovation; and it is more than an ideological concept, one part of a complex pattern of imagery and belief. An *avant-garde* is a concrete cultural phenomenon that is realized in terms of identifiable (though never predetermined) practices and representations through which it constitutes itself in relation to, and at a distance from, the overall cultural patterns of its time. Moreover, its construction and the definition of its function result from a broader discursive formation that provides the terms of reference by which artists can see themselves in this illusory but effective mode of difference, and by which others can validate what they are producing as somehow fulfilling an *avant-garde's* function.[10]

Analyzing two discontinuous formations, one around 1870 in Paris and another after 1930 in New York, and refusing to link them in an unfolding narrative of progress, Orton and I theorized dislocated *avant-garde moments*. An avant-garde moment occurs at the historical point when a specific kind of self-consciousness within a distinctive group emerges to foster identification between members of a self-selecting group or a collection of mutually-referencing groups. These internal identifications serve, in turn, to establish difference and distance from the official cultural formations. Orton and I thus distanced ourselves, theoretically and historiographically, from the dominant trends in art-historical writing that treated modern art and the avant-garde as synonymous. Such an elision made the latter term meaningless. Accordingly, all art qua art and all artists canonized by modernist art history and the modernist museum immediately had the role of being avant-garde: leading, innovative, and significant. That trend, in other words, was circular. It allowed for no failures of avant-garde moments, no contradictions, internal or otherwise, and no later failure of cultural recognition (thus effectively excluding from legitimation as avant-garde any cultural practice not compatible with a particular, often purely formalist account of modernism). Our project was to turn research back onto the conditions under which both specific moments of avant-garde consciousness were formed and the resulting aesthetic practices were shaped and understood whether critically, or not.

I returned to thinking about the avant-garde in 1999 when writing about the first complete exhibition, at the Generali Foundation in Vienna, of American artist Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79): composed of 139 elements, organized into six parts, now conserved in six different locations over three continents. This assembling of Kelly's multipart project for the first time in a single-site installation invited a critical retrospect on the "moment" of its emergence in the 1970s, that first great feminist decade, which I defined, using the Orton-Pollock formulation, as an avant-garde moment. The difference was that it was

a specifically *feminist* avant-garde moment occurring at the singular conjunction, around 1970, of independent cinema and emergent video art practices, conceptual art, feminist engagement with contemporary psychoanalytical theories, and a renewed and politicized theorization of, and activism around, gender and sexuality—resuming the broken thread of earlier avant-gardist moments, in Paris in the 1920s for instance. At this moment in the 1970s, for the first time in history, feminism would finally engage with, work on, and intervene in *the visual arts.*

Mary Kelly's project *Post-Partum Document* coemerged with Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's independent film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1976) and Julia Kristeva's text *Héréthique d'amour* translated into English as *Stabat Mater* (1977). I wrote the following:

The atmosphere in the mid-seventies was one of experimentation in which cultural practices in art and film produced a laboratory in which the social and the psychic domains in which we are formed as socially positioned and psychologically constituted subjectivities could be researched in order not only to challenge existing patterns and associated oppressions, but in order to produce knowledge of both what existed and what might be, what was unimaginable and unthinkable in existing terms of patriarchal representation and phallocentric language. I want to suggest that this constituted an avant-garde moment—not in terms of the banal capitalist art market's appropriation of innovation for its tired sake—but in terms of Julia Kristeva's contemporary theorizing of revolutionary poetics that she, however, located only in the late nineteenth century, and in poetry and in work by men. I am suggesting that there was a critical conjunction between the revolutionary poetics of independent cinema, and the poetics of conceptualism that opened a fluid, intertextual aesthetic and theoretical space for a distinctive *feminist* avant-garde practice: an avant-garde moment "in, of and from the feminine" as defined by a feminist critical consciousness of the unconscious and of language. This avant-garde sought to create knowledge about the *feminine* that existing discourses or practices could not or did not provide.[11]

In light of the current theoretical dominance of postfeminist queer theory, I shall need to justify such anachronism as this appeal to the term "the feminine." Expanding the debates about gender beyond the initial feminist inflection towards women, queer theory is vital to our thinking, but not at the cost of outlawing the still unfinished business that it has been a specifically feminist theoretical project to research— not because gender is more important than other arenas of experience, but because feminism alone makes gender a theoretical object. My usage of "the feminine" derives from the existential problematics posed initially by Simone de Beauvoir in 1949 and modified by the vocabulary of Kristevan psychoanalysis and semiotic theory.[12] The French term *le féminin* is not easily translated by the English word feminine or femininity,

which have accrued connotations more typically disowned by feminists. *Le féminin* does not refer merely to prescribed ideas of what is proper to patriarchally defined women's normalized, gendered behavior. Understood as the negated other that consolidates the singular selfhood of the masculine One (de Beauvoir), or as a psychosymbolic position in language, *le féminin* is defined by Kristeva as "that which is not." *Le féminin* cannot *be* in the sense of defining the being of someone: woman is X. Rather it functions positionally as a radical negativity (in the Hegelian sense) that generates renovation and sometimes revolution in the Symbolic that, ruled by a phallocentric logic, places *le féminin* as its outside/ excess. While I resist the absoluteness of Kristeva's radical position of *le féminin* as only a semiotic radicality in phallocentric logic, I want to propose that it is both what is not yet known (for lack of signifiers in phallocentric language) and also what has inevitably and already been, often unconsciously, inscribed into culture precisely by avant-gardist women artists and writers because, as self-conscious avant-gardists, they participated in material, semiotic, and creative dissidence with regard to the patriarchal, bourgeois Symbolic. Yet while avant-gardist experimentation allowed the space or process for such "other" inscriptions, artist-women might not have recognized what had been inscribed in culture through their aesthetic practices, because the otherness of the feminine in phallocentric culture remains obscured for lack of terms in which to recognize its difference, except as what is "not." If up to now we have lacked the appropriate terms to acknowledge *le féminin* as the haunting excess of a limiting phallocentrism, as a result of feminist work on language, art, theory, and so forth, we can now both desire to know and frame such difference via terms of analysis and recognition developed by feminist theory, itself an intellectual avant-garde intervention: which is to say, a disturbance of radical significance to the existing orders of meaning.[13] In that sense, the attention in feminist theory and practice during the 1970s to both the body and to language, and the intersecting aesthetic and theoretical moves that composed the feminist avant-garde moment, necessarily raised to the level of representational and philosophical significance the "excess" within patriarchal bourgeois society that had been formerly managed on the latter's behalf by religion, but which now self-consciously radical women—feminists—took on. Kristeva stressed that it was religion that was contested by the avant-garde; but only once feminism had articulated the issues of gender, sexuality, and sexual difference theoretically *and* aesthetically could the full potential of that contest be staged.

    It is at this point that the maternal (not motherhood) emerges as an issue, not because of social protests against socially prescribed motherhood in bourgeois society, but because the maternal is the imaginative

and metaphorical site of notions of the creative, the generative, of becoming and of difference, and of the hinge between life and death, desire and ethics. I think it is the confusion between the social ideologies of motherhood and the psychosemiotic research into the excess and significance of the maternal-feminine that has created a profound theoretical difficulty in feminist theory and practice. It has tended to make feminism deeply ambivalent toward, rather than bravely interrogative of, the maternal and/as the feminine. Hence, it becomes important to be so unfashionable as to look at avant-garde representations of the maternal-feminine in art.[14]

A Dissident Proposal

I keep dreaming up exhibitions that no one would or could contemplate putting on. For instance, I would like to create a visual conversation between Mary Cassatt's *Reading Figaro*, Vincent Van Gogh's *La Berceuse* and some of his drawings of peasant women from 1885, Pablo Picasso's *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, Willem de Kooning's *Woman I*, while screening Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's film *Riddles of the Sphinx*, Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* and *News from Home*, Mona Hatoum's *Measures of Distance*, Martina Attille's *Dreaming Rivers*, Tracey Moffatt's *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* alongside Charles Chauvel's *Jedda* and installing as much of Mary Kelly's *Post-Partum Document* as I could, while commissioning a film about Julia Kristeva delivering her recent lectures on maternal passion and arranging readings of selected texts on Kristeva's own maternity and on woman, creativity, and dissidence from the 1970s in French and English translation.[15] Each of these works deals in a fundamental way with the maternal-feminine as a site of subjectivity and of meaning in intersubjective encounter inflected by manifold dimensions of time, place, social, cultural, and sexual difference. All exhibit an aesthetic radicality. For instance, Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum remembers a conversation with her mother in Beirut through letters that speak of love and exile; Martine Attile explores the subjectivity of a Caribbean woman in exile viewed by her children at her deathbed. Tracey Moffat addresses cultural estrangement and personal mourning in the figuration of an Aboriginal woman fostered by a white mother under the epistemic violence of Australian colonialism, while Chantal Akerman works through the silence that is the transgenerational legacy of Holocaust survivorship.

Such an exhibition chaotically swerves from the 1870s through to the 1970s and then to the present. In terms of the modernist museum, it incoherently mixes up paintings and film, documentary and text, cubism

and conceptualism, artworks and cultural theory, Western psychoanalysis and postcolonial cinema, and new media art. It juxtaposes heterogeneous avant-garde moments: 1870s Paris, 1900s Paris, 1950s New York, 1970s London and Paris, Beirut, Sydney, and London circa 1988–89. How could Mary Cassatt's impressionist *intimiste* study of her middle-aged mother reading a newspaper stand beside the dramatic power of Picasso's homage to Ingres's painting of *Monsieur Bertin* in his portrait of his patron and fellow genius, the Jewish lesbian writer Gertrude Stein, painted just as he was contemplating beginning *Demoiselles d'Avignon*? What links Cassatt and Van Gogh, let alone both to de Kooning via their relations to Picasso? I want to show how the encounter between selected works of art, as moments of creative dissidence, might help us to recognize the engagement that works of art perform with what disturbs the bourgeois order and also, more recently, their challenging of the forms of ethnic, racist, sexist, or homophobic violence, or the pain of migration and exile.

My proposed selection transgresses all the museologically divided categories of medium, style, and movement. It conceptually interrupts established historical narratives and their segregated temporalities. Such a show even unsettles the traditional, exclusionist understanding of the avant-garde, which evaluates works of art for their break with the past in terms of a logic of progressive formal innovation, linking the social and the artistic in the name of a recognized principle of the necessity for change: Marxism, anarchism, antifascism, and so forth. In that light, such an exhibition might seem simply retrograde.

With several exceptions, these works are all made by women from diverse moments, cultures, and aesthetic affiliations and thus insist on the heterogeneity of women and of the diverse singularities of the feminine itself. Yet in assembling this group of significant works that undoes any sense of collectivity or homogeneity amongst artists who are women, how are we to account for the shared symptom: the exploration of relations between the maternal, aesthetics, and the avant-gardist self-consciousness of intervening in dominant representational languages and social economies of the image?

Encounters in Liquid Times and Monumental Time

My dreamed-up exhibitions are conceived through a program I call *encounters in the virtual feminist museum*.[16] The *virtual feminist museum*—where virtuality is philosophically, not cybernetically, attached to the concept of feminism as something still becoming and to come—is an invitation to revisit past moments, but with (a) difference. The configuration is

driven by what I named in 1999, without any theoretical justification, *feminist desire*, in order to articulate my epistemophilic ambition to know *differently*, my curiosity to see difference and to allow different conversations to take place that might realign our current thinking through novel configurations exposing relationships hitherto suppressed and disappeared by official, phallocentric narratives of cultural history, including the authorized version of modernism.[17] Inheritors of a manner of thinking about modernist culture as a project ceaselessly moving forwards and definitively fuelling constant innovation, we are stymied now by "neo"-ism and "post"-ism and worse.[18] Current-day Jeremiahs, myself included, lament what appears to be the total penetration of the art world by Adorno's dreaded culture industry in the global marketing of commodified art and celebrity artists, driven by the necessity to fabricate the latest novelty to keep faith with the commodity-driven idea of progress, which easily mistakes mere newness for once genuine critique.[19] Liquid modern times are times of instability and change to which we are responding with often genuine panic, as we have so little to guide us through our newly groundless condition.[20] So what can art be or do in liquid modern times?

I am suggesting that the concept of the avant-garde in any of its many formulations and moments was, or could only have been, an agency of necessary renovation in an otherwise solid modernity. The newly solid was necessary as a stable ground for avant-garde intervention, innovation, transgression, radicalization, offering political or aesthetico-political aggravations that sought to effect real change as opposed to fleeting changefulness.

Liquid modernity's endless oscillation between fashion and obsolescence has no guiding purpose (save profit) and is linked to no conviction about where we are going because of alterations of the present. Postmodernist disenchantments, some justified, with modernity, furthermore, disabled us from daring to propose a single narrative of improvement in the name of equality (substantial redistributions of wealth, nationally and globally, and real eradication of poverty) or of any other of the now disowned grand narratives of modernity. So, in effect, we are now "up the creek without a theoretical-political paddle" in the face of unfettered globalizing international capitalism, whose powerful economic forces are unleashed from the minimal but still effective correctives created by local and national political regulation that emerged within nation-states through both trade union movements and older conservative pressures in the earlier moments of national capitalism typical of solid modernity.

So, wondering why our models for understanding what is going on culturally fail to account for or critically understand a hugely successful

but constantly diversified and shifting art business on a global scale, I think that, paradoxically, an eccentric archaeology of the underanalyzed archive of the modern opens up new potential scripts about what happened. Reclaiming them does not lead to some new vanguardist task but to critical thinking that is, perhaps, what remains available to us to demonstrate our fidelity to what we cherished in the historic moments of sociocultural radicalism that bears the label of the avant-garde. If we ask "where is the avant-garde now? Is it a useful category?" might we not be seeking answers either down blind alleys or in already institutionalized and exclusionary scripts? But if we reexamined some of its invisible dimensions, notably, as I am suggesting, through greater fidelity to its actual historical, experimental, and innovative gender inclusiveness/transgressiveness and varied moments of engagement with sexual difference, might this act of historical archaeology make investigating avant-gardism a little useful in our present plight?

Alternative Models for Thnking

The simplest way to explain the basic criteria for my proposed virtual feminist exhibition on the maternal and the avant-garde, on gender, modernity, and renovation, is a juxtaposition. Firstly, there is the infamous cover created by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., first Director of the Museum of Modern Art for the exhibition of *Cubism and Abstract Art* in 1936 (Fig. 1). It is set beside a single screen from the forty-nine black canvases hung with a combination of photographs of art works and contemporary visual images created by Hamburg art historian Aby Warburg under the rubric *Mnemosyne Bilder Atlas* (Memory Picture Atlas) (Fig. 2) in the late 1920s just before his death in 1929. Warburg's assemblages of images demonstrate his singular conception of a nonaestheticising but symbolic art history, created precisely to contest what is encoded in Barr's formalizing and chronological flow chart.

Barr's model provided the conceptual and the museological template, as well as the concrete architectural floor plan, for presenting modern art as a flow of art movements tending towards specific destinies—in 1936 geometric and nongeometric abstraction—represented in a manner removed from historical time and social praxis because the drive forward of artistic innovation is motored by internal, or autonomous, formal necessity. This distillation of formal necessity is undoubtedly a major factor to be considered in studying modernism, but it performs an exclusion of any consideration of what such formalizations might be responding to in society. Too much is erased in the name of isolating
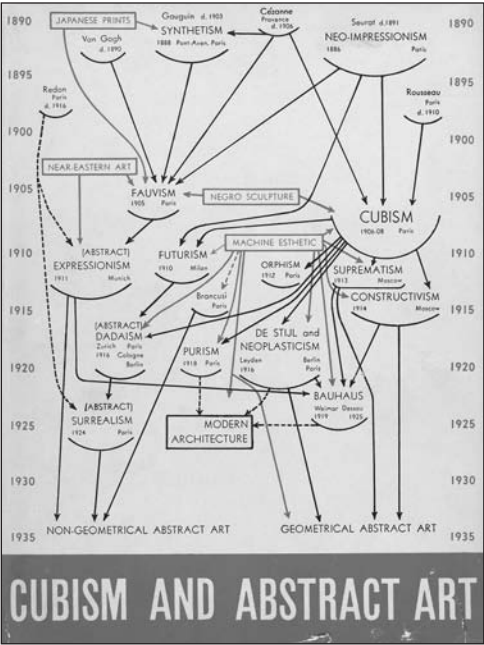
Fig. 1 Barr MOMA Chart 1936

Fig. 2 Warburg Mnemosyne Atlas

the self-conscious attention to form as the only and preeminent question for art, instead of asking how and why artists searched for *forms* for otherwise unrepresented aspects of social reality and lived experience in the conditions of modernity.[21] Thus Barr's timeline of the movements descending from post-impressionism in the 1890s to abstract art in the mid-1930s passes chronologically, and without interruption, through the massive historical upheavals of the horrors of the first industrial world war, revolutions, colonial and imperial campaigns, the rise of fascisms, the Third International, Stalinism, the Popular Front, scientific interventions, and massive social changes brought about by suffrage and mass movements by workers and, of course, by women. Nothing that might pertain to a history of gender transformation, colonial history, racism, technology, philosophy, or physics could be registered as forming part of the conversations that initiated, or were negotiated, by rapid artistic change. Were we to extend Barr's timeline to the present, it would not register the Holocaust, Partition, space travel, AIDS, Szrebinica, 9/11, digitalization, and so on.

For many of us, the speed of change and the dizzying accumulation of artistic interventions in this sixty-year period, 1870–1930, that is the crucible of modernism, registers not as a discrete internal unfolding, but rather as a shattering, if not cataclysmic, negotiation in artistic practices with unprecedented change and often traumatic events. On the other hand, paradoxically, Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* does not so much trace the novelty of art in its responses to challenging conditions of industrial war and social modernity as it discloses persistence within modernity, at deep levels remembered through images, understood as ways of registering and repeating powerful emotions attached to human sociality, life, and death. These image-forms are what Warburg named *Pathosformeln*, formulations of pathos—where pathos is understood as feeling, passion, suffering in the emotional register and as a kind of sense, understood in relation to the meaning of that word as retained in French. *Sens* in French is not only on the side of sensation and sensibility, but also includes meaning (as in common sense, or making sense of something), without being semantically fixed. Thus Warburg shared with Freud a countervision to the idea of modernity as modernization and self-directed change, arguing that, even as moderns, we are prisoners of monumental/cyclical temporalities at work within both individual psyches and cultural memories in which archaic versions of primary emotions, anxieties, and imaginings persist and return. Or rather, as Freud would argue from 1896 onward via his notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, that the initially unassimilable and traumatic mode of such archaic experiences seeks a form borrowed from the subsequent imaginary and symbolic process of the psychic apparatus.[22]

Warburg was, however, as much an analyst of his own contemporary visual culture in the decades of European imperialism leading up to World War I and of the racial violence of antisemitism that would erupt in Germany in subsequent decades as he was a scholar of world cultures and notably of the revival of pagan antiquity in Christian Europe in the fifteenth century. Since the 1999 English translation of his major writings, Warburg has emerged out of the shadows of esoteric Renaissance studies to take his place as a resource in contemporary cultural theory and art practice and notably amongst feminist thinkers and artists.[23]

My juxtaposition of Barr and Warburg as models for thinking time in art might be misread as representing the opposition between formalism and iconography. But that is not the point. Warburg's *Pathosformeln* mediate between imaging, imagining, and form through the concept of symbolic space. Art is treated as *Denkraum*: a thinking space that suspends the simple opposition between emotion and reason to suggest art as the space of oscillation and mediation.

Freud created a thesis about deep continuity, survival, and persistence in the human psyche, producing his often archaeologically expressed theses about subjectivity in the almost museal surroundings of his own collection of pagan antiquities from religious and cultural traditions other than his own.[24] While Warburg and Freud were equally sensitive to, and theorized in their different ways, the novel racializing violence of antisemitic Christian Europe which they themselves witnessed and endured in that very modern period whose culture was indifferently celebrated by Barr as the autonomous progressive daring of a modern art liberated from all history and politics, neither Warburg nor Freud themselves fully registered what Barr absolutely failed to acknowledge: that the modern was also a moment of radicalization of gender and sexual difference. (This is not to deny that Freud was a radical theorist of sexuality who had moments of intense insight and self-criticism about his inability to think his way through the specificity of feminine subjectivity and sexuality.) So as to enable both Freud and Warburg to work as partners in conceptualizing the virtual feminist museum, I have to turn to Julia Kristeva, literary theorist and practicing-theorizing psychoanalyst, who transforms Barr's formalism into a dynamic of semiotics and psychoanalysis she names *semanalyse*, while also finding a way to configure the moment of the avant-garde's engineering of modernism as a moment of simultaneous sexual, semiotic, theoretical, and social dissidence, that far from being "modern" in the sense of a simple rupture with the past, has to find ways to negotiate the deep time and deep structures of sexual difference that touch on life, death, and desire.

Julia Kristeva declares that, at the turn of the twenty-first century, Western culture is in trouble because it is the first culture in history that

is without a discourse on the maternal, that is, a discourse on human creativity and intersubjectivity such as was represented by mythological and religious thinking about the maternal-feminine. This is not the same, of course, as an ideology of socially prescribed motherhood. Kristeva offers an excoriating analysis of the Sarah Palin phenomenon of the Phallic Mother, while she also returns to her long-standing anxiety about an uncritical feminism's failure to understand its own psychic and unconscious determinations.[25] Kristeva has criticized the idealization of the mother in the Western women's movement's self-affirmation of Woman, seeing in what we might call cultural feminism a dangerous potential for a new religion (that is, a space of fantasy about the idealized Mother rather than the critical analysis of sexuality, language, and difference). Currently, she notes both a rejection of motherhood and the demand for it: artificial insemination and surrogacy are symptoms of this new, reverse situation:

Thus, when feminism goes into reverse, in a rush towards surrogate mothers, and when the unbridled desire to procreate at all cost is accompanied by the macabre series of frozen babies and "forgotten," "abandoned," or "abused" children, will we be able to see that we are the only civilization that lacks a discourse on the maternal vocation? . . . . Our scientific and medical knowledge is unable to come to the help of feminine distress effectively, a distress that can even lead to maternal madness, and which does not only affect marginalized women. The necessity "to have" a baby by way of an aided "immaculate conception" functions today as an anti-depressant like any other. And why not? But only on condition that its risks, advantages and consequences are elucidated.[26]

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva saw *the* avant-garde located in French literature after Mallarmé not merely as a "new form of artistic innovation, but also as a symptom of a crisis in symbolic relations affecting all areas of social life but more visible in artistic practice than elsewhere."[27] Kristeva had anticipated this question of the maternal and the avant-garde because it is so intimately linked to the symbolic relations of language and subjectivity itself. She argued that the state and the family, institutions of social and sexual order, "hold together a certain type of relation between the unity (fixing of meaning and identity) and process (the semiotic, drives and the radical instability of subjectivities on trial) in the economy of the speaking subject, at the same time, being consolidated as a result of this relation."[28] The state manages the forces and relations of production; the family ensures unity in the face of the process of drives and pleasure, associated with sexuality and reproduction. Hence the function of the third element of this triumvirate, religion:

This unity, of state and family, is achieved at the price of a murder and a sacrifice—that of the soma, the drive and the process. This is recognized by religion, which thus arrogates to itself the privilege of representing and of speaking the infinite element the ensemble oppresses and yet demands to be spoken. Religion is here that discourse that knows, as far as is possible, what is at stake in the relation between socio-symbolic homogeneity and the heterogeneity of the drives at work within and upon the homogeneity. Complicit with the state and the family to the extent that it restores their other to them, this religious discourse appears not only as the speculative (and often specular) forms of what is unrepresentable in orgasmic pleasure (*jouissance*) and of what is uncapitalizable in expenditure of productive forces.[29]

The complicity of state, family, and religion, far from crumbling with the coming of modernity, was, according to Kristeva, precisely consolidated by the triumph of bourgeois society in the later nineteenth century. This is the striking novelty of Kristeva's argument. Secularization was not the dissolution of an age of Christianity; nineteenth-century bourgeois culture and society was the contradictory moment of its social sublimation. The embourgeoisement of (Christian) religion manages the somatic and psychic excess not otherwise allowed into social representation in the tightening capitalist economies of production and phallocentric reproduction—Victorian values, if you will. This sublimation was, however, simultaneously contested by a new formation of art in the guise of the avant-garde. Art, so to speak, was progressively to seek its independence from the very discourses and institutions upon which it was founded.

This complicity of family, state and religious discourse appears for the first time in the second half of the 19th century, following the triumph of the bourgeois revolution, the consolidation of capitalism, and the accompanying fulfillment of the Christian religion. At the same time, there also appears the subversive function of "art"—subversive because of the way it cuts through and reworks the *frontiers of the socio-symbolic ensembles*.[30] (My emphasis)

What happened in art, literature, and music as well as many related intellectual trends such as psychoanalysis with the coming of the avant-garde, constituted a break with fundamental concepts of the monumentally timed sociosymbolic ensemble. The break destabilized the existing, patriarchal knot of gender, sexuality, and sexual difference.

Since the Renaissance, Western figurative art had shared a fundamental intimacy with Christianity that shaped not just its content, but also the very plastic and aesthetic character of its representational ideologies and practices epitomized by the primacy of its figuration of the body. The Christian theology of the Incarnation and the relation between a word made visible and a word made flesh provided the deepest drive

in Western visual arts towards its particular conquest of mimetic representation that was based on the pictorial narrative and on placing the human figure in geometrically perspectival compositions. This art developed gesture and pose to incite the appropriate affective reception of theological propositions through the spectator's imaginary identification with anthropomorphic illusion. The theology of Incarnation incited, therefore, a particular trajectory in artistic representation that defined the Western visual imaginary until the mid-nineteenth century when it was interrogated and ultimately interrupted by art practices that were not so much antiacademic, or antirealist (as we are usually taught) as *de-Christianizing*, that is, liberating the psychosomatic and the psychosymbolic from the religious imaginary.

In the tension between theological metaphor and a visual picturing that works iconically through representation of the body, the seeds of the avant-garde revolt against, and contest for, the imaginative ground occupied by religion can be traced. Religion is a metaphorical discourse speaking in linguistic or representational terms of what defies such saying and seeing that yet is only imaginable within them—except, that is, for the excess which religious practice, ritual, and aesthetically hypercharged experience allows into, but also manages on behalf of, the sociosymbolic order, namely affectivity, intensity, mysticism, and momentary (dis)possession of the self: *jouissance*.

In defying visual art's function as the representational screen for an Incarnation theology, the avant-garde, according to Kristeva, tries to force into productive acknowledgement both the materiality and the affectivity that underpins the signifying system, the psychosemiotic *processes* that significatory unity tries to fix ideologically as socially authoritative meaning.[31] The project of the avant-garde is to deal with the irreparable dislocation between signifier and referent occasioned in bourgeois capitalist modernity, where the referent lost the transcendent meaning guaranteed by religious discourse. Modernism reminds us endlessly that there are only signifiers and their subjectivizing affects. Yet even in its semiotic nakedness, the poetic or artistic play of signifiers affects us; we are touched and animated by something beyond the symbolic system that tries to harness excess for the sake of socially sanctioned meaning. In coming to know that, however, art lost its faith in its ability as well as its need to provide the visualization of an incarnated subject sustained by imaginary identification and anthropomorphic space. (Cinema might be said to have assumed its mantle.)

For Kristeva, therefore, avant-garde art is, structurally, if never ideologically, both atheist and potentially noniconic, more preoccupied with elements such as rhythm or sonority and its visual equivalents, color, gesture, pulsation. Instead of trying to provide representations of God

realized as an idealized Body, it searched for the means to register the sacrificed *soma*, that is, the drives and pleasures lining the speaking human subject, the subject on trial and in process, because subjectivity is never achieved but is always a challenged process of becoming that is equally at risk of unraveling, as is the case with melancholia or psychosis. Kristeva's insight would inevitably take research back to the foreclosed other of phallocentric signification. Even in its predominantly masculinist mode, the avant-garde retrieved the lost maternal body and her *jouissance*, epitomized in the form of what Kristeva identified as the massacred feminine of de Kooning's paintings of *Woman* rather than the idealized *Madonna* of Giovanni Bellini, whose work stands at the beginning of the incarnational turn in Western painting.[32]

In her essay, "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident" (1977), in which sexual difference is clearly positioned in relation to various avant-garde positions of dissidence, Kristeva identifies four key characters: the political rebel, the avant-garde writer, the psychoanalyst, and, finally, "woman." "Woman" is not like the others, however, as she is not a social or professional type. "Woman" signifies *le féminin* as a complex psycho-linguistic and sociohistorical knot still to be deciphered and spoken, even while playing a fundamental role in human sociality through actual women that is radically misread as mere social instrumentality: breeding, raising children for the state. She writes: "We still cannot reply to Mallarmé's question: *What is there to be said concerning childbirth?*, which is probably just as poignant if not more than the famous *Che Vuoi?* which Freud once addressed to a woman. After the Virgin, what do we know of a mother's (interior) speech? . . . . Through the events of her life, a woman thus finds herself at the pivot of sociality—she is at once the guarantee and a threat to its stability."[33]

As both the socially managed guarantee of sociality in her role as bearer of new generations, and as a signifier of radical dissidence in relation to the phallocentric system governing bourgeois culture (which inherits different Western paradigms of the patriarchal symbolic), "Woman" signifies a resistance to the bourgeois triangulation of the state, the religion, and the family, as well as to instrumental reason's war on critical thought. But, asks Kristeva, what about female creation, creativity, and thought? "Under these conditions, female 'creation' cannot be taken for granted. It can be said that artistic creation always feeds on an identification or rivalry, with what is presumed to be the mother's *jouissance* (which has nothing agreeable about it.) That is why one of the most accurate representations of creation, that is of artistic practice, is the series of paintings by Kooning entitled *Women*: savage, explosive, funny and inaccessible creatures in spite of the fact that they have been massacred."[34]

De Kooning's painting *Woman* both contains references to the artist's historic mother and links that motherline to the emblematic figure for the late nineteenth-century artistic avant-garde that is the antithesis of the maternal: the prostitute's body. Kristeva then has to acknowledge the implications of sexual difference for the thesis demonstrated by de Kooning's *Woman*. Masculine envy of or identification with the Mother, played out through the oscillations of de Kooning's ludic monumentaliza-tion of the Goddess-Mother and the violence of the paint with which this "she" is both created and abused, is radically different from a woman's artistic engagements with this topic. So Kristeva asks:

But what if [such paintings] had been created by a woman? Obviously she would have to deal with her own mother, and therefore, with herself which is a lot less funny. That is why there is not a lot of female laughter to be found ... In any case, far from contradicting creativity, maternity as such can favor a certain kind of female creation ... in so far as it lifts fixations, and circulates passion between life and death, self and other, culture and nature, singularity and ethics, narcissism and self-denial. Maternity may thus be called Penelope's tapestry or Leibniz's network, depending on whether it follows the logic of gestures or of thought, but it always succeeds in connecting up heterogeneous sites.[35]

The exhibition I propose is not a demonstration, a pedagogical re-presentation of a known narrative. It could, I hope, create a thinking space to allow into visual and thoughtful encounter what is in a sense already there, inscribed across works that variously figure the maternal in ways excessive to the bourgeois ideologies of domesticated motherhood and its vicious antithesis, the prostitute, allowing ethnic and cultural as well as historical and sexual specificities into the field of vision, while articulating intellectuality with creativity in the actually or virtually genera-tive "woman." Mary Cassatt's portrait of an adult woman in later middle age reading shares a monumentality and gravity with Picasso's vision of lesbian poet Gertrude Stein, while the presence of the latter disturbs the Oedipal filiation between de Kooning's passionate and ferocious rework-ing of Picasso's other work of 1907, the *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, by making us think about the conversations over eighty sittings between the not yet Picasso and a Jewish lesbian intellectual who was prescient enough to see what he was capable of becoming. If these paintings still operate within and against the figurative embodiment of Picasso's position and place, their juxtaposition with works of the international, postcolonial, and queer feminist avant-garde highlights the specific relation between novel modes of artistic inscription enabled, not by abstraction, but by the Kristevan shift into an noniconic/atheistic engagement with avant-garde textuality, visuality, and temporality that draws on cinematic and

postconceptual possibilities that might enable inscriptions of many forms of difference. Thus Mary Kelly's exploration of the mutual production of maternal and masculine child subjectivities in the specific economics and politics of class and the sexual division of labor engages with Mulvey and Wollen's seven-part antinarrative cinematic exploration of comparable tensions between work and desire by reclaiming the questioning figure of Oedipus's challenger, the Sphinx.

I might conclude the exhibition by looking at another work by Mary Kelly, *Interim* (1984–90), whose interest is enhanced by locating its resonance in relation to my curious genealogy of feminism and the avant-garde. An-iconic to a degree even more remarkable than the *Post-Partum Document, Interim* stages the contradictions of femininity over a four-part installation: *Corpus, Pecunia, Historia, Potestas* (Body, Money, History, Power). Composed of galvanized steel folded in a form evocative of the greeting card that marks life cycle events, *Pecunia* stages four categorizations of the feminine signified in popular cultural form by the rites of female passage: *mater, conju, filia* (mother, wife, daughter) and the aberrant, unplaceable figure of *soror*, sister. Each section has two stories, a joke about how to make a million dollars, an advertisement from a personal column, and a final statement of each subject position. *Soror* is the loose cannon who refuses her place within the heteronormative reproductive economy that defines the daughter, the wife, and the mother. *Soror* stands for the middle-aged artist, the lesbian or the single woman, wanting a complex life and a creativity beyond the violence of the patriarchal frame, wanting the money and the space of the artist: a studio of her own in the country, wanting a position beyond the economy of exchange of women.

The trope of *Soror* perhaps comes closest to Mary Cassatt, whose considerable earnings from her paintings and pastels enabled her to buy a chateau in France where, in 1927, she died renowned at the age of 83. Yet, there is a vast and historically significant gulf between the mother-daughter genealogy that Mary Cassatt could evoke in her figurative paintings of her mother and sister as a support for an artistic subjectivity utterly identified with the project of modernization in artistic institutions, practice, and representational schema, and the work of Mary Kelly in the 1970s after a century of the avant-gardes. Kelly had to utilize and radically to intervene in the critical, an-iconic resources of postminimalist conceptual art to stage a theoretically inflected analysis of how dominant representations of the maternal-feminine exile the woman as creative subject. The complexity of Kelly's long term, multi-part installations, created in oblique if always brilliant dialogue with the mainstream of conceptualism, aptly confirms my conviction that

the radical transformation of the conditions of sexual difference and subjectivity structuring the historical avant-gardes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries remains, even now, profoundly unfinished, indeed that it is only just verging on the point of serious intelligibility today. Thus, far from being a momentary connection lost in the disjunctive temporality of the century of the avant-gardes, the current alliance of feminist interventions in culture and thought and an avant-garde poetics, initiated in the 1970s and sustained by a theoretical as well as creative flowering since, still has a major task to perform against the dizzying proliferation of the eroticized commodified image of woman that veils the deeper deadliness of the cultures of death.

Thus any consideration of the avant-garde from a feminist perspective must initially unearth the maternal as body or ground for the autogenetic fantasy of masculine creativity as it has been absorbed, overwritten, fantasized, and "massacred." Only then can we explore different aesthetic inscriptions of the maternal within critical practices at decisive moments that rupture the social-symbolic ensemble of the Western racist, homophobic, and phallocentric Symbolic. Thereafter we can begin to track the maternal as a site for feminine (that is, dissonant politically or subjectively) genealogies of sexualities and subjectivities, of life and the desire for the life of the other. Thus maternity—as opposed to the socially sublimated Marianism of right-wing ideologies of motherhood—becomes, when artistically reconfigured, a thinking apparatus that raises the very questions tracked back in Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* to pagan ritual and its formalized encodings as image memory and in Freud's archaeology of the psyche: passion/thought between life and death, self and other, culture and nature, singularity and ethics, narcissism and inter- or transsubjectivity. At once generative and foundationally ethical, the maternal-feminine as such a thinking apparatus reexamines the potential significance of what has been so repressed within Western culture. And for historical reasons, in terms of contemporary liquid times governed by commodity production and technology which is reaching into this foundational crucible of human subjectivity, the creative feminine-maternal complex emerges as a site of profound radicality now. This is where the conjunction of feminist critical interrogation of its own thought and of the place of the feminine in culture historically and currently encounters "Auschwitz"—the product of totalitarian fascist masculinity that appropriated the right to life and death, relegated women to social functionality, and hence formed a politico-aesthetic avant-garde that was the antithesis, the negative other, to the avant-garde *in, of, and from the feminine* I have been trying to outline.

Conclusion

In his critical anatomy of the exhaustion of the paradigm of avant-garde transgression as the motor for modern artistic gestures, Anthony Julius refers to *Hell* by Jake and Dinos Chapman (1999–2000). This vast installation created a swastika out of linked vitrines in which a multitude of toy figurines performed acts of horrifying violence on each other in an environment that evoked concentration and extermination camps while the majority of the brutally injured were apparently German soldiers or SS. Confusing the aestheticization of fascism and sadomasochism (which so often now borrows SS insignia) with the horror of the historical camps, *Hell* generated considerable anxiety amongst critics. In challenging certain critics's celebratory claims that this work of taboo-breaking horror offered "imaginative empathy," Julius argues that extreme events such as the "Holocaust [no longer] mandate transgressive art."

To the contrary, art-making responsive to the Holocaust demands a break with the transgressive aesthetic. . . . The best of these works contend with these dilemmas: how can the Holocaust be represented, when representation seems to entail the making of art objects that invite purely aesthetic contemplation? . . . . Only a non-transgressive art practice, one that acknowledges the certainty of defeat and is willing to efface itself before its subject, while knowing that this subject is an impossible one, can negotiate such complexities. It must be allusive, modest, fragile, provisional. It must give witness to the inadequacy of images, and therefore its own inadequacy, to retrieve meaning of the lives that were extinguished. . . . It is an art that meets its subject at the mind's limits. It knows that there are limits to representation that cannot be removed, in the critic Geoffrey Hartman's phrase, "without psychic danger."[36]

I would like to conclude by endorsing Julius's views about art that dares to explore this immense question of historical trauma and aesthetic inscription. In his description of the kind of art that alone can meet such a challenge, which is defined as the opposite of the now parodied notion of vanguardism as heroic transgression, we find in fact a description of what the avant-garde "in, of, and from the feminine" actually looked like. Thus when in her 1996 exhibition of thirty-nine international artists, all of whom were women who showed how complex difference is, Catherine de Zegher proposed "an elliptical traverse" across the twentieth century to trace various clusters of aesthetic practices that transgressed chronological, national, ethnic and sexual categories (1930s, 1960s, 1990s, Europe, Latin America, Asia, African-American, Latin American cultures, etc.), she was identifying in the work of women their struggle with both the social real of modernity and the psychosymbolic modern-

ization of language and subjectivity. She showed how diverse *feminine* negotiations of difference represented the other side of militarized, misogynist, homophobic, and genocidally racist fascism that would, in its egregious crimes against humanity, ultimately condition humanity.[37] Far from being a marginal addition to a mainstream (art) history, the investigation into the feminine/maternal and the genuinely radical in the histories of the modern era becomes a vital archive for discerning, beneath the unstable liquidity of liquid modernity, the deeper and persistent challenges of the passions of life and death, ethics and narcissism, which can be named as the desire for the other to live beside us, with us, and in all the gloriousness and complexity of human plurality.

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

NOTES

1   Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz, eds., *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: MoMA, 2010).
2   For a fuller analysis of these issues see my "The Missing Future: MoMA and Modern Women" in the volume.
3   Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* (1939), repr. in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon, 1961), 3–21. Greenberg himself would be a notorious performer of exclusion of his own contemporaries Helen Frankenthaler and Lee Krasner.
4   Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000).
5   Henri de Saint-Simon, *Opinions littéraires, philosophiques, industrielles* (Paris: Galerie de Bossange, 1825), 331, n.i, cited in Donald D. Egbert, "The Idea of the 'Avant-Garde' in Art and Politics," *The American Historical Review* 73 (1967): 343.
6   Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time" ["Le temps des femmes," 1979], trans. Alice Jardine and Harry Blake, *Signs* 7, no. 1 (1981), 13–35, repr. in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 185–213.
7   Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989)
8   For recent discussion of trauma's times, see Griselda Pollock, "Art/Trauma/Representation," *parallax* 15, no. 1 (2009): 40–55.
9   Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, "Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed," *Art History* 4, no. 3 (1981): 305–27, repr. in the collection of our collaborative and individual writings 1979–1995, Orton and Pollock, *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1996), 141–64.
10   Orton and Pollock, "Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed," 305, 141.
11   Pollock, "Still Working on the Subject: Feminist Poetics and its Avant-Garde Moment," in *Rereading Post-Partum Document: Mary Kelly*, ed. Sabine Breitwieser (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 1999), 243.
12   Kristeva's theses on the feminine had to negotiate the legacy of de Beauvoir, but she shared the Francophone concept which is philosophical rather than rooted in Anglo-American social gender theory. De Beauvoir's founding formulation that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" introduced the French concept of *le féminin*, which has no direct translation into English, because feminine in English more typically and negatively connotes the disowned characteristics of a socially limited concept of women's

proper behavior, dress, appearance, or proclivities. For two important essays analyzing this concept and readings of de Beauvoir's position by American and French feminist theorists see Stella Stanford, "Feminism against 'the Feminine,'" *Radical Philosophy* 105 (2001): 6–15 and "Contingent Ontologies: Sex, Gender and 'Woman' in Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler," *Radical Philosphy* 97 (–1999): 18–29.

13 See Kristeva, "La femme–c'est n'est jamais ça" (Woman can never be defined), *Tel Quel* (1974), repr. in translation in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, *New French Feminisms* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981), 137–41; Pollock, "Inscriptions in the Feminine," in *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse through the 20ᵗʰ Century in, of and from the Feminine*, ed. Catherine de Zegher (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1996), 67–88.

14 For a more expanded plotting out of this argument, see Griselda Pollock, "Femininity, Modernity and Representation: The Maternal Image, Sexual Difference and the Disjunctive Temporality of the Dissident Avant-Garde," in *Das Jahrhundert der Avant-Garden*, ed. Cornelia Klinger and Wolfgang Müller-Funk (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2004), 97–120.

15 Mary Cassatt, *Reading Figaro*, 1876. Private Collection, Washington; Vincent Van Gogh, *La Berceuse*, 1889. Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo; Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, 1906. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Willem de Kooning, *Woman I*, 1950–52. Museum of Modern Art, New York; Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (London: British Film Institute, 1977); Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Paradise Films, 1975); and *News from Home* (Paradise Films, 1976), Mona Hatoum *Measures of Distance* (Tate Gallery, 1988), Martina Attille, *Dreaming Rivers* (Sankofa Film Collective, 1988), Tracey Moffatt *Night Cries: a Rural Tragedy* (1989), Charles Chauvel *Jedda* (1955), and Mary Kelly *Post-Partum Document* (Canberra National Gallery of Art, London, Hayward Gallery, London Tate Gallery, Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, Zurich, Kunsthaus, Santa Monica, Private Collection, 1973–79).

16 Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum; Time, Space and the Archive* (London: Routledge, 2007).

17 Pollock, *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories* (London: Routledge, 1999). On feminist epistemophilia, see Laura Mulvey, "Pandora's Box: Topographies of Curiosity," in *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1996), 53–64.

18 Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2003), 7–12.

19 As a scholar working also in cinema studies and cultural studies, I am not so much of an Adornian as to disown popular culture or mass culture as without significance or meaning. Indeed teaching students film and popular cultural studies is a critical practice of increasing importance, as there is much to learn to distinguish. Rather the lament is for the penetration of the art world by marketing, mediated by market-oriented curation and heritage and attendance figure-oriented museum programming. When presenting a distinguished and passionate dealer who had promoted abstract drawing since the 1960s with the work of one American artist seeking some support from a gallery, the dealer replied that the work was far too intelligent for any gallery to take it on at this time. The disjunction between a kind fidelity to art mediated by dealers and gallery owners who believe in its importance and current conditions for getting one's career made through marketing is growing.

20 Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000) soon followed by *Liquid Love: The Frailty of Human Bonds* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), *Liquid Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), *Liquid Fear* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), and *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

21 See T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984) for the most persuasive argument that what made

modern art modern was not its topics or subjects, but the specific manner in which modernists sought a form for the spectacular mode of capitalist modernity.

22   Sigmund Freud, December 6, 1896, cited in Jean Laplanche and J-B Pontalis, *Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac Books, 1988), 112.

23   In 2005 Joan Jonas scripted a performance *The Shape, the Scent, the Feel of Things* based on her reading of Warburg's essay on the serpent rituals of the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico. In 1983 Sigrid Schade used Warburg as resource for her feminist study of the persecution of women as witches in the sixteenth century (*Schadenzauber und die Magie des Körpers. Hexenbilder der frühen Neuzeit* [Worms: Wernersche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1983]). In 1991 Margaret Iverson catalogued the value of Warburg for feminist thinking in art history, "Retrieving Warburg's Tradition," *Art History* 16, no. 4 (1993): 541–53.

24   See Pollock, "The Image in Psychoanalysis and the Archaeological Metaphor," in *Psychoanalysis and the Image* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 1–29, and "The Object's Gaze in the Freudian Museum," in *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum*, 67–86. See also Mary Bergstein, *Mirrors of Memory: Freud, Photography, and the History of Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2010).

25   "The Impenetrable Power of the Phallic Matron" (published in *Libération*, September 25, 2008), http://www.kristeva.fr/

26   http://www.kristeva.fr/palin_en.html

27   Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, introduction to "Signifying Practice and the Mode of Production," *Edinburgh Magazine*, no. 1 (1976), 60.

28   Kristeva, "Signifying Practice and the Mode of Production," trans. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, from *La traversée des signes* (Paris; Editions du Seuil, 1977) in *Edinburgh Magazine*, no. 1 (1976), 64.

29   Kristeva, "Signifying Practice and the Mode of Production," 65.

30   Kristeva, "Signifying Practice and the Mode of Production," 65.

31   Kristevan theses echo Rosalind Krauss's revision of Greenbergian modernism through her engagement with surrealism and the *informe*. Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993) although Krauss is adamant that feminist thought plays no part in such a revision.

32   See Pollock, "Killing Men and Dying Women," in Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed*, 291–90 on Jackson Pollock and masculine hysterical identification with maternal creativity.

33   Kristeva, "A New Type of Intellectual: the Dissident," *Tel Quel* (1977), 3–8, repr. and translated in *The Kristeva Reader*, 297.

34   Kristeva, "A New Type of Intellectual," 297.

35   Kristeva, "A New Type of Intellectual," 298.

36   Anthony Julius, *Transgressions*, 221.

37   Catherine de Zegher, *Inside the Visible: An Elliptical Traverse of 20ᵗʰ Century Art in, of and from the Feminine* first shown at the ICA in Boston in 1996.

Project
MUSE®

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

http://muse.jhu.edu

Psychogeography, *Détournement*, Cyberspace

Amy J. Elias

IFFERENT BOTH FROM THE MODERNIST avant-gardes that preceded it and later avant-gardes such as Fluxus and Pop, though "very much in the spirit of Dada and Surrealism, whose project of merging art and life it sought to realize in practice," the Situationist Internationale (SI) flourished between 1957 and 1972 as a consortium of avant-garde organizations (including Cobra, the Lettrist International, the International Movement for an Imaginist Bauhaus, and the London Psychogeographical Committee). Articulated most notably by Guy Debord and Raoul Vaneigem, the SI sought a utopian, revitalized urban life that could both elude the aesthetic tyranny of spectacularized global capitalism and provide a vital, liberatory mode of urban Being.[1] Sadie Plant notes that Georg Lukács had a great influence on Debord, and one can see the influence of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin as well: permeating all of the SI writings are central Marxist and Frankfurt School concepts such as alienation under capitalism, the culture industry, and commodity fetishism. To combat the false consciousness that he argued produces both alienation and impoverished thought under capitalism, Debord (and others such as Asger Jörn) called for the construction of a new, liberatory urban space. For the early SI, "psychogeography"—the "study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment . . . on the emotions and behaviour of individuals"—became central to the emancipation of the human psyche.[2]

Today, theoretically informed advocates and devotees of the Internet and Web 2.0 often draw correspondences between the SI's redefinition of city space and the redefinition of cosmopolitan space currently taking place in virtual realities. It is true, of course, that hacker and libertarian manifestoes have often couched utopian ideals within cyberspace rhetoric: cybercultures sometimes adopt the term "psychogeography" to describe what happens when one travels through the World Wide Webb (WWW) landscape, applying SI concepts to the entirety of virtual space on the web. Hacker cultures and the blogosphere like to extol an anarchic, liberationist potential within the WWW:[3] they frequently define it as a dematerialized, telematic space central to the purest form of

algorithmically defined movement, transitivity, and libidinal investment. Scores of web writers seem to have discovered that Debord's description of *dérive*—an urban walking journey—sounds a lot like web surfing:

In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there. The element of chance is less determinant than one might think: from the dérive point of view cities have a psychogeographical relief, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes which strongly discourage entry into or exit from certain zones.[4]

The dérive is always urban in location and character, just as the web implies a kind of cosmopolitanism. The spatial field of the web surfer may be either delimited according to search parameters or openly processual according to linked pathways, and so too, the spatial field of the dérive "may be precisely delimited or vague, depending on whether the activity is aimed at studying a terrain or at emotional disorientation" (24). The spatial field of the dérive "presupposes the determining of bases and the calculation of directions of penetration"—what in cyberspace we call links.

   Yet to claim that cyberspace taken in its entirety is the new space of dérive is at best tautological: in many instances, cyberspace consciously *models* itself on the notions of dérive and psychogeography articulated by the SI.[5] Moreover, correspondences between SI concepts and the WWW as an entity are usually metaphorical rather than substantive. If anything, the web is increasingly part of the spectacle rather than a challenge to it. Like the postmodern city, the WWW has become naturalized as a dehumanized space of commerce, work, and diversionary entertainment; like urban territory, it now cordons off "neighborhoods" and gated communities that effectively limit wandering. Increasingly, even at the level of the personal website, its aesthetics are submitting to the rhetorical and graphics-design clichés of corporate advertising. The ephemerality that constitutes the political efficacy of the situation as defined by SI, moreover, is illusory on the web: what "feels" ephemeral to someone surfing through sites is actually a passage through sometimes permanent, always preconstructed, and maintained databases and uploaded files. Importantly, as insiders such as Lawrence Lessig have repeatedly pointed out, while the numbers of Web surveillance techniques now practiced by agencies seeking to preempt global terrorism is indeterminate, certainly URLs, port numbers, and IP addresses are instant locators that undermine the anonymity central to the street protest. It is also increasingly common for search engines such as Google to tailor programs to search

parameters deemed acceptable to specific political environments and nation-states: the web, in contrast to the SI in any form, is increasingly submitting information access to the demands of totalitarian politics. Finally, there is the problem of motivation. For the SI, "situations" were not random acts; they were constructed interventions with organized aesthetic aims and political rationale. The web as a whole cannot be said to have any kind of rationale or logic of this kind.

But there *are* web-based practices that seem congenial to a Debordian aesthetics, and these demand a more rigorous consideration of how Web 2.0 might facilitate and revitalize the intervention of the *arts* in culture in the manner of the SI. Today, sometimes at the risk of surveillance and political blowback, some cyberartists are redefining (and extending into new territories) key concepts of the 1960s Situationist avant-garde. While the SI provided a vocabulary of resistance to the capitalist spectacle and a praxis for reconnecting art to life and reenergizing aesthetics in the material sphere of the urban city, cyberspace art attempts to work in the belly of the beast—to rehumanize and politicize the absolutely nonmaterial virtual space that itself was birthed by the military-industrial complex of the 1950s. Sites protesting the commercialization and spectacularization of the Web are poetic interventions—stoppages and delays on the information highway that force observation and contemplation. In the manner of situations, they construct a momentary stay against the tsunami of functionalist, alienating, or dehumanizing images flooding the (web surfer's) perceptual screen. An avant-garde counterculture is emerging on the web that takes as its starting point, in the manner of the SI, an attack on spectacular *aesthetics* in the interest of intellectual emancipation. New postconvergence media arts now extend SI concepts into new, dematerialized territories. In the following discussion, I will identify SI aims and principles that seem central to this new media art and examine some specific examples of net.art, Flash art, and Situationist-inspired art in Second Life® to illustrate how it might be understood within the theoretical terrain of psychogeography and situation. My aim is to contextualize the cyberarts within a Situationist effort to revitalize human experience, ironically from within its most spectacular creation.

Situation, Psychogeography, and Détourned Play

In one of the founding documents of the SI, Debord wrote, "Our central idea is the construction of situations, that is to say, the concrete construction of momentary ambiances of life and their transformation into a superior passional quality."[6] The situation (an "integrated ensemble

of behavior in time") was a planned intervention conceived as "the opposite of works of art,"[7] because as an ephemeral staging of human activity that "contains its own negation and moves inevitably toward its own reversal,"[8] it valorized and preserved nothing. A situation could be the iconoclastic defamation of public monuments with anticapitalist graffiti; a twenty-four-hour papering of the city in oracular poster art; the organized inscription of poetic or plastic art into the functionalist space of the city proper—virtually any activity that refocused the glazed eyes of the bourgeois populace and unleashed an awakened, passionate reconnection with the real.

The situation was made possible by dérive and *détournement*. As already noted, dérive is a kind of walk through urban space that evinces a "will to playful creation" and "the practice of a passional journey out of the ordinary through a rapid changing of ambiances."[9] Debord defines dérive as a "drifting," a person's transient passage through environments; it entailed "playful constructive behavior . . . which completely distinguished it from the classical notions of the journey and the stroll." Dérive prepared the way for a "life in step with desire, and the concrete representation of such a life."[10] What was sought in this movement through urban space was authentic pleasure, not the manufactured desire of the spectacle. Yet significantly, this pleasure was created not through random meandering through city space but through movement dictated by simple algorithms—"Go Left, Go Left, Go Right"—that curtailed randomness without prescribing exact or motivated direction. Following the algorithm in a dérive through the city, one would encounter the unexpected and be forced to view one's surroundings in a new way.

While dérive described a phenomenology, détournement described a hermeneutics and a praxis. Détournement was "the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble,"[11] what postmodernism would come to understand as a deliberate, politicized use of irony and pastiche. It was a method of interpretation and reinterpretation: reordering preexisting materials in order to expose their banality or their function within a system of spectacular control and creatively reconstructing them in the service of authenticity. Détournement, therefore, was a mirroring of capitalist recuperation—spectacle's perpetual reintegration and redefinition of existing social elements—but was intended to have opposite effects. Instead of naturalizing existing reality, it denaturalized and parodied it to expose and counter alienation.

There are two points to be made here. First, the concepts of dérive and détournement illustrate how *play* for the SI took on a poststructuralist, antilogocentric quality, for it meant both the free play of the imagination *and* the overturning of closed logical categories associated with the

spectacle and ideological master narratives. However, as it was for both the early-modern baroque and for later groups such as Oulipo, play for the SI was also constrained and *rational*. An example is the algorithmically structured dérive: "Ordinary life, previously conditioned by the problem of survival, can be dominated rationally. . . . and play, radically broken from a confined ludic time and space, must invade the whole of life."[12] Against fake cities of play such as Caribbean tourist islands and Las Vegas would stand a real city of play, a "renovated cartography" that was ordered by logic but could "express not subordination to randomness but complete *insubordination* to habitual influences." Second, the situation constructed by dérive and détournement resituated participants in a renewed, libidinal *space*. Reinventing physical space was the means to reinventing leisure, but it was also the means to renewing perception (from its "subordination to habitual influences") and thus radically challenging the alienation and *boredom* generated by the capitalist spectacle.[13]

Renewed or defamiliarized spaces call for new maps. Artists needed to intervene in the production of space by creating new mapping structures. Thus was "psychogeography" born. Psychogeography was SI's anarchic mapping practice that wrested perceptual control from the panoptic spectacle and returned it to the human body. It produced all kinds of somatic mappings—emotional mappings produced through dérive, sense maps that détourned visuality (maps based upon smells, sounds, touch instead of sight), and maps not corresponding to real space (such as those produced by overlaying maps of two different regions). For Debord, psychogeography was linked to a new form of critique that could be ephemeral enough to avoid recuperation but powerful enough to challenge alienation: "By virtue of the resulting mobile space of play, and by virtue of freely chosen variations in the rules of the game, the independence of places will be rediscovered without any new exclusive tie to the soil, and thus too the authentic *journey* will be restored to us, along with authentic life."[14] Movement and passion combined in the respatialized body. The body-as-commodity was removed from the abstract nowhere of the spectacle and redefined—resituated, glowing with life, in the city of ephemerality, movement, somatic perception, and desire.

The legacy of the SI has lived on in "real life" artistic projects predicated on its original writings and goals. One of the most interesting of these, originally sponsored by Glowlab, is the annual New York City Conflux festival, which features projects integrating the Situationist "classical" approach to psychogeography as well as "emerging artistic, conceptual, and technology-based practices." At Conflux, the "city becomes a playground, a laboratory and a space for civic action in the development of new networks and communities."[15] The now de rigueur phenomena

of "flash mobs"—the planned and/or spontaneous use of text messaging to gather groups for political or absurdist activities—also derives directly from Situationist models. Moreover, there are now pop culture and mainstream adaptations of SI ideas. One can find the term "psychogeography" in *Wikipedia* these days, linked to a number of websites for conferences, organizations, and meetings that promote urban tourism and exploration. As "Barnaby Snap of Helsinki" writes at socialfiction. org (itself a site constructed in the spirit of the SI), "it was fun in the beginning but now it's just everywhere . . . psychogeography has turned into the Dolce & Gabbana of the pedestrian underground."[16] Many cities now provide technology at visitors centers for "psychogeography" as a tourism activity that allows city visitors to use GPS or alternative mapping to tour through a city's prefabricated (often simulated) and heavily marketed historical and "cultural" attractions.

Heirs of the SI are still with us—the aggressively political "precariat" movement in Europe (with its saint San Precario), work by "hoaxes" artists (for example, Beauvais Lyons), and interventionist art by activists such as the "Serpica Naro," the Molleindustria, Guerriglia Marketing, and Yes Men groups.[17] Yet ironically, in the face of the co-optation of Situationist ideas by the culture industry, it may be that the SI's concepts of situation, dérive, and psychogeography are also instantiated these days online, defined through specific websites utilizing Flash, Java, and other applications. At these sites, anarchic impulses are presented as a détournement of official public information. E-zines, blogs, chat rooms, and other elements of web culture have the potential to détourn spectacular ideological constructions. However, at most of these sites, the vehicle is usually satire without poetic intent. In other words, few of these sites combine a poetics, a hermeneutics, a phenomenology, and a politics in the manner of the SI's "situation."

More important, for my purposes, are sites that attempt a *poetical* détournement of web rationality: sites that détourn the web itself, understood as a spectacular creation that turns bodies into alienated desiring machines in the interest of functional rationality for the sake of commodity consumption. Sites, that is, that construct a virtual totality that mimics Raoul Vaneigem's desire: "What do I want? Not a succession of moments, but one huge instant. A totality that is lived and without the experience of 'time passing.' The feeling of 'time passing' is simply the feeling of growing old. And yet . . . virtual moments, possibilities, are necessarily rooted in that time. To federate moments, to bring out the pleasure in them, to release their promise of life is already to be learning how to construct a 'situation.'"[18] "Virtual moments" here construct libidinal time leading to a "federated whole" rather than a closed and

permanent system. The quote is striking when read today, for it is precisely in the context of a Web 2.0 integrated reality that we see the possible, if virtual, realization of Vaneigem's desire. In what ways do some websites "federate moments" to create the lived poetics of the "situation"?

Dérive, détournement, et le virtuel

Given the scope of the web and the frenetic pace of site creation (and obsolescence), it is difficult in the present format to convey fully the specific qualities of the artists and sites that serve as examples of Situationist psychogeography and dérive. And that's the point: one needs to experience these places in order to feel their affective and poetic power.

One site type that seems akin in spirit and function to Situationism and psychogeography is net-art (alternatively, net.art and netart), aimed at defamiliarizing space and reconnecting it to human desire. These art sites attack spectacular alienation, constructed through the reduction of human desires to functional subjectivities.[19] That is, they create spaces that are "algorithmically" predetermined but situated randomly in the cosmopolitan space of the web. Creating Situationist sites in the cybersoul of the spectacle both détournes the notion of the web as functionalist "information highway" and creates a space for the free play of imagination and desire beyond simple surfing, movement, and transitivity. As noted by one critic:

Net.art, by which is meant art written in HTML (and now, optionally, in Macromedia Flash) and exhibited for the first time on the Web, is in many ways the antithesis of museum-gallery art: it has no originals; in many cases its maker's name is a pseudonym; it is accessible from anywhere on the Web; it is rarely dated and it rarely restricts reproduction and duplication under copyright legislation. It is always on exhibit, but it may disappear one day without a trace. In the world of art objects, it is an anti-commodity, and it is hard to imagine how anyone could profit from its sale.[20]

Because of the confluence of media technologies and the plastic arts these days, these sites look and operate much like gallery media art. However, their placement on (and often design for) the web creates synergies between them and SI projects that are often eclipsed in gallery art, always reified by the space of its exhibition.

Net-art websites are both potentially infinite and extremely ephemeral, though some sites have now been online so long as to become "canonical." For example, the German artist Alba D'Urbano was one of the first artists to move her art to the Internet; her site *Couture* is a

feminist parody of the fashion industry and was developed by Nicolas Reichelt, whose own work in Flash and other technologies includes 3-D landscapes of the Institute of New Media in Frankfurt and an amusing 1991 animation *The Monument to Nothing*.[21] Another "classic" site is Marika Dermineur and Stéphane Degoutin's *Keyboard*, a visual and aural interactive site that forces contemplation of the act of communication between people. Their artists' statement describes the project as "About language, ... about articulated gestures, about text, code, protocols, automation, about keyboards as primitive interface, as space, orientation, inscription, sign, memory, passage." On entering the site, one is immediately ordered to "write something," and after typing in some word or phrase, the viewer sees a video stream of a woman's face saying the letters and then pronouncing the word. The point here is the breaking of boundaries between human and technology, outside and inside, body and machine, words and sounds, words and desire for communication. At Dermineur, Degoutin, and Gwenola Wagon's *What Are You?* the focus of attack—through a random association of words, images, and music generated by user clicks—is the false "newness" and arbitrary categories of identity generated by market consumerism. The site combines music, randomly selected pairs of search keywords (such as "junkie/toxic," "top model/macho" or "cannibal/New York") and images captured from the web with similar keyword titles. Algorithmically timing how these pairings of word and picture are flashed on the screen, the site creates startling images and sometimes eerie juxtapositions.

As the site creators note, "In spite of huge investments, designers, marketing experts and trend hunters produce only two new trends a year. *What Are You?*, thanks to its database of more than 500 past, present and future trends, generates instantly 250.000 combinations, by randomely [sic] associating keywords. It is therefore in the position to produce the trends for the next 125,000 years (i.e. until 127005)."[22] Ironically participating in "trendspotting," the site aims to exhaust it, using algorithmic randomness to critique web space as the space of consumption. But also in the manner of poetry, the split screen startles the web surfer with unexpected combinations of signs.[23]

In a different vein, Beth Stryker's and Sawad Brooks's net.art projects confront a passive surfer with the political nature of offline material landscape, and territory through an online human mapping project. *DissemiNET* is a Java-based net.art project commissioned in part by the Wexner Center for the Arts and part of the Walker Art Center's Digital Studies Collection.[24] It was begun with a set of testimonies, "cases with Probusqueda de Los Ninos in El Salvador, where stories of disappearances and displacements have accumulated in the wake of a 12 year

Fig.1. Screenshot from Dermineur, Degoutin, and Wagon's *What Are You?* April 2010

civil war."[25] The interactive site collects testimonies of homelessness, diaspora, and global dispersal and arranges them by keywords such as "belong," "daughter," "crossroads," "exile." According to the Walker Center's site, DissemiNET uses "fuzzy logic" to "algorithmically create a cyber-palimpsest of related memories"; it functions "on a boundary between identity (i.e. national and personal) and its dispersal over the web," and creates "a cross-linked, communal storytelling space."[26] The project correlates the diasporic nature of online existence with the real, lived, politicized diasporas of people throughout the world. Its virtual space thus functions almost precisely as an online dérive, reconfiguring material space as human space, lived space, and storied space. Another Stryker/Brooks project, *Radarweb,* presents information about the U.S. occupation of Okinawa. *DissemiNET* and *Radarweb* are both situation-like interventions protesting dehumanization in different political contexts by specifically linking web space with lived urban space: the authors write that they "envisioned the stories which would be deposited in this space as tales of errancy, recollections of being lost, searching for others, experiencing displacement."[27] Displacement, errancy, lostness, searching—these are precisely the strategy of the dérive. The displacement figured, however, is not voluntary; encountering the site, a web surfer is put into the uncomfortable position of negotiating a reterritorialized space, mapped via human stories of exile and forced displacements.[28]

Net-art is increasingly bringing together online and museum spaces, for as with Stryker and Brooks's projects, artworks are often exhibited in both venues simultaneously. Quickly gaining prominence in this

regard, Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (YHCHI) constructs short narrative artworks found primarily on the WWW, though also exhibited in major museum galleries internationally. Narratives appear on the screen in animated Flash sentence, phrase, or word units, accompanied by an instrumental soundtrack (usually jazz) and color screens. As N. Katherine Hayles notes, each of YHCHI's texts is a multimodal unit of sound, typeface, Flash animation, and color. In not only *Nippon*, which she discusses at length, but all of YHCHI's texts, "if the space of the text has been temporalized, it has also been reinforced as a semiotic system demanding deep attention."[29] "Deep attention" was precisely the goal of the SI, and Jessica Pressman is correct to see these texts as a second- or third-generation digital art that has now moved into the domain of self-critique. I would add that critique of lived space—in this case, virtual space—is also the texts' link to SI activities.[30]

For example, Pressman has nicely illustrated how this project is an example of what she calls "digital modernism" within a fluidly defined high modernist aesthetic that is actually closer to a "post-postmodernism." I would focus less on the period markers and emphasize instead how, in the manner of Fluxus happenings, irony and a Pop aesthetic characterize YHCHI's texts. Indeed, the climax of *Dakota*—a short "road novel"—occurs when the narrator encounters Elvis Presley and when Marilyn Monroe appears as an icon: Warhol's Pop images and aesthetic everywhere inform this and other YHCHI texts, including their use of techniques drawn from graphic design and advertising. YHCHI's texts may reference Marcel Duchamp and Ezra Pound (Young-Hae Chang apparently wrote a Ph.D. dissertation on Duchamp and has cited him as an inspiration[31]), but *The Art of Sleep* (2006) makes the point that Duchamp sold out to the very art culture he critiqued. YHCHI's pieces are chatty, profane, and colloquial, while simultaneously incorporating references to critical theory and high art; they work like cinema, but they also refuse modernist film's symbolic imagery as well as its seriousness and utopianism. They are often self-reflexively ironic. *The Art of Silence*, an online "interview" between Young-Hae Chang, Marc Voge, and Jemima Rellie, for example, is a piece that mimics a serious art journal interview. Here, however, interviewees' "voices" are recorded as digital sound bites and strung together by computer to form sentences and an amusing conversation scenario, in which Young-Hae Chang and Marc Voge end up yelling "bullshit" at one another and admitting to knowing nothing about art.

In *The Art of Sleep*, a first-person insomniac rails against the commercialism and tyranny of art institutions, delivering a Dadaist statement about art ("Art is Everything" and "Art is Dead! Long live Art!"). But by the end of the piece the speaker bemoans the night's loss of sleep because

s/he has to "get up early to start the Tate Commission." Overall the pieces are more Donald Barthelme than Pound, illustrating the thesis of Jorge Luis Borges' "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" that if we try to do modernism now, we get something slightly askew from the original, tinged with irony because of its location in a particular post-WWII, post-WWW chronotope.

Given their exhibition location on the Internet, these pieces work like frenetic digital billboards constructed by a smart-ass nonprofit or a beatnik wannabe; they are signpostings of high art that stop one short on the digital highway but that also use irony to undercut seriousness, utopianism, and high-art pretension. Unlike market websites, they have no profit motive; unlike museum sites that often showcase exhibits online, they deflate the prestige and seriousness of installation art and are online all the time, *en entier*. The flashing text, linearity of story, and irony keep this moment from becoming sublime, fetishized, or commercialized. The texts present political messages but are laced with banal humor, profanity, or overt sexual terminology in the manner of everyday speech. They enact a Situationist "utopian anti-utopianism," and are texts that mock simultaneously the pretentions of academic "hypertext fiction" and the banality of the commercial website. In an interview, Young-Hae Chang notes, "We can't and won't help readers to 'locate' us. Distance, homelessness, anonymity, and insignificance are all part of the Internet literary voice, and we welcome them."[32] YHCHI's texts valorize and preserve nothing; they stage human activity—art as a momentary ambiance of life.

New Internet art is being created all the time, and there are now websites and university-sponsored programs dedicated to net-art. Currently organizations such as Turbulence.org and the Electronic Literature Organization provide major funding for new net.art projects.[33] Countering generally accepted assumptions that the WWW is a medium catering to business and entertainment industries, much of this visual art furthers the reach of Situationism and psychogeography into the virtual space of the World Wide Web, offering new ways that aesthetic defamiliarization and poetic détournement may spatialize and release the pleasure of federated moments of time.

A Second Life® for Psychogeography and *Dérive*

I have been arguing that the World Wide Web should be seen in very specific instances as an analogue to real urban space that provides new opportunities for détournement and dérive. But one might also conceive of today's virtual-reality worlds and massively multiplayer online

roleplaying games (MMORPGs) as visual performance sites that offer new real-time opportunities for urban situationism and psychogeography.[34] Certainly, this conception applies to a virtual world such as Second Life®. A 3-D virtual reality based in San Francisco and created in 1999 by Philip Rosedale, Second Life® was modeled on the "Metaverse" in Neal Stephenson's cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* and is a real-time virtual life-world.[35] Running on Linden servers but on a global grid, its landscapes and objects are constructed by its "residents" who appear in-world as avatars and socialize on digital "islands" that are privately or corporately rented. There are no game objectives in Second Life®, no scoring or game parameters. "Land" is for sale and can be developed according to its residents' desires and programming/building skills, and residents construct communities fitting their own social needs.[36]

Because Second Life® is a virtual reality owned by a corporation but "built" independently by residents, its fundamental characteristic is paradox: the first-born of Spectacle, its virtual landscapes nonetheless offer some residents opportunities for Situationist interventions into, and commentaries upon, both this virtual world and the practices structuring everyday life. Most people use Second Life® in order to replicate real life; the world is known for its merchandizing and sex sites, and much of the world's social interaction and architecture is astonishingly banal. Yet others are using the space creatively, taking advantage of the fact that, unlike many MMORPGs, in which players work with preset character and environmental options, Second Life® offers individuals the opportunity to build and define their own environments from scratch. There now exist wonderful teaching and research sites in Second Life®, such as Bryan Carter's "Virtual Harlem," that are making use of these capacities and extending educational possibilities into virtual space.[37] In addition, some creative artists have used the virtual world to create psychogeographical landscapes and moments of détournement that work in two directions: inward, toward the virtual world of Second Life® itself, and outward, to the world of "real spectacle" that constitutes the consensus reality of web users.

For example, understood through "common sense" perception, the virtual constructs in Second Life® appear as "architecture." As such, in this world, buildings have the potential to defy natural laws and, through their very shape, materials, and location, to be imbued with affect and dreamscape desire. Doesinger notes of SL architectures that any "game" elements inhering to Second Life® are actually about this space, its construction and narrativization. The world "is about 'playing at architectures' and 'playing at communication,'" and the architectural modeling that is possible in Second Life® may be having an impact on real-world architectural thinking.[38] Floating unsupported in midair, their

contorted or symbolic structures defying laws of natural physics, the most ambitious cityscapes in Second Life® can illustrate the utopianism of situationism's "Unitary Urbanism," in which unique, dynamic "experimental cities" would create an "ambiance" or "atmospheric effect"—an emotional effect or response linked to a "gesture." In "Formulary for a New Urbanism," Gilles Ivain describes the new city as if it were one of Marco Polo's imagined, invisible cities in Italo Calvino's novel:[39]

Buildings charged with evocative power, symbolic edifices representing desires, forces, events past, present and to come. . . . Everyone will be in his own personal "cathedral," so to speak. There will be rooms more conducive to dreams than any drug, and houses where one cannot help but love. Others will be irresistibly alluring to travelers. . . . The districts of this city could correspond to the whole spectrum of diverse feelings that one encounters by chance in everyday life. . . . Bizarre Quarter—Happy Quarter . . —Noble and Tragic Quarter. . . . The principal activity of the inhabitants will be the CONTINUOUS DÉRIVE. The changing of landscapes from one hour to the next will result in complete disorientation.[40]

Similarly, in Second Life®, architects and artists are modeling new "sense landscapes" that attempt, through the use of sound and visual effects, to create an actual experience of symbolic and atmospheric architectures. Those involved with international initiatives such as the Odyssey Art Simulator and the Virtual Arts Initiative are serious artists who believe "that virtual worlds . . . provide the opportunity, in the form of a new technology, for radically innovative forms of aesthetic expression."[41]

In this regard, "Seventeen Unsung Songs" by Adam Nash, a member of the Virtual Arts Initiative, straddles the line between digital media, architecture, and "land art," involving dérive in the interest of a unity urbanism within the nonmaterial space of Second Life®. The project installed seventeen sculptures (Unsung Songs) at East of Odyssey, Odyssey Art Simulator in Second Life®, an "island" collective that hosts arts galleries, new installations, and performance sites. It was also a winning project in the First Architecture and Design Competition in Second Life® and won the 2008 National Art Award in New Media at the Queensland Gallery of Modern Art.[42] All of the seventeen "sculptures"—architecturally complex and involving sound, color, and light effects—involve avatars in some form of interactive play. As Lisa Dethridge notes, "These fascinating kinetic devices invite us to linger and play while probing the role of the avatar within the complex 3D space. Each Unsung Song is like the product of an ethereal instrument, fresh from another planet where synaesthesia is the dominant mode."[43] A few of the pieces are still on exhibit at Odyssey, and one, "Unsung Song #7:

Moaning Columns of Longing," illustrates the combination of desire, interactivity, and sense appeals in some of these sculptures. "Unsung Song #7" presents a platform on which eleven tubular columns sway and wiggle in the breeze. It instructs a visiting avatar to approach, which

will spawn a Moaning Column of Longing that loves only you. [. . .] Once it is spawned, it is waiting for you to return to touch it. Every hour that you don't come back, it will get a little duller and a little smaller. It will start moaning a little louder. After the 12th hour of loneliness, the moaning will start to get quieter. It will IM you every 3 hours to tell you it loves you and wants to see you. If you don't touch within 24 hours, it will die of loneliness and a broken heart. And it will be your fault.

The column's script continues to run whether the avatar is present or not. Dethridge has called this a "giggly theatre of cruelty," but from the position of the Second Life® user is also a multimedia symbolic edifice representing desires in the manner of unitary urbanism. In a set with the other sculptures in "Seventeen Unsung Songs," this piece constructs an interactive landscape that sharpens dulled perception, forcing literal connection and sympathy between an avatar and the "inanimate" creations that populate its lifeworld.

However, as a digital artist Nash himself does not perceive Second Life® as do most Second Life® users, who tend to perceive his work as "architecture," for this would require one to define Second Life® as material rather than analogical space. In its most material aspects, this environment is after all the instantiation of a mathematical concept, "realized in digital form." It is a realtime 3D multiuser virtual environment (RT3D MUVE) in which multiple media interact to create affect. Different media principles, including artificial intelligence, converge in this space to the ends of producing affect and meaning through representation—in this case of "architecture" and "land." What Nash says he has produced is art in a virtual postconvergence medium.[44] It is important to note this difference in space perception between amateur users and artist-programmers in these kinds of virtual worlds: while analogies to SI concepts such as "unitary urbanism" may be useful in terms of "reader/ user response" theories, Nash indicates that the concepts can have only a metaphorical relation to the actual art practices located there. Yet while Nash's work is a redefinition of space beyond anything that the SI conceived, it is essentially in line with the SI's advocacy of a "space" that was dematerialized to the extent that it enabled affect to operate against the anesthetic effects of the spectacle.

A different and much more materialist project with overt psychogeographical resonances juxtaposes space inside Second Life® to space

outside it, whether the everyday world of consensus reality or the more
rarified space of the real-world art gallery. For example, John Craig
Freeman's project "Imaging Place," a collaboration with critical theorist
Greg Ulmer and the Florida Research Ensemble, has three locations:
it is a project located on the WWW, it is an installation in galleries and
museums, and it is built as interactive architecture in Second Life®,
currently floating in the air above Emerson Island (owned by Emerson
College).[45] The project defines its psychogeographical aims through a
combination of Situationist ideas, Greek poetics, *I-Ching* philosophy, and
Ulmer's synthesis of *Applied Grammatology* to create "a place-based virtual
reality project that combines panoramic video, and three-dimensional
virtual worlds to document situations where the forces of globalization
are impacting the lives of individuals in local communities."[46] Freeman
and Ulmer have constructed a theoretical vocabulary to describe the
connections between place, storytelling, memory, mood, and political
context in these scenes: their method is called "choramancy" (incor-
porating the notion of choral voices and Platonic chora, and related
to geomancy), which works through "Mystory" with the aim of "divina-
tion," a revealing of how and what reality is at a given moment in time.
Ulmer has directly correlated the aims of the project with those of the
Situationists, noting that "The SI tested possibilities of traversing the city
form following not conventional maps but the hubs of mood. [A] pos-
sibility tested in 'Imaging Place' is the capacity of atmospheres to sustain
moods, and these in turn function as attractors of attention and focus,
with important implications for ethics and politics of cyberspace. Second
Life®® provides ideal conditions for testing mood as primary interface."[47]

   In "Imaging Beijing," presented as part of Turbulence.org's "Mixed
Realities" project, Freeman notes, "The mood of the movement from
Xizhimen Station to the demolition zone was framed by mourning the
loss of ancient cultural heritage on the one hand, and optimism for a
brighter more livable future on the other, simultaneous attraction and
repulsion. . . . The place was allowed to speak for itself." The Second
Life® location is visual and interactive, literalizing in three-dimensional
space the layering of maps and discourses that occurs at the website. To
access "Imaging Beijing" in Second Life®, an avatar flies up into the sky,
landing on a huge round floating disc upon which is imprinted a map
of the earth as seen from atmospheric space. Red lines, like laser light
strings, project out of this map into the space above it, connecting to
other platform satellite images of specific city spaces. Upon these map-
platforms sit egg-shaped, metallic-looking pods; once in the pod, one
accesses a 360-degree view of that city space and hears audio interviews
or conversations with a local resident. An avatar lands on the globe

platform, walks a laser tightrope to the Beijing platform, walks into the pods, and experiences an aural and visual "encounter" with a young man from Beijing.[48]

This project links map to mood, a lived human history, to the physicality of place, and connects both to larger political and social constructs such as government and international policies. The effect of visiting the Second Life® installation and going through all of the pods on one platform is one of temporary saturation or immersion in, but also of an unsettling sense of unfamiliarity with, place, very unlike the reassuring familiarity given by tourism. Debord wrote that "basically tourism is the chance to go and see what has been made trite, because the economic management of travel to different places suffices in itself to ensure those places' interchangeability."[49] The aim of "Imaging Place" in all of its exhibition formats is clearly to return the specificity of place to space through virtual psychogeography. When asked about the relation between the "Imaging Place" project and Situationism, Freeman noted, "As I understand it the Situationists were developing the idea that moving through space, i.e. the dérive, was an act of reasoning, that thinking itself was spatial in nature. . . . In my work I try to capitalize in the inherent drifting of avatars through a virtual experience by providing the equivalent of the Situationists' *plateau tourné*, the vortex, turntable or hub. I do this with the panoramic imagery which is represented in various iterations of the Imaging Place as the node. The nodes are organized into complex scenes we call chora, which is similar to the zone in psychogeography."[50] But "mood" for Freeman includes that which is induced by social context. He notes that he is increasingly drawn to those places where the forces of globalization are affecting the lives of local communities, places like borders and ports, walls and fences.[51] For his "Imaging the U.S./Mexico Border" project, Freeman traveled to the U.S./Mexico Border region at Tijuana and San Ysidro, producing in roughly a week the fieldwork media needed to complete the project. He notes at the project website that "There are three public issues I am exploring. . . . First is the contradictions and bigotry of U.S. Immigration policy toward Latin America. Second is the labor and environmental exploitations of North American Free Trade Agreement, and the third is global human trafficking, slave and indentured labor, and the sex industry."[52] The installation is available now at the Second Life®, Emerson Island location, but it opened on January 5, 2007 at Ars Virtua, one of the premier art galleries in Second Life®.[53]

If these Second Life® projects illustrate how situationist psychogeography and dérive have moved into virtual space, then others illustrate how constructed situations based on détournement can be a central aim of much virtual art. A small example of Second Life® détournement

Fig.2. John Craig Freeman, "Imaging Beijing," in Second Life

was the hacker-programmed "bombing" of ABC, the island of the Australian Broadcasting Network (at the time the third largest commercial site at Second Life®), which incapacitated the island and changed its landscape to a bomb-craterscape.[54] The "griefing" by anonymous attackers was particularly interesting in that the "bombs," or at least their fuselage, apparently were in the shape of Nike and Puma logos. Even if not intended this way, the attack managed to take a form reminiscent of Situationist spontaneity, anonymity, and anticorporate/anticapitalist politics, ironically détourning media images within the context of urban play. Other hacker-inspired activities in Second Life®, often termed "malicious play" or outright sabotage, similarly mimic the poetics of détournement. One example is the deliberate creation of "grey goo," self-replicating object scripts that demand increasing server attention, in essence shutting down a system while concentrating on replicating an object ad infinitum. ("Grey goo" is a term from nanotechnology and science fiction describing an apocalypse scenario where self-replicating robots take over the earth.) Second Life® famously suffered a grey-goo attack in September of 2006, when huge floating Super Marios appeared on numerous islands and started replicating, eventually locking up the grid. The object of the anonymous attacker may have been malicious play or arrogant techno-display, but the form of the attack—programming a popular game figure icon to shut down a game world increasingly defined by capitalist imperatives—was right up the Situationist alley, and grey goo has in fact been deployed to aesthetic ends in work by Second Life® performance artist Gazira Babeli.

Babeli is now also a member of Second Front, a Second Life® performance art troupe that aims to enact Situationist principles, aesthetics, and politics, particularly in the form of détournement. Formed in 2006 with eight members who took their influence "from numerous sources, including Dada, Fluxus, Futurist Syntesi, the Situationist International and contemporary performance artists like Laurie Anderson and Guillermo Gomez-Pena," the group creates "theatres of the absurd that challenge notions of virtual embodiment, online performance and the formation of virtual narrative."[55] Second Front is performance-based, operating in real time in virtual space. Early on, the troupe staged absurdist performance happenings and interventions in Second Life®, generally confronting the virtual world's increasing mirroring of real-life bourgeois mundanity and commercialism. One early performance, for example, was at Reuters News Agency Island inworld, where the group staged an all-text performance improv called "BREAKING NEWS." As described by Man Machinaga in a *Rhizome* interview with Domenico Quaranta, "Breaking News was an absurdist play on the 18th Century idea of the Town Crier, played out in the latest of 21st Century news facilities. By shouting out non-sequitur, moment-to-moment headlines, Second Front hoped to perhaps jam the usual flow of information in the Reuters space."[56] Second Front have staged a commentary on celebrity at Columbia College campus by having one of their (increasingly well-known) members gunned down at a lecture; have taught seemingly genuine Second Life® self-help seminars on "feeling the intoxication of being an avatar," which ended with befuddled conferencees confronting a blood-splattered lecture hall and flaming floor tiles; have disruptively delivered massive amounts of (unasked for) virtual pizzas to a virtual Second Life® board meeting; and have entered combat gamer zones in Second Life® unannounced and wearing peacenik gear "in order to carry out our first official martyrdom operation."[57]

After 2007, the group moved toward scripted performance pieces with an interventionist edge, and the troupe's current members have fundamental ties to SI aesthetics, particularly as these were reformulated by Fluxus in the 1960s.[58] Since 2008 and the more recent reformation of the troupe membership, Second Front's work has the polished quality of gallery or public performance, often being performed not only in the virtual reality of Second Life® but also in real-world galleries, festivals, and event venues such as iMAL (Brussels) and PERFORMA 07 NYC. The group may be moving away from its Situationist roots in the direction of surrealist performance and museum exhibition, though certainly the cornerstones of their aesthetic have remained détournement and remediation.

Remediation, defined as the refashioning and layering of older media and media references within newer media forms,[59] has come to play a significant role in the group's performance identity and its aesthetic of play. For example, *The Gate*, publically performed in October 4, 2007, was located at Odyssey Art Simulator and featured a video portal between Second Life® and the new Brussels Interactive Media Arts Laboratory (IMAL). *The Gate* was seen simultaneously by real-life audiences in Brussels and avatar audiences at Odyssey.[60] Organized and curated by Yves Bernard with a Second Front performance curated by Domenico Quaranta, the performance featured "a bi-directional video stream on a 4 metre x 4 metre screen projected live," showing avatars to people and people to avatars. Avatar attendees in Second Life® approached a huge, freestanding portal or doorlike object, seemingly made of wood and ornamented in high baroque style. Festooned around, before, above, and on the portal as the performance ran were naked members of Second Front, adding living dimensions to, becoming part of, and providing reflexive commentary upon the performance space. The piece was intended to remediate Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz's *Hole in Space* (1980), a live three-way telecommunication event broadcast simultaneously in New York and Los Angeles.[61] In addition, in front of the projection screen in the Second Life® virtual world, Second Front installed a baroque door mimicking, in virtual reality, Auguste Rodin's monumental portal, *The Gates of Hell* (1900). Those watching the performance of Second Front were probably also reminded of Daniel Canogar's *Clandestinos Madrid* (2006), a public performance in which Canogar projected human forms onto a church front (Iglesia de San Pietro in Montorio).[62]

Reconstructing realities in two worlds, *The Gate* drew a crowd within two kinds of corporate space and was also a reversal of capitalist recuperation, a multiple *fracturing* of worlds that drew attention to the oddness of the everyday—an immediate, affective happening. Creating immediacy in the contact zone between Second Life® and IMAL, and enacting Vaneigem's dream of "one huge instant," the performance nonetheless was highly stylized, recalling both the SI's injunction to planning and rational play and late-twentieth-century art's tendency toward pastiche, popular culture referencing, self-reflexivity, and remediation. However, unlike Freeman's "Imaging Place," which is located at a number of semi-permanent online locations and thus can be caught by a web surfer's dérive, *The Gate* was performed in the public space of a virtual reality "game," while also being to some extent cordoned off in an "art space" on Odyssey that did not interfere with the mundane activities of other Second Life® residents. The piece was not constructed specifically as an SI-inspired event or a "situation" as much as an intermedial performance,

but it indicates how difficult it may be *even in virtual space* to construct Situations that move beyond the environments of the intellectual elite and into the spaces of everyday activity. At the same time, the effort of artists to colonize and redefine the space of the aesthetic in Second Life®—to produce incredibly sophisticated media performance art that awakens this space—is quite extraordinary.

End Thoughts

The Situationists understood the nature of play as performance in both its positive and negative sense. Performance is, after all, precisely the logic of the spectacle that reduces thought and collapses time into immediate, affective impression and insatiable desire. According to Debord, this means a fracturing of the world into infinite markets that offer us only iterations of the same: performance within the spectacle includes both the activity of production and the activity of consumption, but since its sole purpose is distraction, it offers no real diversity or depth. Reducing thought and experience to performance and pastiche—especially highly technologized, highly stylized versions—*is* the logic of the spectacle. In the completely technologized world of the Baudrillard simulacrum, it would seem that the Matrix would be complete, the Spectacle triumphant, the aesthetic rendered impotent.

Yet the SI also declared that "we need to work toward flooding the market—even if for the moment merely the intellectual market—with a mass of desires whose realization is not beyond the capacity of one man's present means of action on the material world, but only beyond the capacity of the old social organization."[63] In the tradition of the modernist avant-garde, aesthetics here becomes not a withdrawal from life and politics but their essential medium. The Situationists lobbied for a paradox: using *art* against *representation*, reconstructing a *poesis* out of the signs of the times. The paradox is negotiated by online communities and redoubled because of their space of performance: they must act in the space where somatics have disappeared, where reality consists of the notation of pixels and binary code. Yet, while Lawrence Lessig has shown how computer code can become the tool of totalitarianism, he also attacks this trend by placing his work free online, in the very space that most resents its enunciation. Likewise, cyberartists use code against codification in a WWW performance space. The attack against boredom and generic thinking and the freeing of perception occurs not through the overt claims of politics—understood as just another manifestation of the Spectacle, as symptoms without origins or ends—but through an

aesthetic that unearths and awakens the human, voice, thought, and somatics of perception. The counterattack is a situated art praxis in the midst of virtual unreality.

Contemporary avant-gardes cannot ignore a technologized space of performance simultaneously more visible and more invisible than any that has gone before. I have contextualized the cyberarts discussed in this article as a potentially revitalized Situationist effort to reenergize human experience and perception. The effort is not without its dangers, and given their operation in a spectacular medium at some distance from material reality, it is easy for the cyberarts to fall prey to decadence, style, market imperatives, cool chic, or empty but beautiful affect. It is easy for them to forget the people to whom they mean to talk; it may be difficult at times to tell the virtual dancer from the virtual dance. It is equally tempting for critics and web surfers to forget that most of these artists understand virtual space differently, and are not overtly mimicking or updating SI concepts as much as they are reconceptualizing what "space" means in the environments of digital media. Web arts will need constantly to innovate, as the totalitarian and market forces of the web and virtual realities close down on experimentation, critique, and open-source ethics, but also as technology itself evolves. Yet if the Situationist International was correct, and the triumph of the spectacle in material space is inevitable, it may be that détournement, derive, and psychogeography in cyberspace—the conjoining of humanity, art, and cosmopolitan space within the completely artificial and algorithmic "space" of virtual reality—may, ironically, be our last means to glimpse the authentic life. In this regard, we surely need to consider how new media arts both return to, and redefine, the approaches of their materialist ancestors.

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE

NOTES

1   Libero Andreotti and Xavier Costa, eds., *Theory of the Dérive and Other Situationist Writings on the City* (Barcelona: ACTAR: Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona, 1996), 7. Debord defines "the spectacle" in various issues of the SI but in a most sustained manner in *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995). The SI membership never numbered more than a dozen or so, and the reality status of the London Psychogeographical Society seems unclear. For a statement about surrealism by the emerging SI itself, see the lead article of issue no. 1 of the *Internationale Situationniste* (June 1958), "The Bitter Victory of Surrealism," http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/ si/bitter.html. On the SI in relation to Dada and surrealism, see Sadie Plant, *The Most Radical Gesture: The Situationist International in a Postmodern Age* (London: Routledge, 2002), chap. 2, and Tom McDonough, "Introduction: Ideology and the Situationist Utopia,"in

Guy Debord and the Situationist International: Texts and Documents, ed. Tom McDonough (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), ix–xx. For Situationist and pre-Situationist materials, see Reuben Keehan, et al., Situationist International Online *http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/ index.html*; Ken Knabb, ed. and trans., *Situationist International Anthology*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, CA: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1995), online at http://www.bopsecrets.org/.

2   See Guy Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography," *Les Lévves Nues* 6 (September 1955), repr. in Andreotti and Costa, par. 2, *Theory*, 18–21.

3   See the now classic "Hacker Manifesto," *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ Hacker_manifesto.

4   Debord, "Theory of the Derive," *Internationale Situationniste* 2 (December 1958), repr. in Andreotti and Costa, *Theory*, 23.

5   See Peter Cho, "Cyber Cartography," December 10, 2003, users.design.ucla. edu/~petercho/fall03/cybercartography.pdf.

6   "Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action," trans. Ken Knabb at Situationist International Online, http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html

7   "Preliminary Problems in Constructing a Situation," *Internationale Situationniste* 1 (June 1958), repr. in Knabb, par. 1 , *Anthology*, 43–46 and at Situationist International Online, http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/problems.html.

8   "The Meaning of Decay in Art," par. 13, at Situationist International Online, http:// www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html.

9   Debord, "Report."

10   "Contribution to a Situationist Definition of Play." *Internationale Situationniste* 1 (June 1958). trans. Reuben Keehan at Situationist International Online, *http://www.cddc.vt.edu/ sionline/*

11   "Détournement as Negation and Prelude" par. 1, at Situationist International Online, http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/si/report.html.

12   Debord, "Contribution."

13   Debord, "Introduction," 20–21.

14   Debord, *Society*, 126.

15   Conflux Festival Site 2009, *http://www.confluxfestival.org/*. Glowlab gallery in New York has been relaunched under the name of its founder Christina Ray, *http://www.christinaray. com/pages/about.*

16   "Stranger than any Pynchon Conspiracy," *http://www.socialfiction.org/snapwalk.html.*

17   See San Precario at *http://www.sanprecario.info/*; see *http://info.interactivist.net/* for a quick summary of these groups. "Precarity" is a neologism combining "precarious" and "proletariat" and signals a state of instability and exploitation of contingent labor in a globalized economy. In Milan, Italy, workers created a "St. Precario" and since 2001 have celebrated February 29 as Precarity Day featuring Situationist-like interventions; this has caught on as a new EuroMayday, a carnivalesque, protest-based network. For information, see *http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Precarity_(Euromayday)*). Beauvais Lyons' "Hokes Archives" at *http://web.utk.edu/~blyons/* and the Yes Men at *http://theyesmen.org/*.

18   "Impossible Communication or Power as Universal Mediation," *The Revolution of Everyday Life*, *http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display_printable/40.*

19   See early treatments of this topic by Domenico Quaranta, *Net Art 1994–1998: La vicenda di Ada'web* (Milan, 2004) and also Maren Hartmann, "Situationist Roaming Online," *http:// hypertext.rmit.edu.au/dac/papers/Hartmann.pdf#search=%22Hartmann%2C%20Maren%20 situationist%20roaming%20online%22.*; Alt-X, *http://www.altx.com/home.html*, which has been online since 1993 and which features links to two prominent and established net. art sites, Hyper-X and HIAFF.

20 George L. Dillon, "Net.art," in *Writing with Images: Toward a Semiotics of the Web*, 5.2, (2003) *http://courses.washington.edu/hypertxt/cgi-bin/12.228.185.206/html/tablesall.html*

21 See D'Urbano's "Couture," *http://www.durbano.de/couture/* and http://www.nr3.de/ for more information about Reichelt's work.

22 *http://hawaiicowboy.free.fr/info.html*. See "Keyboard," *http://www.turbulence.org/Works/keyboard/*. See 'What are you?" at *http://whatareyou.net/*. See the artists' explanatory website, http://marika.incident.net/.

23 In contrast, a number of newer projects take as their subject datamining, server surveillance, and bot mapping: see *http://www.net-art.org/spook*; Marika Dermineur's "Antidatamining" (2007–2009), *http://antidatamining.net/*, done in conjunction with the Rybn Collective, *http://www.rhiz.eu/institution-14996-en.html*.

24 The online interface of DissemiNET as of April 2010 was located at *http://disseminet.walkerart.org/*

25 *http://disseminet.walkerart.org/html/gallerycredits.html*

26 *http://www.walkerart.org/archive/D/B17371F39382358D6164.htm*.

27 Beth Stryker, "Interview," *http://www.walkerart.org/archive/7/B57371B81DB88C1A6169.htm*.

28 Equally politicized online projects by Korean artist Rho Jae Oon: "3 Open Up" is one section of a trilogy presenting slow-moving, digitalized scenes depicting lived geography. For some time, these works were available online at *www.vimalaki.net*; the site is now offline, and one wonders if the current political situation has intervened.

29 N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 128.

30 Jessica Pressman, "The Strategy of Digital Modernism: Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries's *Dakota*," *Modern Fiction Studies* 54, no. 2 (2008): 310–11.

31 Petra Heck, "Interview with Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries," nettime-1, *http://www.mail-archive.com/nettime-l@kein.org/msg01062.html*.

32 Quoted in interview with Thom Swiss, "Distance, Homelessness, Anonymity, Insignificance," *Iowa Review Web* (2002), www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/tirweb/feature/younghae/interview.html.

33 See, for example, the Histories of Internet Art: Fictions and Factions site, available through Alt-X, *http://art.colorado.edu/hiaff/home.htm*, and "Introduction to net.art" at *http://www.easylife.org/netart/*. Turbulence.org is located at *http://www.turbulence.org/about/about.html*. The Electronic Literature Organization is located at *http://www.eliterature.org/*.

34 This was recognized by the Brooklyn, NY Conflux Festival in September, 2007 (seehttp://sndrv.nl/slwalkietalkie). In that annual celebration of psychogeography, attendees were given free walkie-talkies that connected visually to an avatar in Second Life®; while one walked the streets of New York, the other walked simultaneously in Second Life®—extending the boundaries of psychogeography itself.

35 The Second Life® official site is located at *http://secondlife.com*.

36 For a full ethnographic study of the communities in Second Life® see Tom Boellstorff, *Coming of Age in* Second Life®*: An Anthroplogist Explores the Virtually Human* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008).

37 See Bryan Carter's bio, *http://glsconference.org/2006/pop/carterb.htm*.

38 Stephan Doesinger, ed. *Space Between People: How the Virtual Changes Physical Architecture* (Munich: Prestel, 2008), 14.

39 Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (New York: Harvest Books, 1978).

40 Gilles Ivain, "Formulary for a New Urbanism," *International Situationiste* 1 (June 1958), repr. in Andreotti and Costa, *Theory*, 14–17.

41 At *http://www.virtual-art-initiative.org/Virtual_Art_Initiative/index.html*. Virtual Arts Initiative is directed by Gary Zabel, a member of the University of Massachusetts at Boston's

Philosophy Department since 1989. The Initiative maintains four sims in Second Life®: Caerleon Isle, an artists collaborative space; New Caerleon, an experimental university; and Caerleon Art Collective and Caerleon Art Collective 2, both artists' colonies. Activities include workshops, lecture series, and seminars as well as active installations and collective projects. Odyssey Art Simulator, *http://odysseyart.ning.com* was created by Pacino Hercules and Sugar Seville (SL™ avatar names) and as of April 2010 was managed by Artistic Director Fau Ferdinand with codirector lizsolo Mathilde, both members of The Second Front, and is funded by Dynamis Corporation.

42   "Seventeen Unsung Songs" is featured in Doesinger, *Space Between People*, 88–89.

43   Dr. Lisa Dethridge (Lisa Dapto), "Seventeen Unsung Songs," *http://yamanakanash.net/ secondlife/unsung_songs.html*

44   Email with the artist, May 3, 2010. Nash also directed me to Wikipedia, "Post-Convergent," http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Post-convergent.

45   Imaging Place in Second Life®, SLurl (111, 141, 64) and online at *http://institute. emerson.edu/vma/faculty/john_craig_freeman/imaging_place/imaging-placeSL/index.html*. The Florida Research Ensemble, *http://institute.emerson.edu/vma/faculty/john_craig_freeman/ imaging_place/about/research_ensembles/fre.html*.

46   *http://institute.emerson.edu/vma/faculty/john_craig_freeman/imaging_place/imaging_place. html*. See Podcast for "Imaging Place,"at http://institute.emerson.edu/vma/faculty/ john_craig_freeman/podcast/ImagingPlace_2008/

47   Email in response to author questions, posted at "Imaging Beijing" (blog), January 17, 2008.

48   At *http://pages.emerson.edu/Faculty/J/John_Craig_Freeman/*

49   Debord, *Society*, 120.

50   Email to author, posted at "Imaging Place" blog, January 17, 2008.

51   *http://institute.emerson.edu/vma/faculty/john_craig_freeman/imaging_place/about/projects/ u_s_mex/index.html*

52   *http://institute.emerson.edu/vma/faculty/john_craig_freeman/imaging_place/about/projects/ u_s_mex/index.html*

53   *http://arsvirtua.com/about.php.*

54   For reports on the bombing, see News.com.au, *http://www.news.com.au/entertainment/ story/0,23663,21780235-7486,00.html*. In Second Life®, "griefing" is the term used to describe harrassment, sabotage, acts of violence, or vandalism at any island site, and extreme griefing is cause for expulsion.

55   "The Second Front," *http://www.secondfront.org/index.html*#. Original members of the group were Wirxli FlimFlam/Jeremy O. Turner; Gazira Babelli; Man Michinaga/Patrick Lichty; Tran Spire/Doug Jarvis; Penny Leong Browne; Liz Solo; Great Escape/Scott Kildall. Today the group is comprised of members Gazira Babeli; Fau Ferdinand/Yael Gilks; Great Escape/Scott Kindall; Bibbe Oh/Bibbe Hansen; lizsolo Mathilde/Liz Solo; Man Michinaga/Patrick Lichty; and Tran Spire/Doug Jarvis. Wirxli FlimFlam committed avatar suicide for love of another avatar in a SL performance piece on Valentine's Day 2010.

56   At http://slfront.blogspot.com/. It should be noted that Second Life® has made it clear that it may log user chat and activities inworld, and it has increasingly instituted policies policing residents inworld behavior (such as "age play") in the interest of community standards and responsible play, a policy sometimes seemingly counter to its ethic of resident-constructed communities on an open-source model. See, for example, Linden's statement on its collection of information, http://secondlife.com/corporate/privacy. php?lang=en-US#privacy1.

57   http://slfront.blogspot.com/2007/08/inter-access-summer-workshop.html

58   The group has stated its ties to Fluxus in a number of public interviews and blogsites. In addition, the group members have professional and personal ties to Fluxus. Patrick

Lichty, a professor at Columbia College, Chicago, is editor-in-chief of *Intelligent Agent*, an electronic arts/culture journal based in New York City and is an animator for the activist group The Yes Men, an internationally recognized performance group that stages public hoaxes embedding political commentary (see *http://theyesmen.org/*). As her webpage notes, Bibbe Hansen is the daughter of Al Hansen of Fluxus, worked with Andy Warhol and Jonas Mekas, and appeared in Warhol's films. Babeli was part of the initial launch of Odyssey Art and is accruing international gallery and exhibition recognition; Simulator Liz Solo and Scott Kindall are practicing artists in multiple media.

59 The term "remediation" became mainstream with the publication of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Boston, MA: MIT Press, 2000).

60 Discussion and pictures of *The Gate* performance can be viewed at Quaranta's archived site "Spawn of the Surreal," *http://spawnofthesurreal.blogspot.com/search?updated-min=2007-01-01T00%3A00%3A00%2B01%3A00&updated-max=2008-01-01T00%3A00%3A00%2B01%3A00&max-results=22*

61 Recently "Hole in Space" was exhibited as an installation at The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art as part of The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now, Nov. 2008–Feb 2009. Pictures of the original event are in the museum catalog.

62 See pictures of Canogar's piece at http://www.danielcanogar.com/ and http://www.seacex.es/Spanish/Activities/Activity_Library/Paginas/ACTIVITY_171_1.aspx?vid=1_1_171_508

63 Debord, "Introduction," in Andreotti and Costa, *Theory*, 19.

The Radical Avant-Garde and the
Contemporary Avant-Garde

Philippe Sers

DEBATES ABOUT THE ARTISTIC AVANT-GARDE tend to stress formal oppositions. Yet in doing so they stage a confrontation that soon loses all its meaning, since it obscures the more fundamental problems that animate philosophical discussion—which have more to do with the heuristic function of art than with the capricious and gaudy spectacle of a small circle of people bound together by the latest artistic trends.

To address the question of avant-gardism without limiting our focus to issues of formal innovation, we must return to the first avant-garde—that of the first half of the twentieth century—and clearly identify its principles and intentions, especially in light of the movements that followed during the second half of the twentieth century and that persist today. This object of study demands that we implement a hermeneutic that privileges inquiries into meaning, as well as an approach that makes it possible to combine artistic elements toward an intelligibility [*évidence*] so original as to revitalize our ways of knowing without undermining their rigor.

The artistic revolution of the first half of the twentieth century conferred a new status upon truth in art. In their theoretical texts and practical experiences alike, creative artists—whether the first abstract painters or the Dadaists—define this truth in similar terms and expand upon it methodologically. The encounter between the interior structure of one's being and the organization of the world confers a double quality upon the elements of art—at once exterior and interior—which makes them privileged instruments for a particular way of disclosing meaning. This is true first of all in painting, given that it belongs to the order of strictly visual images (that is, such images are neither mental nor tactile). Yet in this regard painting also recalls music, the art of sound, since music and painting alike belong to a category of art that brings into play sensations felt from a distance, according to the distinction drawn convincingly by Maurice Pradines. With abstraction, painting came to share in the ambition Schopenhauer ascribed to music alone: that of

knowing how to reach the noumenon. To these arts the artists of the avant-garde readily added poetry, in its capacity to attain the register of *transreason* (the Russian futurist *zaum*).

From this point onward, the question that arises is not about the death of representation but its redefinition. According to artists' own accounts, artistic composition is a convocation of meanings—a representation of elements within the order of meaning. At the same time, it also comprises a liturgy of the present, the representification of an event, which the artist experiences as an encounter between meanings, and whose trace it leaves in the work of art.

Through such testimony, the philosophy of art takes into consideration a comportment toward Being, which I will refer to as an ontological ethos. Taking the form of a conceptual blueprint [*épure*], this comportment describes the asymptotic approach of our possible relationship to an origin, or to the meaning of things; it proposes a perpetually renewable mode of evaluation. The fruits it yields are the works of art themselves; the works, in turn, are the trace of this relation, comprising the testimony of the artist or poet. This definition of the work of art clearly challenges the principle of evaluative indifference characteristic of postmodern thinking about art, insofar as such thinking appears markedly complicit with the interests of a totalitarian intentionality. Thus if it is true that thought is called upon to judge the value of these "fruits," such a judgment involves rehabilitating the critical function, which must completely disengage itself from the appreciation of taste and instead engage in a truth procedure. The work of art constitutes the principal material for the testimony in question, of course; but at the same time, an artist's account of the conditions for the appearance of the work in his or her life is no less indissolubly linked to the work, with which it maintains a complex relationship. This account, which emerges when the work stands as a particularly demonstrative and innovative landmark for the truth process, indicates the creative development that has led to the work itself.

Since the revolution of abstraction, arts such as painting, music, and poetry have freed themselves from their descriptive function, acquiring instead the function of an inventory of meaning we see implemented by the radical avant-garde of the early twentieth century; from here on this is how the arts will frame their approach to Being. The fruits of these activities—the works themselves—bear witness to the way Being is approached: that is, to the ontological ethos. The status of truth in art refers to the encounter between an absolute and an ethos. The difficulty here is that this is not a matter of isolating a truth exterior to consciousness (according to the system that determines truth through

the encounter between consciousness and a material reality exterior to it). For the mystery of the absolute is that, in spite of its radical alterity, it posits itself at the very source of one's existence, and thus at the core of one's being.

To identify truth implies taking into account the components of vital experience that confirm the relationship with Being we thus confront during the process of discernment. This identification involves an ethos, and it comprises the ultimate task of any philosophy of art. Discernment necessarily intervenes because the eschatological dimension of ontological exigency leads to an ethos of transgression with regard to worldly conventions; discernment is thus inextricably linked to the identification of value, wherever this may take place.

Artistic intelligibility [*évidence*] manifests itself as a confluence between what Chinese philosophy designates as "heart-mind" and what the Hesychastic tradition refers to as "the energies," brought together in an attitude of moral exigency. Through such concepts we can return anew to Wassily Kandinsky's understanding of "interior resonance": for Kandinsky, interior resonance has little to do with aesthetic appreciation, but functions instead as a kind of indicator that gauges one's experience of an event, as well as its own potential as an instrument of meaning.

Turning to the term "avant-garde" itself, it seems to have become a commonplace in our ways of thinking about art. Since the nineteenth century, its use has become widespread, designating any artistic movement that can be described as innovative. The term's fate is grounded in the relevance of its military metaphorics, which liken artistic invention to the actions of a small band of forces that sets off in advance of an army in order to clear its path. We thus strike upon several basic characteristics of the avant-garde: first, the notion that the avant-garde restores the collective dimension of explorative creativity. But the term also evokes the conditions of conflict that arise between this creativity and the prevailing society; at the same time, we must keep in mind that "avant-garde" designates artistic activity as the means for opening up new territory.

The term's current problems arise from its social and economic valorization, which has become so important today that all artists want to be considered avant-garde—even though they generally consider the essential character of avant-gardism to involve little more than a spectacular revolution in form. The notion of avant-gardism subsequently takes on a different meaning than it had originally: it has come to signify a mindset of formal innovation, rather than a dedication to exploration and radical creativity that clashes with convention. Thus the positions of an entire range of so-called avant-gardes can be accommodated within

an economic consensus that values formal innovation for reasons of competitiveness and profitability. At the same time, competitive rivalry leads to the disappearance of the collective dimension of innovative creativity which had been, no doubt, a fundamental characteristic of the avant-garde. We must therefore accept the idea that the very evolution of the avant-garde, which compels it to follow the trends of the market-place, also brings about its death—a death to which the contemporary art market and institutional consensus alike seem fully determined to have us bear witness by crowning its most ridiculous propositions with museum exhibitions. These preliminary remarks highlight the instabil-ity of terms such as "avant-garde," as far as artistic experience goes. For it is by no means clear that the term means the same thing for the avant-garde of the first half of the twentieth century as it does for the avant-garde that followed.

With regard to the contemporary avant-garde, it is worth recalling here the important precautions formulated by the founders of the radi-cal avant-garde since its very inception. In a letter to Hans Richter, who was then remaking himself as an historian of Dada, Marcel Duchamp writes on the subject of neo-Dada that "this Neo-Dada, which they now call New Realism, Pop Art, Assemblage, etc., is an easy way out, and lives on what Dada did. When I discovered ready-mades, I thought to discourage the carnival of aestheticism. In neo-Dada they have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic value in them. I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into their faces as a provocation, and now they ad-mire them for their aesthetic beauty."[1] This condemnation, which the otherwise courteous Duchamp never retracted, harbors a real malaise: indeed, in the contemporary avant-garde we are hard-pressed to find the artistic characteristics that the first avant-garde taught us to discover.

It would be quite unjust to systematically write off the contemporary avant-garde in its entirety, as if it constituted an undifferentiated whole; yet doing so nevertheless helps us highlight the issues at stake. What Duchamp takes issue with in the artistic practices he discusses is an error of evaluation. This error is bound up with a whole set of factors that lead to serious misinterpretations, in the exacting eyes of pioneers such as Duchamp.

Paradoxically, we live today under the equivalent of a new prohibi-tion of the image, which recalls the earliest prohibitions of the biblical period. This furtive contemporary interdiction expresses itself through a devaluation of the iconic instrument as an instrument for approach-ing meaning. The major tendencies in artistic creation today propose either to reduce art to a function of discursive language—that is, to adopt a linguistic standard that renders iconic creation a by-product of

discourse—or else to link it to psychoanalytic source material, which is largely independent of individual responsibility. In both cases, such reductions amount to denying the cognitive functions of artistic creation, especially those proper to the image.

Under these circumstances, each artist now behaves as though he or she had to devise an axiomatic system without any regard to its validity. It is as if all theoretical constructs and experimental approaches were systematically excluded from the contemporary artistic landscape. We see a widespread denial of the autonomy of the artist and the truth function of art. This refusal principally concerns painting and the plastic arts, but it has quickly spread to other creative practices as well. This tendency toward denial is tied to three social phenomena whose combined effects bring about a disruption of the avant-garde paradigm. The first is the tendency to devalue the image—and artistic creation in general—as a particular site of evidentness [*évidence*]; alongside this, we find an erosion of hope brought about by the so-called "end of utopias," as well, finally, as a tendency to question inspiration, both in art as well as in other fields, such as religion.

1. The devaluation of the image and artistic creation as particular sites of intelligibility leads to the idea that it is the world that provides the standard for artistic creation, as well as the site of its evaluation: we thus abandon evaluation to the consensus of the "general" (Søren Kierkegaard). What gets overshadowed as a consequence is the fundamental intuition of artists, for whom artistic intelligibility is the axis around which the world is organized. Indeed, insofar as art functions through the transfer of intelligibility [*évidence*], an artistic creation consistent with a principle of evaluation asserts itself as a site for deciphering the coherence of things, a "formative" standard for the world. The work of artists of the radical avant-garde brings the elements of the world to a site of legibility—whether "elementary" as in the first abstractions, mechanomorphic as in the work of Marcel Duchamp, or visionary as in the work of Hans Richter.

The contemporary avant-garde is bound up with the devaluation of the image, insofar as it prioritizes the pursuit of formal innovation at the expense of rigorous content.

Our era is still characterized by a fascination for the implement [*ustensile*]. Yet the prominence of the implement derives from a falsified reference to Duchamp.[2] Duchamp subjected the implement to *détournement* and transformed its techniques. Unaltered by Duchamp's *détournement*, however, the implement restricts artistic creation to a "constant form" (a term borrowed from Chinese thought). By contrast, the "constant internal principle" in art unfolds as a rhythm apposite to

all formal possibilities; this is why Chinese thinkers, for whom rhythm contains the dynamic of the universe, seek it out in the rock, the cloud, the root, the bamboo. Dada tracked it down by chance, as a provocation in meaning. Exploring the meaning of things is a function of the pure arts (painting, music, poetry). But the promotion of the implement has, quite logically, resulted in the confusion between pure art and the applied arts we see today: even the most commercial trades, such as fashion design and cooking, aspire to the function previously reserved for the pure arts, which remain the only arts suitable for comprising a *mathesis* for transforming the world.

2. The second phenomenon that concerns us here is the belief in the "end of utopias," a belief that equates any intention to improve the world with ideology. We thus witness an erosion—itself eschatological—of our horizon of expectation. There is, no doubt, an idea of progress at the origin of the intention to transform the world through art. This idea is based on the belief in the positivity of a temporal sequence. In the mentality of the radical avant-garde, there is a relationship between utopia and prophecy that breathes life into its major projects, such as Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument* from 1920 or Kurt Schwitters's unusable cathedral. To renounce this hope is to return to an antiquated notion of time as the measure of decline from a state of original perfection deemed as a golden age. In denying any progress other than technical advancement, the contemporary era has led to the systematic promotion of fashion and circumstance. But it is not true that all the elements of time are immediately intelligible; there is always a double reading, which involves evaluation as well as discernment. This double reading enables us to identify what constitutes an *event* in time and to distinguish it from what is merely a *circumstance*. An event is that which has meaning, as well as that which reveals meaning. An event, which comprises the relation of the present to the absolute, marks the coincidence between the moment and the supersession of one's limits. As for circumstance, it is simply what is bound up in the moment, and which no longer consists of anything as soon as we look at it. It is what becomes lost in the fugitivity of the chaotic succession of worldly moments.

The belief in the end of utopias freezes time. Reinforcing the idea that the world is the standard for artistic creation, this belief renders artistic creativity futile—reducing it to a mundane form of spectacle that functions through the collusion of a group which exerts its power of intimidation over an otherwise free consciousness. Such intimidation represents an evasion of dialogue that amounts to a refusal of the other; it has nothing in common with the "provocations" of the radical avant-garde (such as Dada, for example). For whereas provocation constitutes

an invitation to depart from convention, intimidation is by contrast the pressure to adhere. It thus works against freedom.

3. Lastly, the third phenomenon that affects the fate of the avant-garde paradigm is the tendency for contemporary prefabricated thought [*le prêt-à-penser*] to question inspiration. The search for and judgment of inspiration nevertheless constitutes an essential part of an artist's work. Inspiration—the encounter with transcendence—is confused with hallucination, that is to say, a perception without an object. As a result of this negation of transcendence, the work itself, perversely, becomes personified, at the expense of the construction of personhood through a relationship to the absolute. The work fashions an artificial world easily assimilated within the realm of commerce and politics. However, by defining the elements of a work as its means, and the transfer of intelligibility or "cogitable" certainty as its goal, I insist that it is the coincidence of means and ends that enables the work to function as an instrument for the construction of personhood. This is incommensurate with the spheres of either commerce or propaganda.

Alongside its devices for crash-landing us in the immediacy of consumption, the contemporary era has seen the growth of a consensus about (moral) transgression, which has supplanted the transgression of consensus. We are thus witnessing the emergence of rituals of false transcendence. The consensus about transgression is based on the idea that it is essential to free oneself from morality. The transgression of consensus, on the other hand, derives from a problematic: nothing less than a complete moral reassessment. The mere inversion of values does not constitute a refusal of value. Rather, the real transgression toward which artistic creation aims is the transgression of the limitations of human finitude. This latter mode of transgression entails a positive project with regard to moral philosophy. Indeed, three years after *Beyond Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche himself registers the exigency of morality and truth in his famous letter from Turin, *The Case of Wagner*: "That music should not become an art of lying."[3] And yet much of the contemporary avant-garde evolves in this confused way from romanticism to dandyism, from spleen to nihilism. Nihilism implies a withdrawal with regard to the absolute: this is without a doubt the most serious and most basic difference between the contemporary avant-garde and the radical avant-garde. For this withdrawal leads to an evaluative indifference (a "whatever") that serves as an effective ally for totalitarianism.

We might seek out nihilism in the radical avant-garde, but we would not find it. Amidst the turmoil of the last century, and in different spheres of artistic creation, the radical avant-garde developed at once a paradigm for art, a common struggle, and a unified set of preoccupa-

tions. The revolution it initiated is grouped around four major synthetic movements: the first is the struggle of abstraction against figuration in painting, led by Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Kazimir Malevich; the second is the struggle of poetry against literature in the field of verbal creativity, led by the poets of *zaum* and transreason, as well as by Dada and Bretonian surrealism; the third is the struggle of interiority against style in architecture, whose principle theorists were Theo van Doesburg and Le Corbusier; finally, the fourth is the struggle of "metaphysical" theater against psychological drama in scenography, led by the great voices of Hugo Ball and Antonin Artaud.

I consider the following components to be the cement that binds together this avant-garde:

- the establishment of a constant internal principle, as opposed to a constant form, that directs art toward the exploration of original dynamics;
- the affirmation of the autonomy of an individual creative consciousness with regard to evaluation, which rejects authoritarian prescription and leads to individual verification;
- the systematic exploration of all forms of alterity, which thwarts the possibility of confining art to a single cultural tradition and opens creativity to faraway, foreign, or "primitive" civilizations and works of art;
- an openness to transcendence, which authorizes our access to what is different from, or superior to, everyday knowledge;
- the will to transform the world through art, which takes on the status of a specific and privileged instrument of transformation;
- and, finally, the idea that the creative act is the bearer of a dissatisfaction that surpasses the simple play of aesthetics and calls instead for an ethical gaze coupled with an eschatological insistence.

It is on account of this ethical rootedness that the radical avant-garde has become a seat of resistance in the struggle against totalitarianism.

<div align="center">
ÉCOLE NATIONALE SUPÉRIEURE DES BEAUX-ARTS, PARIS
TRANSLATED BY JONATHAN P. EBURNE
</div>

<div align="center">NOTES</div>

1   Marcel Duchamp to Hans Richter, 10 November 1961, quoted in Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 207–8. Translation modified by the author.
2   For further discussion, see my *Duchamp confisqué, Marcel retrouvé* (Paris: Éditions Hazan, 2009).
3   Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 180.

Project MUSE®

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

http://muse.jhu.edu

How Avant-Gardes End—and Begin:
Italian Futurism in Historical Perspective

Walter L. Adamson

WHEN THE DOYEN OF FUTURISM, F.T. Marinetti, arrived in Buenos Aires on the evening of Monday June 7, 1926, the press was alive with reports that the Brazilians had booed him off the stage as a "fascist" and that, in at least some instances during his just-concluded visit there, he had been unable to speak. Not surprisingly then, in his first conversation with the Argentine press on June 8, Marinetti denied that he was a fascist and declared that his mission was not political but purely artistic.[1] This was very likely untrue: the most plausible explanation for why he had come to Argentina was that he was trying to ingratiate himself with Mussolini by playing the role of Italian cultural ambassador, but of course this mission had to be denied in order for it to have any possibility of success. In any case, his political objective demanded a cultural strategy. And in his many performances over the next three weeks—at universities, in theaters, at the Colosseum—he made the usual spectacle of himself, dressing in outlandish costumes such as red pajamas to impersonate the Devil, haranguing *passatisti* (passé-ists) such as Giovanni Papini, championing synthetic theater and theater of surprise, claiming to have been a great soccer player, and hosting "semi-futurist" art exhibitions.

Yet, while Marinetti's reception in Argentina seems to have been more dignified than the one he received in Brazil, press reports suggest that it was quite cool. Jorge Luis Borges, then a 26-year-old poet and editor of the avant-garde review *Proa*, suggested in an interview with *Crítica* that Marinetti had played an important role in undermining the symbolist and decadentist movements, but that "his books have little value—they are Italian simulacra of Whitman, Kipling and perhaps Jules Romains, any one of whom is superior to him."[2] Borges expressed indifference regarding the importance of the visit for the Argentine avant-garde community—"there will be banquets with a store of epitaphs, conferences with many ticket booths and deliberately manufactured high expectations"—but the visit will have no impact ("none") on Argentine culture. Similarly, the painter Emilio Pettoruti, who had spent time in

Italy with Marinetti and declared himself "a personal friend," and whose work was central to the "semi-futurist" art exhibitions Marinetti's visit had spawned, limited his praise to polite formulas ("Marinetti . . . is a man of disconcerting, childlike ingenuity") and defended him against the charge of being fascist.[3] Yet nowhere in a long interview did he give any indication that he still thought of Marinetti as having fresh ideas about art or continuing relevance to avant-garde efforts to merge art and life. In short, both Borges and Pettoruti treated Marinetti as an historical relic—a blast from the past—a man who once played a significant cultural role but one that was now played out.

Born in 1909, Marinetti's futurism was arguably the first of the historical avant-gardes and a prototype for many to follow, including vorticism, Dada, De Stijl, and surrealism. As such, we might think it unlikely that it would have expired as an avant-garde in just seventeen years (although, of those just mentioned, only surrealism lasted longer). Yet Borges and Pettoruti were hardly alone in declaring it moribund in the mid-1920s. Indeed there are important critics and historians of futurism who see its period of genuine creativity and social impact as having ended in 1916 with the death of Umberto Boccioni or even in 1915 with the entry of Italy into World War I.[4] Marinetti himself suggested in the founding manifesto that his movement would perhaps not last a decade and that he wanted it to die a timely death: "Our successors . . . will throw us in the wastebasket like useless manuscripts—we want it to happen!"[5] For the Marinetti of 1909, one might almost say that the death of futurism was precisely the point: avant-gardes *must* produce their own obsolescence, for that is precisely what makes them successful as avant-gardes. Not surprisingly, however, the Marinetti of 1926 was not eager to fold his tent and give up the show, and he certainly did not concede the death of futurism as an avant-garde.

What I want to suggest in this essay is that if we can arrive at an understanding of when and why an avant-garde ends, we can go a long way toward understanding what avant-gardes are. Yet, as Marinetti's prophecy of 1909 intimates, avant-garde endings are linked to avant-garde beginnings. So the essay will first offer some general thoughts about what an avant-garde is in terms of how it begins and ends. The bulk of the essay will then illustrate these thoughts by means of the futurist case. It will conclude with some attention to the larger context in which the historical avant-gardes were produced. The aim here will be to contribute to our understanding of the relation between individual avant-garde endings and the general question of the end of the avant-garde.

* * *

To understand how avant-gardes begin, I want to begin in what may seem like an unlikely place: with some of the central ideas of the American philosopher Richard Rorty. Rorty argued that the great tradition of Western metaphysics stretching from Plato to Kant had effectively ended with Hegel, who, though offering his own pantheistic idealism as a kind of final metaphysics, also, and more importantly, presented a vivid portrayal of the historicity of existence through his *Phenomenology*.[6] For Rorty, Hegel was the first philosopher to understand intellectual history as (in effect) a series of altered vocabularies, altered via "avant-garde" innovation.[7] Hegel criticized his predecessors not in the sense that their views were false but that their languages were obsolete. He thereby inaugurated what Rorty called the "ironist" philosophical tradition that continues with Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida, one that sees philosophy as a literary genre. Because this tradition understands itself in relation to its predecessors rather than in relation to truth, the point of the enterprise is that each philosopher is trying to artfully overcome his predecessor by producing what Rorty called a new "final vocabulary" (final not in the sense of static or fixed but in the sense that what it expresses is "as far as one can go with language"). The philosopher's hope is that this vocabulary cannot be "*aufgehoben*"—cannot be redescribed in ways that will make that philosopher just another link in a chain of tradition.

Within this understanding of the philosophical enterprise, first self-consciously articulated by Nietzsche in his youthful essay, *On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, the fundamental value becomes individual and collective "self-creation." As Nietzsche puts the point there: "The thought of being mere epigones, which can often be a painful thought, is also capable of evoking great effects and grand hopes for the future in both an individual and in a nation, provided we regard ourselves as the heirs and successors of the astonishing powers of antiquity and see in this our honor and our spur."[8] Historical cultures, for Nietzsche, present the "painful thought" that you or I might merely be an "epigone"—"a copy or a replica," as Harold Bloom would later put it—yet, in Nietzsche's view, if we make inspired, creative use of history, we can triumph over it by fashioning new metaphors that cast us as uniquely interesting, fully autonomous self-creations.[9] The enterprise is a precarious one: in seeking stimulation from the past we are in danger of being overwhelmed by it, of becoming "like a snake that has swallowed rabbits whole."[10] Yet if, as Foucault reading Nietzsche would later suggest, we strategize our "returns" to the past with care, we can hope to avoid the "excess" that leaves us awash in nostalgia and to locate the roots of a radically new vocabulary for the present.[11] In this way we can—to return to Rorty's

language—"get out from under inherited contingencies and make . . . [our] own contingencies," thereby allowing the individual to forge a life that "closes in the assurance that the last of his final vocabularies, at least really was wholly his."[12]

Yet, in an important sense, the final, final vocabulary never arrives for Rorty's ironist. Ironists are people who are always questioning their present vocabularies, and yet they also know that arguments in the present vocabulary cannot put an end to their doubts and that no vocabulary gets us "closer to reality" than alternative ones. Vocabularies are like a set of tools that open the world in a certain way. If we are living actively and creatively—if our lives are in motion—then we are likely to get tired of our present tool set, think up some new metaphors, and revise our vocabulary accordingly, or even invent a new one. Hence for the ironist, a vocabulary is always under construction.

In my view, the founders of the historical avant-gardes were aesthetic ironists, and they proceeded much in the way that Rorty's post-Hegelian philosophers do. They began by articulating a vocabulary, one they viewed as innovative, original, dedicated to self-creation, and aimed at overcoming the "anxiety of influence." This vocabulary almost always preceded and oriented the production of art, rather than the other way round.[13] Even avant-gardists who refused to write manifestos—like Wassily Kandinsky—tended to offer detailed written vocabularies that rendered the art of their movements intelligible.[14] These avant-garde vocabularies were very much under constant construction, yet they operated as a kind of launching pad from which a desirable cultural trajectory could be brought into view. As G. B. Guerri says about Marinetti's futurism: "It was for 35 years a building *in fieri*, a model to be continually reshaped with new intentions and adaptations to the times."[15] In other words, the initial vocabulary presented in the founding manifesto was typically supplemented and amended by subsequent manifestos (in Marinetti's case, with a vengeance). Such manifestos were the cardinal avant-garde practice. However, an avant-garde like futurism was never satisfied with this lone practice. Rather, it also continually sought to identify additional practices through which it could foist its vocabulary on its target culture and thereby remake the culture in its image. These practices reflected the particular avant-garde's understanding regarding the relationship of artist, audience, the public sphere in which they are jointly situated, the work of art, and the presentation, staging, or performance of that work.

Does this general picture suggest anything about when the work of such an avant-garde will be completed? At this point, let me just venture an analogy with what the distinguished psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear says about when the work of a psychoanalyst is completed. He argues that we

must distinguish between being an analyst and doing an analysis. Being an analyst is more than just doing something (like being a newspaper reader); it is an identity, a "who we are." And that "who we are" is never fixed: to be an analyst one must always be in the process of becoming an analyst. If you have arrived, then you have ceased to be an analyst. Being an analyst is "re-creative repetition."[16] On the other hand, doing an analysis involves a finite, personal relationship. It comes to an end in one of two ways: betrayal and termination. Betrayal means that in some way the implicit rules and limits of the relationship have been violated (for example, when the analysand is no longer trying to work things through). As in a love relationship that has been betrayed, the analyst will likely try to interpret what happened as something other than a betrayal. But, Lear writes, "there comes a point where one's ability honestly to understand an event in another light runs out."[17] Termination is a more natural end: either the therapy has resulted in a "getting better," perhaps even a "cure," or one party or the other has simply decided to bring the therapy to conclusion. The analysand therefore no longer needs or wants the analyst and the latter must "let go" in the way a parent must when a child reaches maturity. One might say that the relationship represented a project which has now either been realized or simply abandoned.

Similarly, I would suggest, to understand when avant-gardes end, and, in particular, when futurism ended as an avant-garde, we will need to distinguish between the identity of Marinetti and other futurists as avant-gardists, on the one hand, and—on the other—the futurist movement as a vocabulary, set of practices, and changing set of participants intersecting with Italian society in concrete historical circumstances. I will also suggest that Lear's notions of "betrayal" and "termination," appropriately reformulated for the avant-garde context, are helpful in understanding the sense in which futurism is or is not an avant-garde during its various phases of development. So let us now briefly reflect upon the historical development of futurism as an avant-garde with an eye on the question of when and how it ended.

* * *

Anyone who reads much of Marinetti is likely to be aware of the anxiety of influence he suffered. Consider the following paragraph written in 1922: "I am not the equal of anyone. New type. Inimitable model. Don't you copy me. Plagiaristic clouds! Enough! I know all your shapes. I have catalogued them all. Originality! Fantasy!" (*TIF* 551). Less obvi-

ous, perhaps, is the idea that Marinetti's self-proclaimed avant-gardism and inimitability can be located in a Nietzschean tradition. Yet the point has been persuasively argued by Luca Somigli, who shows that, despite Marinetti's own denials, he not only drew upon Nietzsche's concept of "life" but used it as the rhetorical structure of the founding manifesto.[18] And indeed, just before the manifesto pictures his car as landing in a "maternal ditch," its driver shouts, "Let's leave wisdom behind as one does a horrible shell." Later in the text, "wisdom" is parsed as "the eternal and useless admiration of the past" (*TIF* 9). The only real difference between this argument and Nietzsche's is that while the latter concedes the usefulness of some careful "monumental," "antiquarian," and "critical" appropriations of the past, Marinetti discards it as altogether useless.

The manifesto develops the initial futurist vocabulary for which it has become (in)famous: "love of danger," "war, sole hygiene of the world," "scorn for woman," "beauty of struggle," "destroy museums," and the like. Somewhat less well understood is the mode through which Marinetti hoped his vocabulary would become implanted in mass culture and thereby seize the masses as a revolutionary force. Whether or not he was fully conscious of it in this way, I am among those who believe that Marinetti deployed his vocabulary as a Sorelian myth.[19]

In his *Reflections on Violence*, which appeared in 1908 and which Marinetti very likely read, Sorel conceived "myth" in a very different way from our everyday usage. To develop his notion of myth, Sorel drew upon Bergson's notion of intuition, which points us to a "self" that knows in time as lived duration, that lives, as it were, internal to the world. When this self intuits, it literally enters into the object. The contrast term is intellect, which views the world from the outside, inspects it, dissects it, analyzes it, describes it. Hence myth for Sorel is "not a description of the world but a determination to act," which projects a powerful image—like the "general strike" or "class war"—as a way of "entering" the social world and revolutionizing it.[20] In contrast, the form of political thought which develops myths in the everyday sense (descriptions or at least models of what is coming or what ought to be) Sorel called a "utopia." Myths, for Sorel, lead people who have made them their own into action, action that is likely to be truly revolutionary; utopias are more rationalistic, more about systematic programs, and they encourage reform not revolution.

In my view, early futurism is a myth in this sense: it wants to provoke violent change—in a word, war—and it deploys its vocabulary as well as modes of communication based on simultaneity and the destruction of syntax through words-in-freedom [*parole in libertà*] to stimulate desire for a new world, one that has been cleansed of all residues from the past

and acculturated into a receptivity toward modern technology. Because he understood that the futurist myth could not simply be imposed top-down, however, Marinetti was not satisfied merely to articulate a myth; he also needed to perform it in a context in which the masses might make it their own. The main venue he invented for performance was the *serata*, or futurist evening, which enacted the myth of the coming great war as the pelting of onstage poets by the organic refuse that the audience had brought as ammunition. Similar mythic enactments were bound up with the demonstrations of the 1914–15 campaign for Italian intervention in the war.

Yet once Italy enters the war in the spring of 1915, matters begin to change—and rather quickly. For once the war has arrived as an Italian reality, futurism's original myth has, arguably, been realized. The war is no longer a projection into the future but a present reality. And this has enormous consequences in itself: for if the founding myth has been realized, the rationale for the movement no longer exists. In addition, of course, the war would soon change the futurist movement in more direct, material ways. Some important futurists like Umberto Boccioni and the architect Antonio Sant'Elia died in it; others like Carlo Carrà and Ardengo Soffici were stimulated by the war to adopt more cultur-ally conservative and/or more populist orientations. Marinetti, when he was not at the front, focused his energies on a circle of young futur-ist enthusiasts in Florence, one that was completely different from his older prewar circle based in Milan. Indeed, not only was it younger and Tuscan, but it included a number of important female participants, a fact that seems to have reflected a recognition of the intensified need to cultivate a female audience for futurism during wartime. Ultimately, through this group centered around the journal *L'Italia futurista*, Mari-netti sought to reinvigorate the movement, but no longer in terms of a revolutionary myth of violence and war. Instead, *L'Italia futurista* mostly devoted its early issues to literature, and then, in later ones, took stock of the effects of the war. In this latter connection, it hosted an important debate about the social role of women in wartime and postwar Italian society. Finally, in its concluding issue of February 11, 1918, the journal published Marinetti's "Manifesto del partito futurista italiano." Over the next two years, Marinetti entered an intensely political phase in which he sought to organize a futurist party and entered into strategic alliances with militant ex-combatants such as the *arditi* as well as Mussolini's *fasci di combattimento*. He also wrote key political texts such as *Democrazia futurista* (1919) and *Al di là del comunismo* (1920). The futurist utopia had arrived.

Given this transformation, it should not be surprising that there exists an important historiographical tradition on futurism which holds that

it ends as an avant-garde around 1916. Should we agree? I do not find evidence to support the conclusion that either Marinetti or futurism generally abandoned an avant-garde perspective at this stage. If anything, Marinetti's new involvement with the Florentine circle around *L'Italia futurista* intensified it. Yet the avant-garde nature of the relationship between futurism and its public did weaken somewhat. To return to Lear's notions, I would suggest that "betrayal" occurs when the original avant-garde vocabulary is explicitly contradicted or repudiated and that a "termination" occurs either when that vocabulary is abandoned or ceases to be "re-creatively repeated," or when social practices integrated with that vocabulary (for example, in the case of futurism, the *serata*) are terminated. (Another form of avant-garde ending is a simple surrender of movement autonomy, which may be judged either a betrayal or a termination, depending on circumstances and motivations.) In my view, the move from a mythic to a utopian basis for futurism involved no betrayal—the vocabulary is neither contradicted nor repudiated but simply supplemented and amended, a process that, as already suggested, goes on all the time in any case. Nor do I think that futurism lost its autonomy as an integrated social movement with this shift. Yet I would suggest that the shift did entail a weakening of integrated social practices, since the *serata* was almost completely abandoned and the futurist political party never found any comparably powerful mode of interacting with the broad public. Indeed, as Marinetti's party manifesto made quite clear, "The futurist political party that we are founding today, and that we will organize after the war is over, will be entirely separate from the futurist art movement . . . . All Italians can belong to the futurist political party, men and women of all classes and all ages, even if they are entirely lacking in artistic and literary concepts" (*TIF* 158).

If futurism's utopian phase was prepared by the realization of its myth, it also involved a generational shift that significantly supplemented futurism's political vocabulary. Consider, for example, an article written in 1917 by Emilio Settimelli, one of the central figures in *L'Italia futurista*. In it, Settimelli argued that "art is only part of the futurist program—the most developed part, but certainly not the most important." Futurism is "not to be confused with a kind of supermanism and absolutist aristocracy. Nothing could be further from the truth. Futurism is *democracy*. . . . We recognize all the rights of the working and productive classes and our program is in the front line of '*the economic defense and education of the proletariat.*' Our nationalism is anti-traditionalist and *eminently democratic.*"[21] Unfortunately for the futurist movement, however, voters in the November 1919 Italian elections did not appreciate—or perhaps even take notice of—the new party's democratic turn. Election results were disastrous both for futur-

ism and for its fascist allies, neither of whom won a single parliamentary
seat. Partly as a consequence, futurism took an antipolitical turn in the
winter of 1920 and broke openly with the fascists that May.

Meanwhile, Marinetti was beginning to undergo a kind of personal
"return to order." In the fall of 1919, just as he was becoming politi-
cally disillusioned, Marinetti established a love relationship with Bene-
detta Cappa, who was also an artist and who quickly became a futurist!
Nonetheless, their creative and intellectual relationship was clearly
reciprocal. Over the next three years, Marinetti, in active collaboration
with Benedetta, embraced many ideals he had earlier scorned such as
"love and friendship," rejected a concept of life based on "materialist
appetites," developed new spiritualist ideas such as *tattilismo* (tactilism),
and moved his personal life in a direction that encompassed marriage,
children, and an active family life including religious practices such as
baptism and communion (*TIF* 161).[22] From this perspective, what one
scholar takes as Marinetti's shift away from nationalist politics toward
"anarchic individualism" in the summer of 1920 is better understood
as part of a spiritual transformation that will move him precisely in the
opposite direction: toward an embrace of a spiritualized understanding
of fascism.[23] And indeed, after Mussolini takes power in October 1922,
Marinetti begins to reassess his relationship with fascism, concluding a
year later that the best road forward for futurism is to seek to become the
aesthetic arm for fascism rather than an autonomous social movement
in full control of its cultural politics (*TIF*, 491–98, 562–64). Paradoxi-
cally, the break with fascism in 1920 opens the way for a personal and
intellectual reassessment on Marinetti's part, one that ultimately leads
him to embrace the regime as part of a mutual convergence rather than
a simple accommodation.

After 1923, Marinetti and futurists loyal to him certainly propagandized
for the regime. The voyage to South America in 1926, with which we
began, must be seen in this light, as must Marinetti's decision to accept
an invitation to join the Italian Academy in 1928, despite the ringing
condemnation of "museums, libraries, and academies of every sort" that
he had made in the founding manifesto (*TIF* 11). In addition to Mari-
netti's new-found *passatismo*, his promotion of "aeropainting" and other
forms of "aero-art" in the 1930s were certainly of propagandistic value
for the regime, as was his promotion of fascist imperialism in speeches
and via military service both during the Ethiopian campaign and at the
Russian front in World War II. Yet, as Marja Härmänmaa has shown,
Marinetti developed his own concept of the "new man" in the 1930s,
which included a commitment to fascism but went well beyond it with a
rhetoric of hyperindividualism, a continued commitment to a Sorelian

project of overcoming decadence, and unabated Nietzschean anxiet-
ies about being perceived as a mere epigone.[24] Moreover, in my view,
aeropainting cannot be reduced to propaganda, and there continued
to be, in the 1930s, an active futurist movement independent of fascist
politics, even if it was one that risked parody of its own early "heroic"
period by pursuing a more commercial and populist orientation. Futurist
"*case d'arte*" (art houses) emerged, which sold posters, ceramics, clothes,
cookbooks, and related items to a public that, it seems, was eager to buy
them. As such, it may even have functioned as a kind of cultural alterna-
tive to the regime, although in no sense an explicitly antifascist one.[25]

Still, it will doubtless come as no surprise when I now argue that
Borges and Pettoruti were right to assert that the futurism they had
before them was no longer avant-garde. The important point is to try
to understand why this was the case—in terms that can be adapted to
other avant-gardes. I would suggest that there are three reasons why
futurism should be seen as having died as an avant-garde in 1923. First
of all, an avant-garde comes to an end ("terminates") when it either
loses its identity as an avant-garde or continues to have one but with
a sense of having "arrived," hence without the "re-creative repetition"
of its founding vocabulary that I earlier suggested is essential to being
an avant-gardist. Guerri may be right that futurism continued to think
of itself as "*in fieri.*" Certainly manifestos continued to be produced,
exhibitions held, and journals published. Yet when Marinetti and other
futurists declare that they want futurism to become an art of state, there
is an unmistakable air of an arrival, of a journey having ceased, even
if the goal remains unachieved (as was in fact the case).[26] To put the
point another way, what is painfully absent from futurism after 1923 is
a "return" in Foucault's sense of the word—a revisiting of the original
vocabulary in order to disrupt mere nostalgic or self-parodic repetitions
of it and to revitalize current work.

Second, an avant-garde comes to an end when its vocabulary and
practices are "betrayed," which is to say, contradicted or repudiated.
Obviously, Marinetti's decision to join the Italian Academy contradicted
on a practical level his heroic-period condemnation of "museums, li-
braries, academies of any sort." Yet Marinetti went much further in his
new-found fondness for *passatismo* than simply joining the Academy.
As recent scholars have shown, he actively engaged in the work of the
Academy by writing articles celebrating important Italians of the past,
and he lowered futurism to the level of publicitarian support for regime
projects such as the draining of the Agro Pontino marshes.[27] In general,
one might say with Giovanni Lista that the futurism of the fascist-regime
years "does not struggle against the museum but for the museum. Its
battle is not one of contestation and opposition but of integration."[28]

Finally, an avant-garde comes to an end when its vocabulary and practices are "betrayed" or "terminated" in the sense that it is no longer autonomous or self-determining but has become an appendage of something larger which exercises control over it. Surely this is the decisive point: lacking self-determination, an avant-garde is no longer credible. But how are we to understand this outcome? In one sense, Marinetti in 1923 suffered a failure of nerve: in publicly suggesting a new division of labor between the fascist "political revolution" and the futurist "artistic revolution," he was clearly seeking shelter for futurism under the protective wing of the regime. In a larger and more important sense, however, the totalitarian aspirations and rapidly emerging police state in Italy (soon to be confirmed by the murder of Giacomo Matteotti in 1924) certainly encouraged this decision. Far from being a bee buzzing in the ear of the fascist state, futurism would prove to be a faithful sheepdog in the African and Mediterranean pastures through which Mussolini's military machine, such as it was, would seek to roam. No doubt, had futurism chosen to play the role of the bee in an aggressive manner, it would have run the risk of being summarily swatted and destroyed. Arguably, sustained avant-gardism is possible only in liberal political cultures in which a wide swath is given to public expression, and Italian fascism, however anemic in comparison with Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, was certainly not one of those. Nonetheless, there were Italian intellectuals during the fascist regime who played critical roles—typically, but not always, from exile—and I would argue that Marinetti might have made fascist-regime futurism much more contestatory than it was.

Thus, as we reflect on the end of futurism as an avant-garde, I would suggest that we ought to bear in mind the counterfactual question of how futurism might have adapted to the role of a buzzing bee or "disconcerting" force, to recall Pettoruti's word, even in a rather inhospitable political environment. Futurism, as we have seen, went through two avant-garde phases. Mythic futurism was avant-garde in the way its integrated cultural-political performance signalled a spectacularly "revolutionized" vision of modernity. Utopian futurism was avant-garde because of its creative project of reshaping mythic futurism into a concrete political ("reformist") program for Italy and leading an alliance of similarly minded groups in an actual electoral campaign. In both these phases or modes, futurism was avant-garde in the traditional sense of imagining itself on the margin, apart from the center or mainstream, indeed in organized opposition to it. However, the second of these phases—precisely by representing a fundamentally new project—suggests a third possible response (beyond "betrayal" and "termination") that an avant-garde may make when it senses that its founding vocabulary

is collapsing: that of creative "transformation." In this "transformation" scenario, "termination" is followed by a creative renewal in which an avant-garde vocabulary is fundamentally revised or even created anew. I would now suggest that futurism faced another crisis situation in 1923 to which it might have responded with a "transformation" (as it did in 1916), although this transformation would have been not to another form of cultural or political "opposition" but rather to an "immanent" role within the fascist regime—that of the disconcerting, disturbing, contestatory, provocative, iconoclastic element within the mainstream. In this role, an avant-garde functions to keep the system "open" by contesting its "meanings" and "practices," thereby keeping it from becoming complacent, unreflective, corrupt, humdrum, standardized, or otherwise static and safe. With a nod to Theodor Adorno, I would call this role "immanently critical" or simply "immanent avant-gardism." This is the kind of role that, for example, Walter Gropius chose to play in 1918 as he sought to transform a now exhausted prewar German expressionism into a Bauhaus movement committed to an immanent critique of art-industry relations in Weimar Germany. We will return to this point.

* * *

Each of the historical avant-gardes developed in terms of its own internal dynamics and relation to the particular society in which it was situated. Yet they did not simply rise and fall as discrete entities. They also shared a common context: that of the commodity culture which arises in post-1880 Europe and which represents the prehistory of the consumer society as we know it today. And this wider context bore directly upon their individual fates as well as upon the fate of the historical avant-gardes as a whole, particularly in the aftermath of World War II. To understand them and their fates then, we need at least a brief consideration of this wider European, even global-historical context.

In earlier work, I defined this rising commodity culture in terms of four of its most basic features: its strong semiotic dimensions (goods as "meaningful"); its marked differentiation of consumption from production; its aggressive assault upon hitherto "sacred" realms such as art, education, and religion; and its need to confront the intense popular resistance this assault brought on, much of it led by historical avant-gardes.[29] Indeed, mounting a challenge to commodity culture was for the historical avant-gardes a major raison d'être. In this, of course, they were hardly alone. Commodity culture, particularly the more vulgarized and aggressive versions of it associated with Americanism or Americanization,

was strongly challenged in the run-up to World War I by anarchist and socialist movements and in the postwar period by communist movements allied with the new Soviet Union as well as by fascist movements and regimes. What distinguished the historical avant-gardes in this context was their representation of art and artists in the effort to influence and alter public spheres.

Some degree of ambivalence about commodity culture was apparent in most, though certainly not all, of the movements and regimes that challenged it, yet the historical avant-gardes—as full and active participants in commodity culture—were no doubt especially ambivalent. They certainly understood themselves as offering goods to consumers whose selections would be based on symbolic self-representation, and they used appropriate marketing and advertising techniques with this reality in mind. They also understood themselves as taste professionals hoping to educate their audiences about art. They understood that craft production and artisanship was on the way out and, in some important cases, even welcomed this new reality. As John Roberts has written, "From the 1920s onwards . . . [there is an] increasing withdrawal of the notion of artistic value from the mimetic capacity of the expressive hand in painting and sculpture."[30] And the historical avant-gardes certainly sought to seize control over the process of determining artistic styles and the value of artistic products. Indeed, this was at the heart of their efforts. For by the end of the nineteenth century, it was fully apparent to European artists and intellectuals that there was simply no way to opt out of commodity culture. In this new world, the most use-value-oriented artifacts still circulate as commodities—despite or even because of their origins. Indeed, those objects that appear to be the least commodified in origin may become the most valuable precisely because they are viewed as genuine or uncorrupted. Similarly, as Pierre Bourdieu argued, late-nineteenth-century intellectuals who attempted to withdraw from commodity culture and forego "economic capital" actually increased their "symbolic capital" by doing so; whatever their intentions, they came to inhabit a kind of "economic world turned upside down" in which they acquired an "interest in disinterest."[31]

In addition, I believe the historical avant-gardes were alive to the arrival of commodity culture in at least two other ways. Modern capitalism commodifies time, a fact readily apparent in the world of wage labor where labor time is traded for money, but also in "leisure time" and a more general cultural sense that modern life means life lived at increasingly high speeds. Marinetti's reduction of modernity to *velocità* or speed is emblematic here. Second, and related, capitalism, in making labor power a commodity, inevitably raises the question of what "free labor"

might be, and a number of avant-gardes—most notably surrealism—styled their own responses to commodity culture by modeling artistic activity (construed in terms of movement ideals) as free labor.

Even as they participated in commodity culture and understood its inexorability, the historical avant-gardes resisted it as well; indeed, their modes of resisting commodity culture were fundamental to the ways in which they engaged in self-creation as avant-gardes. Among the historical avant-gardes, Marinetti's futurism distinguished itself as the most cunning and inventive in the way it resisted commodity culture. Especially in the prewar period, Marinetti went so far as to appropriate self-consciously many of the values and marketing strategies of commodity culture in an effort to beat the rising entertainment industries at their own game. André Breton's surrealism offered another strategy, much blunter and completely uncompromising: to reconceptualize modern art as a form of pure research uncontaminated by rational or utilitarian ends and conducted by "professionals," yet universalizable in the sense that the research could be used to redefine art as a form of life open to everyone. Whatever the specific strategy, however, the historical avant-gardes were in agreement in one fundamental respect: in their refusal to allow exchange value to become the standard for judging art. They all insisted that only artists, individually or as part of a profession, were fit to assess aesthetic value. They never doubted that artists were capable of developing such standards, and they consistently aimed to wrest control of the judgment process away from critics, audiences, and others they perceived as servants of the bottom line. In this way, the historical avant-gardes, at least implicitly, insisted upon a separation between themselves as a kind of cultural "opposition" and a cultural "mainstream" in which market-oriented, entertainment values prevailed.

This idea that avant-gardes could position themselves as an "outside" to a commodity culture "inside," as an "opposition" to a "mainstream," was one of two central premises that underlay their resistance to commodity culture. The other was the notion that commodity culture is inherently precarious and needs to be fundamentally reformed if not altogether destroyed. Each of these premises became problematic in the aftermath of World War II, although not immediately, and in complex ways that we can only roughly gesture at here.

The first became questionable in the 1960s, if not before, and in at least two ways. First, the idea that avant-garde art could be separated from a cultural mainstream withered from within as avant-gardes embraced popular culture and in a variety of other ways resisted the idea of isolating art from popular life. Second, the idea that the avant-garde could be separated from a cultural mainstream also withered from without in the

sense that the experimental art with which it was commonly identified came to be not only accepted but prized. Such acceptance meant that avant-garde art was "defanged" and no longer perceived as in any way threatening. This is not to deny that the category "avant-garde" continued to be used in a wide sense to refer to those who create "experimental art" as well as more narrowly to those seeking to merge art and life. Yet, increasingly, neither experimental art nor "happenings" represented a serious challenge to mainstream, popular culture. Writing in 1980, the historian Christopher Butler noted that while surrealism had been "a genuinely adversary movement . . . recent avant-garde movements lack such radically disturbing ideological perspectives, and in any case had a much more stable society to contend with. . . . Indeed, we rather like the anxiety caused in us by avant-garde art. . . . Hence the phenomenon of the anti-bourgeois bourgeois, who accepts society more or less as it is, while at the same time entertaining a set of intellectual and artistic notions which are contradicted by his actual behavior." In such circumstances, Butler concluded, it is "difficult to see" how avant-gardes organizing "on the artistic level can have much effect on the larger political one."[32]

The other premise was famously and, it appears, irrevocably shattered in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Eastern European regimes and, soon thereafter, of the Soviet Union. Yet even before those dramatic events, thoughtful European intellectuals were concluding that "alternative scenarios" to a society of mass consumption had eroded and that such a consumer society had to be recognized as "our only future."[33] As the historian Victoria De Grazia has skillfully documented, "by the close of the [twentieth] century . . . Europe was as much a consumer society as the United States," and the main difference between them was only that Europeans were much more conscious of the need to develop a "critical consumerism" through which the new society might be reconciled with "European ways of living."[34] Indeed, if one considers the post-1968 political and social history of Europe, one sees clear signs that a new individualism quite amenable to commodity culture had been arising for two decades prior to 1989. In Italy, for example, the industrial and urban "boom" of the 1960s led to a vast expansion of higher education and, with it, not only an intensifying sense of the possibility of individual advancement by means of education but also the increasing salience of cultural issues involving "meanings" and lifestyle choices such as divorce, abortion, women's liberation, and sexual freedom, including gay rights. In light of this advancing individualism, it is not surprising that the Italian Communist Party, which enjoyed its greatest electoral successes in the 1970s, underwent a political and cultural crisis in the 1980s from which it would never recover.

After 1980, then, the idea of an avant-garde as an aesthetic or artistic challenge to the commodification of art or to commodity culture generally ceased to make much sense in the European and, arguably, the more general Western context. Consumer society comes to be accepted as inevitable and irrevocable; the problem becomes one of finding ways to live with it critically. In this context, avant-gardes as aesthetic ironists can and very likely will continue to play an important critical role. Indeed, a new sense of context for avant-gardes certainly emerged under the watchword "globalization," understood here as the politically uncontrolled expansion of the industrialization of life in which human needs are to be satisfied by large international corporations operating for the most part in rampant disregard of the earth's environment as well as the traditions and needs of specific lifeworld communities. This context was already quite fully presented by Jürgen Habermas in terms of the relation of "system" and "lifeworld" in his work of the early 1980s, even though the term "globalization" did not appear in his work or enjoy widespread currency at that time.[35] More recently, it has been argued by the anthropologist Daniel Miller that, since most people today "have a minimal relationship to production and distribution," it is consumption that "provides the only arena left to us through which we might potentially forge a new relationship to the world." In particular, he suggests that, in the context of globalized production and consumption, "links between First World 'taste' and Third World suffering are understood by the producing nations and it has become evident that increasingly their destiny has become, in effect, a secondary effect of shifts in First World consumption patterns." For the world as a whole, this represents a "democratic deficit" that is repeated within First World nations as the contrast between their "relatively well-off majority" and a minority "living in poverty." All of this has placed the politics of consumption as "the vanguard of history."[36]

No doubt artworks have a role to play in the global context of an avant-garde politics based on values of critical consumption, environmental defense, local and regional community, and cultural democracy. One thinks, for example, of the work of contemporary artists such as Maya Lin, Gabriel Orozco, and Yinka Shonibare, as well as that of an art critic such as Lucy Lippard.[37] Yet it seems doubtful that the role of art in contemporary avant-gardism will be as great as it was during the period of the historical avant-gardes. More obviously, the central avant-garde role would seem to shift to the aesthetic in the broader sense that includes such matters as cuisine, clothing, and cultural identity generally. One example of such an avant-garde that has already emerged is the slow food movement that originated in Italy.[38] Notably, its practices involve "critical" modes immanent to system; it does not cast itself as an

"opposition" in the manner of José Bové and "no-globalism."[39] And it is
interesting that the "Official Slow Food Manifesto," written by movement
founder Carlo Petrini and approved in 1989 by international delegates
to the movement's founding conference in Paris, begins by noting that
"our century . . . first invented the machine and then took it as its life
model. We are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same
invidious virus: Fast Life."[40] Intended or not, a more direct challenge
to Marinetti's futurism would be hard to imagine.

                                    * * *

   By way of conclusion, let me say a few more words about my more
general claim that "immanent avant-gardism" is the form of avant-gardism
most appropriate to and most likely to prevail in the contemporary world.
No doubt some will see what I call immanent avant-gardism as a form
of bad faith or as evidence for the proposition that "real" avant-gardism
has simply been coopted. And I would concede that such forms of im-
manent avant-gardism as do appear today are sufficiently different from
the historical avant-gardes that one may legitimately question whether
the linking word "avant-garde" is truly appropriate. Still, I would argue
that the increasing irrelevance of historic "oppositional" avant-gardism in
most of the world today ought to be celebrated rather than bemoaned.
Neither the fact that the cultural contestation of meanings and practices
no longer typically takes the form of avant-gardes facing off against a
commodified mainstream, nor the fact that this contestation is not
always (or even typically) self-conscious as "avant-garde" or cognizant
of any connection with historical avant-gardes, has diminished the ro-
bustness of the contestation. Around the world today we see a variety
of efforts—sometimes formally organized, more often not—to contest
existing cultural vocabularies and sometimes institutional practices as
well, even if they only exceptionally call into question the economic and
political structures in which those vocabularies and institutional practices
are embedded. What unites these efforts, and what leads me to think of
them as immanent avant-gardes, is their common commitment to revis-
ing cultural vocabularies in a culturally democratic direction. Over the
last several decades, we have witnessed the emergence of democratically
oriented cultural contestation in such areas of meaning as sexuality,
marriage, family, food, ethnicity, national identity (including complex,
hybrid forms of it), and historical memory.
   Like Settimelli's characterization of futurism as "democratic" in 1917,
these new forms of immanent avant-gardism are democratic not simply
because—indeed, not primarily because—they are committed to demo-

cratic ideals such as equal rights for all or respect for common people. Rather they are democratic because they understand that a democratic culture is always a work in progress. In the terms set forth by Jacques Derrida in a late work, contemporary immanent avant-gardism represents and seeks to perform the "singularity" that keeps the system open, that prevents "closure." It understands that democracy is an ideal that is never achieved in practice but is a telos: democracy implies what Derrida calls a "democracy to come."[41] Thus, while present-day forms of immanent avant-gardism may sometimes evince utopian elements (utopian in the usual sense rather than the specifically Sorelian one), their main thrust is skeptical, especially regarding any notion of a finished ideal. They are predicated on the notion that the things ordinary people take for granted often contain hidden complexities of which they are not aware, that the most basic questions are always unanswerable, and that we must therefore learn to live with those questions even as we may wish to have them resolved.

Had Marinetti and the futurists cast an immanent, avant-garde role for futurism under fascism, then they would not have accepted but would have sought to undermine the cult of the Duce and other modes of fixing the meaning of the regime. They would have insisted that fascism remain the open, fluid "doctrine in action" that it constantly proclaimed itself to be rather than the ossified regime it actually became. They would therefore have worked more vigorously against the intransigent, "squadrista" types such as Roberto Farinacci and Achille Starace, and they would simultaneously have promoted a positive image of the "new man" who could not be reduced to the innocuous and often ridiculous image of the futurist as the person whose utopian aspirations are limited to those that can be satisfied by futurist cookbooks. And, in performing this role, they would have anticipated the role that avant-gardes should seek—and, for the most part, are seeking—to perform today. The problem for avant-gardes in current, liberal-democratic cultures operating in a global economy is how to be "critical" without either falling off into an unrealizable, and often counterproductive, stance as an "opposition" or "betraying" themselves by becoming fully "integrated" movements whose messages simply "circulate" without any disconcerting, practical effect.[42]

EMORY UNIVERSITY

NOTES

1   The present account of Marinetti's visit to Argentina is based on a reading of *Crítica*, a Buenos Aires daily, from May 15 through July 1, 1926. For a fuller account based on this same source, see Sylvia Saítta, *Regueros de Tinta: El Diario "Crítica" en la Década de 1920* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Sudamericana, 1998), 164–73.

2   J. L. Borges, "Marinetti Fue una Medida Profilactica," *Crítica* (May 20, 1926): 5. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this essay are my own. For my usage of the concept of "avant-garde," see my *Embattled Avant-gardes: Modernism's Resistance to Commodity Culture in Europe* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2007), 17–18.

3   Emilio Pettoruti, "Marinetti es un Hombre de una Ingenuidad Infantil que Desconcierta," *Crítica*, May 28, 1926.

4   For example, Maurizio Calvesi, *Le due avanguardie*, vol. 1, *Studi sul futurismo* (Milan: Lerici, 1966); *Il futurismo* (Milan: Fabbri, 1970); and *Il futurismo: La fusione della vita nell'arte* (Milan: Fabbri, 1977).

5   F. T. Marinetti, "Fondazione e Manifesto del Futurismo," in *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, ed. Luciano De Maria (Milan: Mondadori, 1968), 13 (hereafter cited as as *TIF*).

6   Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989).

7   Although Rorty is not directly concerned in this book with avant-gardes, he uses the word at least twice in connection with his argument; see pages 48 and 56.

8   Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, ed. D. Breazeale, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), 103.

9   Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), 80.

10   Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, 78.

11   Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), 134–36. See also Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 1–4.

12   Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 97, emphasis deleted.

13   On this point, see the discussion in Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-garde* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991), 5–7.

14   For Kandinsky, see, for example, *On the Spiritual in Art* and *The Blaue Reiter Almanac* in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, trans. Peter Vergo (New York: Da Capo, 1994), 120–219 and 233–85.

15   G. B. Guerri, *Filippo Tommaso Marinetti: Invenzioni, avventure e passioni di un rivoluzionario* (Milan: Mondadori, 2009), 90.

16   Jonathan Lear, *Therapeutic Action: An Earnest Plea for Irony* (New York: Other Press, 2003), 32.

17   Lear, *Therapeutic Action*, 55.

18   Luca Somigli, *Legitimizing the Artist: Manifesto Writing and European Modernism 1885–1915* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2003), 104–14, 248n26.

19   See, among others, Luciano De Maria, "Introduzione," in *TIF*, lvii–lix; Robert S. Dombroski, *L'esistenza ubbidiente: Letterati italiani sotto il fascismo* (Naples: Guida, 1984), 43–45; and Cinzia Sartini Blum, *The Other Modernism: F.T. Marinetti's Futurist Fiction of Power* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1996), viii, 16. However, these scholars tend to see futurism as myth extending into the postwar period whereas I see it as effectively ending with its "realization" in the war.

20   Georges Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, trans. T. E. Hulme and J. Roth (New York: Collier, 1961), 50.

21   Emilio Settimelli, "Il massacro dei Pancioni," *L'Italia futurista* 2, no. 26 (12 August 1917): 1–2, emphasis in original.

22   See also Claudia Salaris, *Marinetti: Arte e vita futurista* (Rome: Riuniti, 1997), 212–53.

23   Emilio Gentile, *"La nostra sfida alle stelle": Futuristi in politica* (Rome: Laterza, 2009), 125.

24   Marja Härmänmaa, *Un patriota che sfidò la decadenza: F. T. Marinetti e l'idea dell'uomo nuovo fascista, 1929–1944* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2000).

25   For more on the futurist cultural politics of the 1930s, see Claudia Salaris, *Artecrazia: L'avanguardia futurista negli anni del fascismo* (Florence: La Nuova Italia, 1992) and my *Embattled Avant-gardes*, 247–48.

26   One of the documents that most clearly exemplifies this sense of arrival is Fillia, "Rapporto tra futurismo e fascismo" (1930), now in Luciano Caruso, ed., *Manifesti, proclami, interventi e documenti teorici del futurismo, 1909–1944* (Florence: Coedizioni SPES-Salimbeni, 1990), vol. 2, document 196.

27   Matteo D'Ambrosio, *Le "Commemorazioni in Avanti" di F.T. Marinetti* (Naples: Liguori, 1999) and Massimiliano Vittori, ed., *Futurismo e Agro Pontino* (Latina: Novecento, 2000). See also Härmänmaa, *Un patriota che sfidò la decadenza*, 152–60.

28   Giovanni Lista, *Arte e politica: Il futurismo di sinistra in Italia* (Milan: Multhipla, 1980), 19.

29   See my *Embattled Avant-gardes*, 34–44.

30   John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007), 2.

31   Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 1995).

32   Christopher Butler, *After the Wake: An Essay on the Contemporary Avant-garde* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), 122–23.

33   Victor Scardigli, *La consommation, culture du quotidien* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), 127, as cited in Victoria De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), 466.

34   De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, 463–67.

35   Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, 2 vols. (Boston: Beacon, 1984–87).

36   Daniel Miller, "Consumption as the Vanguard of History," in *Acknowledging Consumption: A Review of New Studies*, ed. Daniel Miller (London: Routledge, 1995), 1, 3, 8, 17.

37   Maya Lin, *Boundaries* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000) and *Maya Lin: Systematic Landscapes* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2006); Ann Temkin, Briony Fer, Benjamin Buchloh, and Gabriel Orozco, *Gabriel Orozco* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2009); Rachel Kent and Robert Hobbs, *Yinka Shonibare, MBE* (New York: Prestel USA, 2008); Lucy R. Lippard, *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multi-centered Society* (New York: New Press, 1997); and Lucy R. Lippard and Rina Swentzell, "In and Out of the Swirl: A Conversation on Community, Art, and Life," in *Parallaxis: Fifty Five Points of View* (Denver: Western States Art Federation, 1996), 11–24.

38   On the Greens in this connection, see Miller, "Consumption as the Vanguard of History," 46–47. On slow food as an avant-garde movement, see De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, 458–80.

39   De Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, 471.

40   Carlo Petrini, "The Official Slow Food Manifesto," in *Slow Food: The Case for Taste*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2003), xxiii.

41   Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins (London: Verso, 1997), 22, 104.

42   The latter alternative is the nightmare described in Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde*.

Project
MUSE®

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

http://muse.jhu.edu

My Avant-Garde Card

Bob Perelman

> TAG-Heuer: Swiss Avant-Garde Since 1860
> —Wristwatch ad on a billboard before the
> Lincoln Tunnel

> Please don't trade young Andre Iguodala . . . .
> His avant garde rainbow jumper, while not yet
> popular with hidebound coaches and teammates
> who see success only in a shot dropping through
> a net, is bound to catch fire in time.
> —jjg, Philadelphia basketball blog

> Avant-garde is usually a term reserved for inno-
> vators. . . . It is in this sense that . . . a seventy-
> year-old self-described invisible network of fol-
> lowers of Christ in government, business, and
> the military, use the term avant-garde. They . . .
> consider themselves a core of men responsible
> for changing the world. 'Hitler, Lenin, and many
> others understood the power of a small core of
> people,' instructs a document given to an inner
> circle, explaining the scope, if not the ideologi-
> cal particulars, of the ambition members of this
> avant-garde are to cultivate.
> —Jeffrey Sharlet, *The Family*[1]

I

IT'S OBVIOUS FROM MY EPIGRAPHS THAT, when it comes to the avant-garde, it's not easy for me to avoid irony. But it is irony of a particularly unstable sort. On the one hand, I have been closely associated for decades with the poetic movement known as Language writing, and thus my history, allegiances, and goals make the avant-garde central to my interests as poet-critic. That I am a Language writer and that Language writing is avant-garde—these are normative categorizations. But it is just this normativity that fuels the taste for vexation and amusement that draws me to the misuse cited above. It is not that the

epigraphs contain any grains of truth; they are simply emblems of a perception I have found difficult to accept: that the avant-garde is not something to take seriously. But this way of putting it is too tame, too easily construed as a kind of avant-garde gesture, since not taking itself seriously is a primary trait of some parts of the historic avant-garde. What these quotations remind me of is the harsher truth that, at one key point at least, my own poetry derides the avant-garde. This is not a conclusion, for various reasons, that I'm not happy to acknowledge.

As a poet-critic, my poetry and my critical position takings should agree. But the ambiguities of the avant-garde disrupt any such alignment, as the following personal anecdote will illustrate. It's an odd story, something of a home-grown example of the return of the repressed, with the parts of both analyst and analysand played by myself. But as personal as the particulars are, they will bear on the larger situation of the avant-garde vis-à-vis recent innovative poetry.

As I was beginning to write this essay, I had recently come across the examples that serve as my epigraphs. Although they were obviously not germane to the specific topic of avant-garde art, I was intrigued, first, by how wrong they felt, and then by the somewhat paradoxical notion of the term "avant-garde" being used wrongly. To try to spell out what a correct use might be, I wrote the following paragraph. While it might seem like a rather bland and sensible description, it will turn out, in fact, not to express my current thinking. With apologies for the amateur Freudianism, I would now like to present it as something like the manifest content of a dream, a statement to be investigated and unsettled:

While the particulars of the history and trajectory of the avant-garde are charged topics of debate, I can't help but hear a common, normative sense in the word (though I admit the paradox of using common sense to parse the meanings of "avant-garde"). In its plainest use it stands for a historical current of innovative, advanced art continuing into the present. If avant-garde is taken as a distilled essence of the new involving fundamental artistic and political critique, then it can't be separated from a major and growing tradition stretching from various emergent moments in the nineteenth century across the twentieth century (including both modernist and postmodernist work, and thus rendering that binary quite indistinct) and continuing on in the practices of many of the most crucial contemporary artists.

However, such an affirmation—with the avant-garde seamlessly amalgamating contemporary with past practice and combining revolutionary critique with poetic excitement—suddenly seemed like a brittle piety when I remembered "Confession," a 1998 poem of mine which, amid its ironies and displacements, seems quite clearly to delegitimate the

avant-garde, or at least to emphatically dissociate its author from it. The poem in general provides little encouragement to devotees of the avant-garde, but several lines near the end, "I / seem to have lost my avant-garde // card in the laundry," are especially unenthusiastic about the whole enterprise. Some kind of humor is basic to these lines (and to the poem as a whole), but this dismissal of the avant-garde published by a poet so closely identified with Language writing is not simply a joke.

These lines should have been central to what I might have to say about the avant-garde, and it was odd that they didn't come to mind as I began to work on this essay. "Confession" was not, in my own sense of my poetry, an obscure piece. I placed it first in my 1998 book, *The Future of Memory*, which means I thought especially highly of it; I've read it often enough at readings; and in fact I had just finished working with Peter Nicholls on republishing an interview that focused on the relation of "Confession" to the avant-garde.[2] But the most striking symptom of my repression of my own work occurred when a graduate student, emailing me about class business, cited the lines in an aside. He was being witty, playing on Anna Barbauld's "Washing Day" (which we would be discussing in the upcoming class) while simultaneously performing a gesture that should be welcome to poets—quoting their own lines back to them. However, in this case, the performance was lost on me: there was a long moment when I simply didn't recognize that the words inside his quotation marks were in fact mine. Why was he writing to me about losing his avant-garde card in the laundry? Laundry had something to do with "Washing Day," true, but what was his point? Finally, like some suddenly surfacing scrap of a troubling dream, I recognized the lines as mine, and I felt a stab of angst as I heard the poem denying and—since it is a dramatic monologue by an "I"—I heard myself denying avant-garde status to my own writing.

Then again, an identity card that gets shredded in the laundry is quite a dismissive emblem to bestow on the avant-garde, so perhaps my poem was saying that the loss of such status was nothing to worry about. No, my angst insisted: whichever way the aggression of these lines pointed, whether the attack was directed inward (toward myself as not being sufficiently avant-garde) or outward (toward the avant-garde as having become too bureaucratized to be of any interest), their existence spelled trouble. And why, moreover, had I been asking a class on modernist poetics to read Anna Barbauld's "Washing Day" from 1797? Admittedly it was in the service of a small critique of Charles Olson's condescending aside from "Projective Verse": "And Homer, who is such an unexamined cliché that I do not think I need to press home on what scale Nausicaa's girls wash their clothes."[3] Wasn't my eccentric juxtaposition already a

sufficient display of aggression toward the avant-garde? A quite unpleasant comparison suggested itself: that in "Confession" I had authored a gesture not unlike T. S. Eliot's declaration of allegiance to royalism, classicism, and Anglo-Catholicism—an allegiance, that on a personal level, I find repellent.[4] There are gross dissimilarities of course: Eliot's pronouncement was made in very different historical circumstances, by a poet occupying a position of real cultural prestige acting in full awareness of what he was doing, and the resonances of his pronouncement have been, to say the least, widely noted. None of this applies to my situation. But angst is never particularly cognizant of scale and thus it was hard to dismiss the worry that in "Confession" I was, beneath the varnish of humor, doing something unpleasantly Eliotic. I was throwing my weight against the mainspring of interesting art. I was blaspheming.

When these few lines are read in the context of "Confession" as a whole, and the poem is read in its relation to Language writing, this angst will doubtless seem overblown. But before turning to a more objective mapping, I want to isolate the sarcasm in these lines and to amplify it, in order to challenge the "manifest content" of my own pledge of allegiance to the avant-garde cited above. Under this new dispensation, the avant-garde, far from being the "distilled essence of the new," becomes at best a venerable temporal illusion or, less generously, a stale religious metaphor. Rather than naming what is so radically new, so dynamically oriented toward the future that most contemporaries can't perceive it, "avant-garde" becomes an ever more quaint periodizing term. To put it in a prosecutorial vein: as a concept, the avant-garde is suspiciously like phlogiston.

According to seventeenth-century protochemical theory, phlogiston was the heat-bearing substance: when a log burned, phlogiston was released into the atmosphere. But now, of course, phlogiston exists only as a verbal curio from a discarded scientific regime. In modern and contemporary poetry, phenomena akin to heat occur in exciting work that do not occur in more routinized forms of writing, but must the concept of "avant-garde" continue to be the essential index to what is taking place?

II

Beyond the particulars of my own perception, "avant-garde" is an intrinsically unstable term in critical contexts. In the call for papers that occasioned this issue, the first three uses of the word are syntactically distinct—"the avant-garde" (proper noun, sans capital), "an avant-garde" (common noun), and the adjective "avant-garde"[5]—and the entailments

of each are quite different. The definite article strongly supports Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*: the use of the proper noun makes the avant-garde a unique historic event. While the particulars of its duration and of individual constituents can be argued over, at the syntactic level the singularity implied by the definite article has already confirmed Bürger's view of the historical uniqueness of the avant-garde, as evidenced in his claim that "certain general categories of the work of art were first made recognizable in their generality by the avant-garde . . . . the social subsystem that is art enters the stage of self-criticism."[6] Such historical singularity renders any attempts at reinstantiation futile: Burger considers the neo-avant-garde "a manifestation that is void of sense and that permits the positing of any meaning whatever" (61).

On the other hand, the common noun "an avant-garde" renders Bürger's argument moot. Whether or not you think the imagists (Ezra Pound's or Amy Lowell's?) were an avant-garde or whether you think the Language writers are (or were?) an avant-garde, the grammar has already declared that avant-gardes are recurring phenomena.

The adjectival "avant-garde" is the weakest and most widespread usage of the three. As a descriptor, it moves the emphasis from movement(s) to the individual artist or work, and once this happens, things get wobbly. Take, for example, Richard Kostelanetz's *A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes*. While the title includes the proper noun, the entries do not cohere theoretically: each confers or withholds the designation in ad hoc fashion. Though the dictionary is mostly organized around the names of individual artists, these artists do not offer a stable or coherent exemplification of avant-garde status. One entry reads: "The avant-garde Cummings is not the author of lyrics reprinted in nearly every anthology of American verse . . . but of several more inventive, less familiar poems."[7] Another entry runs as follows: "The most avant-garde W. C. Williams was less the poet-playwright-fictioneer than the essayist who, out of his broad and generous sympathies, was able to appreciate many of the most radical developments of his time. (This stands in contrast to T. S. Eliot,* who ignored them, for instance keeping Williams unpublished in England during their almost common lifetimes.)" (236). The asterisk in that quotation refers the reader to the entry on Eliot, which begins, "Where and when was Eliot avant-garde? Not in his pseudojuvenile *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* (1939), or in the solemn footnotes at the end of *The Waste Land* (1922). One could make a case for *Sweeney Agonistes* (1932) as a conceptual play, because it cannot be staged as is; but to my mind, Eliot's greatest departure was publishing, even in his initial *Collected Poems* (1930), several works that are explicitly introduced as 'Unfinished'" (67).

From a theoretical point of view, such designations are all over the map, relying on very different definitions. One entry appeals to formal features (one poem of cummings is avant-garde, another isn't); another to the poet's tactics (Eliot's decision to include unfinished work in his *Collected Poems*); a third, as with Williams, on his sympathies, which makes avant-garde a matter of personal allegiance.

One could try to discipline the adjective by demanding that it be used rigorously, that is, only when pertaining to a fully theorized avant-garde. Wouldn't such rigor, however, simply enforce a tautological imperative, as if "Miltonian" could only refer to Milton? Unless the avant-garde is a category with a static content (which it surely is for Bürger, as a one-time historical event), it will continue to be confronted with new candidates for admission. However, once this wider applicability is granted, it's hard to see how to avoid the slippery slope whereby the adjective "avant-garde" becomes an intensifying cognate for a host of words such as "confrontational," "difficult," "advanced," and "new." Such latitude, of course, raises new problems, for these terms are, in particular contexts, far from synonymous. Take the following familiar quote from Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (widely known as a signal moment in his conservative turn in poetics and politics): "The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art."[8] If we were to substitute "the avant-garde work of art" for "(the really new) work of art" the result would be absurd, undoing the opposition of Eliot's essay to avant-garde manifestos, one of the most familiar mappings of modernist poetic history.

The disparateness in the above sampling of approaches, I would argue, can be boiled down to a rough and ready distinction between two very different kinds of usage: 1) the avant-garde as a critical construct in aesthetic theory; and 2) avant-garde as a labile adjective in the poetic field. In the first use, the avant-garde is a phenomenon with carefully theorized historical entailments. Hal Foster, rebutting Bürger's theory of a once-only avant-garde and a nonexistent neo-avant-garde, sees both period terms as naming a single complex phenomenon that is bound together by what he calls "deferred action" on the model of Freud's *Nachtraglichkeit*: rather than "cancel[ing] the project of the historical avant-garde . . . ," he writes, "the neo-avant-garde comprehend[s] it for the first time."[9] Foster and Bürger occupy opposed positions, and Foster's model of historical action is arguably more complex; nevertheless, they share a larger similarity in that their claims depend on scrupulous historical accounting. For both, the temporality entailed by "avant" is crucial: history is the master frame.

Avant-garde is a very different matter in poetry, where it is simply one adjective among others, serving more or less interchangeably alongside a host of other terms (innovative, experimental, modernist, post-avant-garde, and still, on occasion, the increasingly passé postmodern) as a token of affiliation. In fact, until a few years ago, "avant-garde" was hardly used as a descriptor by most poets and poetry critics; recently, it has begun to appear more often—due, I would imagine, to the increasing influence of theory. Here, as I refer to the avant-garde in poetry or the poetic avant-garde, it should be kept in mind that "avant-garde" can often be replaced by a concomitant adjective such as innovative or post-avant-garde; similarly, "poetry" refers to any form of innovative writing that freely traverses genres.

In contrast to the precise history posited by the critical concept of the avant-garde, the history of avant-garde in poetic usage is expansive, overlapping, agglutinative, ultimately typological—typological in the sense that all advances, aliveness, attacks on stagnation, in whatever era, tend to be seen as tokens of a single process. Thus, the poetic avant-garde is sequential and transhistorical in equal measure. If the ad hoc designations in Kostelanetz's *Dictionary* must strike a rigorous historian of the avant-garde as sloppy, what about the following example from a recent, highly visible anthology of innovative writing, *Poems for the Millennium, Volume Three*? The editors, poet-critics both, are sophisticated historians of poetics: Jeffrey Robinson is a highly respected Romanticist; Jerome Rothenberg has edited numerous anthologies of innovative poetry. The prior two volumes of the *Poems for the Millennium* are designed and marketed as authoritative collections of avant-garde/modernist poetry; they are crammed with nuanced scholarly detail. And yet what is equally salient in the following commentary on "Kubla Khan" is its historical promiscuity: the discussion begins with Coleridge, but quickly moves forward to surrealism, backward to the paleolithic, and forward again to Pound. This promiscuity is useful, it seems to me, and not merely a sign of theoretical weakness.

["Kubla Khan"] is not only the model for a Romantic poem that records the spontaneity of dream or reverie, but an early form of that "automatic writing" (A. Breton) that will be the defining mark of a later Surrealism. . . . As a poem received in a dream it looks back as well to the oldest, shaman-derived roots of poetry. . . . [Coleridge's metrical experiments lead] to his famous formulation, in the preface to *Christabel*, of the breaking of accentual-syllabic into accentual verse—an important step toward the 'heave' into the modern line. (Similarly the unpredictable use of line length and rhyme in "Kubla Khan" prefigures a 'free' verse still to come.)[10]

The quoted "heave" refers to Pound's metapoetic line from Canto 81, "To break the pentameter, that was the first heave," which is well-known in innovative poetic circles because of its panache in compactly dramatizing the advent of free verse and imagism in English.[11] Rhythmically, Pound's line enacts what it recounts, starting in iambs (to BREAK the PEN), breaking out of them and ending with a tough spondee (FIRST HEAVE). Sonically, this encapsulates the strenuous heroism of young modernists in London smashing the inherited (iambic) torpor of Victorian poetics. Such heroism is central to the poetic mindset of subsequent generations in the avant-garde/innovative tradition. Robinson and Rothenberg do not share Pound's political baggage, but they do share his conception of poetic history, which contains two simultaneous modes: 1) a forward-moving present, dramatically separating before from after; 2) an expansive, heterogeneous historical archive where items can be juxtaposed without worry over chronology.

To give another example: here is Pound again, recounting a key poetic event. The "first heave" of imagism had done its work: Pound's anthology *Des Imagistes* was published in 1915, and imagism and free verse quickly became popular (relatively speaking, of course). Much to Pound's displeasure, Amy Lowell brought out three anthologies of imagist poets in 1916–18. In response, Pound and Eliot then turned, polemically, to writing rhymed quatrains. Looking back from the 1930s, Pound writes that "at a particular date, in a particular time in a particular room, two authors, neither engaged in picking the other's pocket, decided that the dilution of *vers libre*, Amygism [an insulting Poundian coinage referring to Lowell's appropriation of Imagism], Lee Masterism [a slightly less insulting coinage referring to Edgar Lee Masters's *Spoon River Anthology*], general floppiness had gone too far and some counter-current must be set going. Parallel situation centuries ago in China. Remedy prescribed 'Emaux et Camées' (or the Bay State Hymn Book). Rhyme and regular strophes."[12] Here again the historical moment is dramatized; but at the same time the action is given a typological gloss. Pound's particular sense of "parallel situations" (London 1919, Tang Dynasty China, the Bay State Hymn Book, etc.) will not necessarily be repeated by subsequent poets and critics; what will reappear is the combination of historicized breakthough and transhistorical affiliation. This double sense is compactly evoked in a phrase from Jeffrey Robinson's website: "The fundamental avant-gardism that is Romanticism."[13]

In the innovative poetic universe, in other words, a sense of advance does not always entail chronological advance. At certain moments, asserting the new can involve formally retrograde gestures, as with Pound and Eliot above. The newness of any given formal device is a variable

matter. To be sure, on the mechanical level, Pound's and Eliot's quatrain poems ("Hugh Selwyn Mauberley"; *Ara Vos Prec*) can easily be considered anti-avant-garde. But at the same time, doesn't this act of Pound and Eliot—collective, formally novel (outré vocabulary and unconventional rhymes), and constituting a conscious breach of poetic decorum—display characteristics that typify the theoretical concept of the avant-garde?

In the long-range reception of the poetic avant-garde, the newness of any work or author can vary to the point of contradiction. Take the following three moments in the reception of e.e. cummings. In Laura Riding's and Robert Graves's *Survey of Modernist Poetry* (1924), cummings is an exemplary instance of the new.[14] Considering the caustic competitiveness of Riding and the seriousness of the book, this is very high praise. A quarter of a century later, in Book Five of *Paterson* (1958), William Carlos Williams includes an interview in which Mike Wallace attacks modern poetry with a snippet of cummings as a prime example of the avant-garde at its most scandalous:

> (im)c-a-t(mo)
> b,i;l:e
>
> FallleA
> ps! fl
> OattumblI
>
> sh? dr
> IfttwhirlF
> (Ul) (lY)
> &&&

Wallace then demands, "Is this poetry?" to which Williams responds by conceding that he gets from it "no meaning at all."[15] But subsequent decades have tamed cummings. While it's true that a rapid scan of these lines will register little more than gibberish, when the typographic camouflage that outraged Wallace is ignored, the resulting semantic message is anything but demanding: "I'm cat mobile: Fall leaps float tumblish drift whirl fully." This does not quite land the poem in Hello Kitty territory, but it is certainly lies open to charges of sentimentality. And in fact in a recent essay, "A Liquid Hand Blossoms," Herman Rapaport uses cummings as the sentimental poet par excellence.[16] The point is not that the new becomes tame—Cezanne's work transforming from scandal to MoMA tote-bag decor—but that linear chronology is not a reliable guide to such matters. What may look tame, on a formal level, can appear, from a later perspective, to have been quite new. For

instance, the New Narrative prose of Bruce Boone, written in the Bay Area in the 1970s, may look normative compared to the contemporaneous disjunctiveness of Language writing. The following passage from *My Walk with Bob* (1997), describing the domestic foibles of Boone and his fellow writer Robert Glück, is formally unexceptional: "With our lovers Bob and I liked to be childish. We liked to tease. Bob for instance used to make faces, supposedly for Ed's benefit and usually when they were alone. And Ed supposedly was enjoying these faces. The joke would be that these faces weren't funny at all."[17] But it now strikes me that it was quite an advance, in the 1970s, for gay sexuality to be presented as so unexceptional.

Nevertheless, such anti- or achronological factors (strategies of "retrograde advance," the evanescence of the new, delayed manifestation of the new) do not mean that the question of forward and back movement does not exert a powerful force on poets as they are writing in the present. As an emblem of its pervasiveness, consider the reaction of Williams to Eliot in the 20s. Williams's description of *The Waste Land* as a reactionary catastrophe for avant-garde American poetry is well-known: "It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped." In addition, there is also this comment: "T. S. Eliot had come to Paris about then [1924], appearing at the Dôme and other bars in top hat, cutaway, and striped trousers. It was intended as a gesture of contempt, and received just that."[18] In other words, every detail of a poet's activity can be read for signs of allegiance: is this poet, this poem, this line going forward or not? "How easy to slip / into the old mode, how hard to / cling firmly to the advance," as Williams puts it in his 1922 counterpart to *The Waste Land, Spring and All*.[19]

Williams's contempt for Eliot's costume allows me to circle back to the matter of my own angst. I have argued that the chronological associations of the term "avant-garde" among poets are labile. At any present moment, however, the question of affiliation remains urgent and the question of whether something is forward moving or not is still charged. During their careers Williams and Eliot were adversaries in the poetic field: for Williams, Eliot's trousers were, so to speak, the flag of the enemy. Once poets have entered the avant-garde archive, however, their standoff becomes much more muted, and the question of whether *The Waste Land* is more or less advanced than *Spring and All* seems ultimately fruitless. But then again, in my present, a figure such as the conservative Eliot of *The Rock* and *Four Quartets* is a charged symbol of the painful question of disaffiliation. Does losing my avant-garde card in the laundry mean I have to wear Eliot's striped trousers? Have I inadvertently resigned from such large avant-garde (innovative,

modernist, etc.) coalitions as those represented by *Poems for the Millennium*?[20] One can see my utter hesitancy in the 1998 interview with Nicholls mentioned above. When Nicholls concludes the interview by asking the bottom-line question about my work—"Is that avant-garde or not?"—I answer, "It's not. It's 'post-avant-garde,' so to speak." In my 2009 afterword to the interview, I characterize the phrase as a "spur of the moment parrying maneuver"—at the time of the 1998 interview "post-avant-garde" was not a term I had heard before.[21] However, if one accepts the sense of adjectival equivalence I've outlined here (where "avant-garde" equals "post-avant-garde"), I would now say my response was equivalent to answering: No, it's not avant-garde, it's avant-garde.

So what exactly is my problem with the avant-garde? If, in poetry, "avant-garde" is a baggy descriptor, one of a number of synonyms marking an affiliation with innovative art, then why would this term in particular (in contrast to "innovative") trigger such a bolus of angst and scorn?

III

When I turn my attention away from these conundrums back to their proximate cause, "Confession," the perspective changes considerably. In the poem, the avant-garde, far from being the patent object of an all-out attack, is named only in passing near the end of an equivocal satiric trajectory, the aforementioned "avant-garde card" appearing suddenly like a comic prop about to be used in some pratfall. In what follows I will give an account of what I'll call the compound present of "Confession." This term refers to two times. There is the rhetorical present (with its beginning, middle, end, surprises, reversals) that proffers an unchanging coincidence of reading and writing times. And, increasingly distinct from this, there is the historical time in which the always-expanding gap between reading and writing times is foregrounded. In this latter dimension, the materials of the poem—its vocabulary and formal features—reveal their sell-by dates ever more clearly with the passing decades.

But any present, compound or not, requires some sense of the past to be legible, so I'll begin with a brief account of where things stood when I wrote the poem. For readers familiar with Language writing, the title, "Confession," would send an obvious satiric signal by naming a long-standing polemic target; an opposition to persona-based confessional poetry was a basic stance for Language writers from the beginning of the movement's coalescence in the 1970s. The primacy of the confessional poem has since faded, but the formal particulars of this genre are of secondary importance. Defining what Language writing *is* has never

been a particularly fruitful activity, whereas the senses of what it is *not* are easier to come by. Polemic has been an abundant feature of Language writing (both in criticism and in poetry) as well as its reception. One redolent example occurs amid the metonymic, semidisjunctive linkages of Ron Silliman's *Lit* (originally published in 1987):

> . . . not enough
> imitation mayonnaise or the bulb
> in the bathroom's blown, how can you
> watch the orange cat spray
> all over the University of Pittsburgh Press, dramatic
> monologue of a false self, a bloop
> single or the run
> in your stocking, nothing is
> grounded and enjambment smears or
> sneers, the old power mower
> rusting away . . .[22]

In Silliman's lines, the proximate targets are the dramatic monologue and the staged poetic self; behind these particulars, the poem mocks institutional formations such as conservative poetry series from university presses; ultimately, a basic line across the poetic field is being drawn.

The sense of such a charged demarcation certainly weakens and blurs over the decades, as Language writers age; some teach in universities; one (Rae Armantrout) wins a Pulitzer. Language writing may have been the latest thing in the 1970s, but enough time has elapsed for Language writing to become, in some poetic perspectives, venerable. Here is a refrain from *The Transformation* (2007) by one of the most visible post-Language writers, Juliana Spahr. She is looking back at herself and others in the 1980s poetics program at SUNY Buffalo (a primary site for the production of post-Language poet-critics): "All of them were well schooled in the avant-garde, an avant-garde that used fragmentation, quotation, disruption, disjunction, agrammatical syntax, and so on."[23] Throughout the book, the world-weary normativity of this phrase becomes more salient with each repetition, but I think the tag "and so on" will give a sufficient hint of that sense for our context here. Formal breakthroughs, once the site of excitement and controversy, have quickly become a suite of normative costume for the properly dressed post-avant-garde aspirant.

In spite of such examples of accommodation and aging, however, one can still find examples where Language writing remains a hot button for aesthetic hostilities, as in the following aside from a recent article on John Ashbery in the *London Review of Books*: "These scribbles [Ashbery

lines that the reviewer finds nugatory] have something in common with Language poetry and the current redundancy known as Flarf, movements which themselves owe a great deal to Ashbery's second book, *The Tennis Court Oath.* It's harmless fun (don't tell the Language poets), but once you've read a few hundred specimens you start to think: surely the point wasn't to give over the entire typewriter factory to the monkeys."[24] Such an updated version of the Mike Wallace umbrage from *Paterson* quoted above may still be construed as a badge of avant-garde honor, but my point in juxtaposing this reviewer's high-hatting, Spahr's refrain, and Silliman's dig is to give some sense of the layered temporality of Language writing. In 1998 when I wrote "Confession" and now as I discuss it, Language was and is both avant-garde and venerable.

Here is the beginning of the poem:

CONFESSION

Aliens have inhabited my aesthetics for
decades. Really since the early 70s.

Before that I pretty much wrote
as myself, though young. But something

has happened to my memory, my
judgment: apparently, my will has been

affected. That old stuff, the fork
in my head, first home run,

Dad falling out of the car—
I remember the words, but I

can't get back there anymore. I
think they must be screening my

sensations. I'm sure my categories have
been messed with. . . .

If we stay on the level of sorting formal categories, then the satire signaled by the title remains undiluted: the speaker of the dramatic monologue remains the target. Other moments in the poem can also be read as simple satire: for instance, when the speaker distorts catalog prose to reject various poetic styles: "The sexy // underwear poem, the sturdy workboot poem / you could wear to a party / in a pinch, the little blas-

pheming // dress poem. . . . // the button-down oxford with offrhyming cuffs; / the epic toga, showing some ancient // ankle . . ." But the odd-ness of the opening sentence makes it hard to keep the satire in focus. Is this line also a parody of tabloid UFO prose? Hardly: that reading won't survive the mention of "aesthetics." Perhaps the juxtaposition of aliens and aesthetics may strike a casual reader as an attempt at avant-garde shock. Deliberately odd juxtapositions go back almost a century and a half: for example, Lautréamont's famous "beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella."[25]

But such celebrations of surprise are just what the poem works against. Both sides of this unlikely pairing are taken seriously, as if they were elements of a single situation. In fact, a rather transparent allegorical connection renders the poem communicative and—almost—normative. If we understand that when aliens and flying saucers are mentioned, "Language writing" is the intended reference, then the poem can be read as an autobiographical account of my becoming a poet. The flying saucers and aliens would be a minimal disguise, something like the half masks worn in operas like *Così Fan Tutte*. At points the disguise is par-ticularly flimsy: "Why don't they [flying saucers] ever / reveal themselves hovering over some New // York publishing venue?" is baldly asking why New York publishers can't perceive Language writing.[26]

But the allegorical transfer is never complete. While there are the nudge-nudge, wink-wink moments where we are told that flying saucers are not the literal point of what is being said, mixed in among these, however, there are repeated signals that, somehow, the aliens are to be taken seriously, that something very, very odd really *is* out there. The scenario of the alien abductee is returned to continually, as in the lines already quoted: "I / think they must be screening my / / sensations. I'm sure my categories have / been messed with." But what, then, does it mean to insist that Language writing is truly out of this world? Should it be heard as a kind of strategic redeployment, echoing back (and thus aiming to preempt) the sarcasm of attacks such as the recent crack about monkeys and typewriters? If the abjecting of poetic movements could be measured on some scale, wouldn't the trope of aliens trump that of monkeys? To carry out such a strategy, the "ick factor" is accentuated in lines like these: "The authorities / deny any visitations—hardly a surprise. // And I myself deny them—think / about it. What could motivate a // group of egg-headed, tentacled, slimier-than-thou aestheticians / with techniques far beyond ours to // visit earth, abduct naive poets, and / inculcate them with otherworldly forms . . . ?" But alongside such a ventriloquizing of rejection, there is, in these lines and elsewhere in the poem, a tongue-in-cheek utopianism; and while it is comically encum-

bered throughout the poem, at the end it is insisted on. Since this final
moment closely follows the sudden appearance (or disappearance) of
the avant-garde card, I'll quote the entire passage:

> . . . Why don't they [flying saucers] ever
> reveal themselves hovering over some New
>
> York publishing venue? It would be
> nice to get some answers here—
>
> we might learn something, about poetry
> if nothing else, but I'm not
>
> much help, since I'm an abductee,
> at least in theory, though, like
>
> I say, I don't remember much.
> But this writing seems pretty normal:
>
> complete sentences; semicolons; yada yada. I
> seem to have lost my avant-garde
>
> card in the laundry. They say
> that's typical. Well, you'll just have
>
> to use your judgment, earthlings! Judgment,
> that's your job! Back to work!
>
> As if you could leave! And
> you thought gravity was a problem!

In the rhetorical present of the poem the speaker is thus revealed to
indeed be an alien, addressing "earthlings" who are encumbered by the
inescapability of normative judgment, tethered down to things-as-they-
are more firmly than they are held down by gravity. But if the poetic
state reached at the end of "Confession" transcends the normative and
revels in the forces of advanced art that are unknown to, or ignored by,
most earthlings, this ending is far from a celebration of the avant-garde.
Language writing remain an alien manifestation that invades normativity
and colonizes it, and the transcendence (semi-ersatz as it is) enacted
by the end seems to have been reached precisely by the speaker losing
his avant-garde card.

   The little clanging rhyme of "avant-garde card" directs a none-too-
subtle irony toward Breton-like excommunications. It is not a shocking

revelation that some surrealists suffered from an unself-conscious mas-
culinity and that André Breton's hypertrophied sense of organizational
hygiene was an untoward accompaniment to his goal of exploring the
unknown. But does this phrase address the avant-garde in any wider
sense? The larger irony at the end seems elusive. The syntactic fiction
of a single speaker is never called into question, yet the monologic
voice is hard to resolve into a unity. One person, syntactically, speaks
throughout, but who? A disidentifying alien addressing gravity-bound
(history-bound) earthlings? This is certainly not the heroic avant-garde
speaking. Couldn't the end easily be read as kitsch in the way it quotes
Seinfeld and uses flimsy flying saucer paraphernalia, à la Ed Wood's *Plan
Nine from Outer Space*? On the other hand, if the poem is taken as an
apostate Language writer denying the avant-garde, it becomes much
more serious. Or, on some third (alien?) hand, is this poem in fact an
example of Language writing by a poet who is following avant-garde
poetic decorum by playing serious definitional games?

Such questions rephrase the definitional challenge issued by Peter
Nicholls in our conversation: Is Language writing the satiric target of
"Confession"? Or is the poem defending Language writing by attack-
ing some caricatured sense of Language writing as a naively futuristic
avant-garde? Or is "Confession" itself an example of Language writing?
In asking this last question, I want at the same time to emphasize the
ordinariness of the poem's language and imagery. "Confession" is not
just a send-up of the dramatic monologue, a satirical redeployment of
the first-person. "That old stuff, the fork / in my head, first home run,
// Dad falling out of the car" *is* in fact autobiographical. My father *did*
have a drinking problem; I *was* a baseball enthusiast; my sister (so I'm
told) *did* stick a fork in my head when I was a toddler. However, lan-
guage being multiplicitous, any word or phrase can be "the fork": the
site of a branching off. Ordinary language can be taken as Language
writing and vice versa. In "Confession," this is dramatized at the level
of description. I referred earlier to "the speaker distort[ing] catalog
prose to reject various poetic styles." In fact, that is only a half-accurate
description. Here is the complete "catalog":

There's the sexy

underwear poem, the sturdy workboot poem
you could wear to a party

in a pinch, the little blaspheming
dress poem. There's variety, you say:

the button-down oxford with offrhymed cuffs.
The epic toga, showing some ancient

ankle, the behold! the world is
changed and finally I'm normal flowing

robe and shorts, the full nude,
the scatter—

There is more going on here than simply saying yes or no to Eliot's striped pants. Only the "workboot poem" and the "epic toga" are straightforwardly satirical. The adjective modifying the "flowing // robe and shorts" is of course comically hypertrophied—"the [world is / changed and finally I'm normal] flowing // robe and shorts"; but at the same time it articulates the utopian hope: when the flying saucers land, I (alien, Language writer) will be normal and the avant-garde and the ordinary will be the same thing.

IV

One way to think about the avant-garde is to use a pair of contrasting terms from religious studies: orthodoxy versus orthopraxis.[27] In orthodoxy the desire for correctness (the "ortho") is focused on the doxa: keeping the teachings straight means texts, doctrines, practices must be kept unchanged. In contrast, orthopraxis means that the objective striven for is to get the action straight: the believer wants to have the originary experience of the divine be happening in the present. Orthodoxy, with its stability and familiarity, is often exactly what needs to be overcome to achieve orthopraxis. Clashes between the two can be spectacular: for example, the Zen monk saying that the Buddha is a shit stick (according to one web source, this may have been the medieval Japanese equivalent of toilet paper). This is an extreme example, but in all cases the interplay between orthodoxy/orthopraxis is complex. Here, however, I want to yank these notions from their nuanced context in religious studies and use them, at least as an initial move, as polarized, portable emblems, flags to signal positions in the poetic field.

In such a binary landscape it's obvious where the avant-garde would line up. Orthodoxy would be a primary enemy; the avant-garde attacks inherited forms and established aesthetic protocols—decorum in general. The Italian futurists' call to destroy libraries and museums would be a textbook example. Thus the avant-garde has to be orthopractic. But while the "ortho" of orthodoxy is easily understood, what does the

"ortho" of orthopraxis mean in an avant-garde context? Is there some originary avant-garde experience or practice that must be experienced in undistorted fashion? How can this be ascertained without recourse to a history, a tradition, historical examples to be mastered? But then wouldn't this make the avant-garde into a new orthodoxy?

Here it is necessary to distinguish the critical task of discerning the historical realities of the avant-garde from striving to write the avant-garde in the present. It is ironic that the Italian futurists' call to destroy libraries and museums is now a standard item on undergraduate modernism syllabi, but that is not the point here. In classrooms, and in historical and critical studies, the question is: what was the avant-garde? The related question for the contemporary writer—what is the avant-garde?—cannot be answered by recourse to even the best critical accounts. The best critical accounts are, in short, a contribution to avant-garde orthodoxy.

The transgressiveness of the concept of the avant-garde is clear, but which "ortho" practice is being adhered to? And doesn't any hint of such adherence open the door to the prosecutorial logic of Bürger, for whom a continuous avant-garde is a fatally contradictory notion? Paul Mann's *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* attempts to prolong such a contradiction, but, while allowing for continuity, expresses it via a recurring series of death beds, such that an avant-garde breakthrough is always accompanied and quickly put to rest by recuperating theory. Convincing answers to Bürger and Mann have been made, by Hal Foster and Barrett Watten, among others. Watten addresses Mann directly in his assertion of avant-garde continuity: "The self-canceling perfection of Mann's avant-garde *posthistoire* must account, even so, for an embarrassment: the continuing work of artists and writers who, seemingly unaware of their position, persist in avant-garde practice."[28]

I'm largely in sympathy with this argument; Watten and I share a great many specific connections over the decades and our individual archives of inspiring examples of art would have a great deal of overlap. But what he denominates as "avant-garde practice," I am forced to address by insisting on the impossibility of "avant-garde orthopraxis" as a meaningful term. We are both referring to more or less the same set of historical examples and ongoing poetry scenes; our basic affiliations with the historical avant-garde, modernism, postmodernism, and innovative poetry are roughly similar. But the difference in our view of the presentness of the avant-garde is more than just a matter of naming: it speaks to my denial of any primacy to the avant-garde as an ongoing term. One way to clarify what I'm objecting to is to reverse Antonio Gramsci's phrase "optimism of the will, pessimism of the intellect." For the contemporary writer, I contend, recourse to the avant-garde as a critically discernible

set of practices would be an example of an (unjustified) optimism of the intellect.

What does a literary world look like in which the avant-garde acts its age? A world in which the avant-garde is not ahead in some crucial sense but only historical? Is it a world that is all that different? The roster of best practices, as one might say, stays quite the same. One could object that this is simply to reiterate Bürger's view that the avant-garde is over and that attempts to revive it or rediscover it are doomed to failure. Except that where Bürger posits the avant-garde as something of a secular *deus absconditus* (in a leftist sense), the view I'm articulating here denies the ontological centrality of the avant-garde altogether. The goal of any ambitious, innovative writing is to catch up with the present. A known avant-garde is strictly irrelevant to that task.

UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

NOTES

1   Jeff Sharlet, *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 3.
2   The interview (with the poem embedded in it) can be found at http://jacketmagazine.com/39/perelman-ivb-nicholls.shtml.
3   Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Collected Prose* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1997), 157.
4   T. S. Eliot, *For Lancelot Andrews* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, 1929), vii.
5   "What defines *an avant-garde*? Is *avant-garde* art synonymous with shock, extremity, and rupture? Do its provocations matter only at particular historical moments? And is its most salient and overriding feature a desire to overcome the distinction between art and life? In recent decades, the parameters for such questions have been largely set by Peter Bürger's obituary to radical art. In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger pays tribute to *the avant-garde's* challenge to the autonomy of art, while also underscoring its failure" (my emphases).
6   Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984), 15, 22.
7   Richard Kostelanetz, *A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000), 51.
8   T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1928), 50.
9   Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 15.
10   Jerome Rothenberg and Jeffrey Robinson, *Poems for the Millennium*, vol. 3 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 2009), 216.
11   Ezra Pound, *The Cantos* (New York: New Directions, 1970), 538.
12   Pound, "Harold Munro," *The Criterion* 45, no. 11 (1932): 590.
13   http://jeffreycrobinson.com/
14   Laura Riding and Robert Graves, *A Survey of Modernist Poetry and A Pamphlet Against Anthologies*, ed. Charles Mundye and Patrick McGuinness (London: Carcanet, 2002.)
15   William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 222.
16   Herman Rapaport, "A Liquid Hand Blossoms," *boundary 2* 36, no. 3 (2009): 105–120.

17   Bruce Boone, *My Walk with Bob* (San Francisco: Ithuriel's Spear, 2006), 36–37.
18   Williams, *Autobiography* (New York: New Directions, 1951), 174, 217.
19   William Carlos Williams, *Spring and All* in *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams*, ed. A. Walton Litz and Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1986–88), 191.
20   My poem "China," which Fredric Jameson uses as an example of "schizophrenic" postmodern poetry in his *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,* appears in Jerome Rothenberg and Pierre Joris, eds., *Poems for the Millennium,* vol. 2 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1998).
21   Peter Nicholls, "A Conversation with Bob Perelman," *Textual Practice* 19, no. 3 (1998): 531–32. It has been reprinted, with my afterword, in *Jacket* 39 (2010).
22   Ron Silliman, "Lit," in *The Alphabet* (Tuscaloosa: Alabama Univ. Press, 2008), 242. Quoted in Alan Golding, "'Isn't the avant garde always pedagogical': Experimental Poetics and/as Pedagogy," which also discusses "Confession." *The Iowa Review* 32, no. 1 (2002).
23   Juliana Spahr, *The Transformation* (Berkeley: Atelos, 2007), 49, 61, 64, 80, 81.
24   Michael Robbins, "Remember the Yak," *The London Review of Books* 32, no. 17 (September 9, 2010), 25–26.
25   Le Comte de Lautréamont, *Maldoror*, trans. Paul Knight (New York: Penguin, 1978), 217.
26   In fact, Charles Bernstein's *All the Whiskey in Heaven* has now (2010) been published by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.
27   See the beginning of Mary Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1009).
28   Barrett Watten, *The Constructivist Moment: From to Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 2003), 47.

Project

MUSE®

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

http://muse.jhu.edu

The Conservative Avant-Garde

Richard Schechner

I

The current state of American theater and performance art is of a circulating stasis, a neomedieval system doing business under the name of globalization. More a "niche-garde" than an avant-garde, this art has for a long time been settled in its various places geographical and conceptual. It is not in advance of anything. Yes, there is a lot of new work, if by "new" one means brilliantly accomplished pieces—many in repertories years or even decades old—by established artists and new, also brilliantly accomplished pieces by still not so widely known groups such as the TEAM, the Nature Theater of Oklahoma,[1] Witness Relocation, Pig Iron, Big Art Group, National Theater of the United States of America,[2] and many more.[3] "Niche-garde" because groups, artists, and works advertise, occupy, and operate as clearly marked and well-known brands. The younger groups fall into line behind their forebears in the familiar pattern of both tradition and marketing: take a lot, change a little, and make something old look excitingly new. As with identity politics, political correctness, and academic orthodoxy (a new canon from Foucault to Derrida, Fredric Jameson to Richard Schechner) the avant-garde is known before it is experienced (again). Much of this work—at a high level conceptually, performatively, and technically—is profoundly conservative aesthetically.

But what is "conservative"? There are at least two kinds. I do not mean the Tea Party, but something in line with "reduce, reuse, and recycle," "sustainability, and "make a smaller footprint"—respect for and conservation of the planet's ecosystems and its myriad local cultures, both human and animal. This kind of conservatism is noninterventionist—except for intervention on behalf of the endangered. The very different Tea Party conservatism can be traced back in the United States to the pre-Civil War anti-Catholic, anti-immigration Know Nothing party, officially the American Party, whose membership was reserved exclusively for white Protestant men. Tea Party Know-Nothing conservatism is actually radical, almost anarchistic, in tune with the opposition to authority typifying the avant-garde manifestoes of the twentieth century. Of course,

programs of both kinds of conservatism are not reducible to the binary of radical versus conservative: what's happening on the world stage and in the arts is much more complicated. But it is true that the "historical avant-garde," in both its artistic and political incarnations—from, say, futurism and Dada to surrealism and the Situationists; from Alfred Jarry to Antonin Artaud to the Living Theatre; from Trotsky to Mao, Che Guevara to Franz Fanon—strongly advocated disruption, overthrow, and anarchy—a revolutionary cathartic as prelude to a new world order. This species of avant-garde, I have argued elsewhere, has been literally enacted by those who make terror-spectacles such as the attack on New York's World Trade Center on September 11, 2001.[4] As for a new world order, it is arriving in the form of the global corporation. By corporation I mean an interlocked system of businesses, governments, ideologies, and religions. There is nothing outside the corporation. Paradoxically, amidst economic fluctuations and imbalances—many of which are arranged, the better to profit by them—and in harmony with unending yet limited wars, terrorism, and virulent religiosity, what is emerging is an underlying stability similar to that of medieval Europe, a stasis based on the interdependence of the system's parts. Apparent adversaries are actual (if unknowing) allies, just as criminals, police, and judiciary are codependent. The consensus of what comprises basic knowledge is STEM.[5] Everyone from fundamentalists and jihadists to the cyberattackers who go by the name Anonymous buy into and use the corporation's information infrastructure[6]—the Internet, digital data storage and dissemination, imaging, and global networks subverting and transcending nations. People who live far apart geographically are close in terms of communications. The affinity (dare I say comradeship?) of those who think/believe alike rather than live together is what brings nichedom into existence. Netspace overtakes geospace. Mass demonstrations—Glenn Beck's and Stephen Colbert-Jon Stewart's competing Washington rallies of August and October 2010 are instances—conflate entertainment and politics.[7] I am not wildly enthusiastic about this emergent world order. But I am not knee-jerk against it either.

II

To bring this down to the arts: today's niche-garde enacts changed social, cultural, and political circumstances far different from the historical avant-garde. With each passing year, the historicity rather than currency of the avant-garde is seen more clearly. The avant-garde had its beginnings, its thriving epoch, and its ending (to be Aristotelian about

it). The avant-garde began in the nineteenth century as a European phenomenon tied tightly to colonial expansion and industrialization. It would not have even been imaginable without the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' philosophies of the Enlightenment—Immanuel Kant's especially—which regarded "art" as something that could be thought of in its own terms, "framed" and detachable from other kinds of processes and things; "art for art's sake," if you will. But also "art for the market's sake." What can be framed and detached can be easily evaluated and sold. In our own day, what is framed and detached are not only "things," *objets d'art*, but behaviors. This framing of behavior as the performative counterpart to paintings and such is what is behind the current rage for "reperformances," such as the 2007 redoing of Allan Kaprow's *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* or the Museum of Modern Art's 2010 Marina Abramović retrospective, *The Artist Is Present*. In that exposition, older performance art pieces are "redone" along with a new work—Abramović's weeks' long sitting on a chair at the center of the large ground-floor entry hall of MoMA, as people waited hours for a chance to sit opposite to her, their eyes fixed on a being somewhere between Queen Elizabeth and Our Lady of Lourdes.[8] The Kaprow and Abramović—and many other recent redoings—are fundamentally different from, say, a restaging of Wagner's *Ring* cycle at the Met, where what is prized is a "new" vision of an old score/text. What is asked of the Kaprow, Abramović, et al., are events as close as possible to the "originals," as if performances were paintings, the *Mona Lisa* or *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, not instantly perishable enactments but "things" available for experiencing in their pristinity—*again.*

All of this redoing hinges on branding and marketing. A brand is a product made familiar, instantly recognizable, and needed by means of advertising and other kinds of marketing. Branding depends largely on the repetition of slogans and the reproduction of images, over and over and over. This kind of reproduction is the opposite of the avant-garde's claim to be "new" or "first" or "only." But, things being what they are, this claim has itself become a brand. Once the avant-garde was by definition unpredictable, even repulsive—some works really were shocking. But today's avant-garde inhabits the already known, marketed as fitting into specific categories or brands. Spectators, scholars, funders, and festival bookers know what to expect when they dial the Wooster Group, Lee Breuer, Richard Foreman, Laurie Anderson, Robert Wilson, Anne Bogart, Builders Association, Elevator Repair Service, or whomever-whatever. As with identity politics, political correctness, and academic orthodoxy, the avant-garde is known before it is experienced.

But, in the positive vein, much avant-garde work is at a very high level both conceptually and technically. In my decades of experience, the

quality of the avant-garde in performance has never been higher. Some groups and artists provide extreme formalism; others take realism-naturalism to its quotidian limits; some lay out complex political and social histories; some celebrate "alternative" lifestyles and sexual orientations; some promote collective creativity and group-devised works; others enact the unique visions of auteurs. This diversity and quality is as true of the newer groups and artists as of the more established. New artists arrive on the scene already well trained, thoughtful, and fully equipped to deliver superb work that deserves attention and applause. For example, among the fairly new avant-garde groups in and around New York are the Nature Theater of Oklahoma, National Theater of the United States of America, the TEAM, Radiohole, the New York City Players, Big Dance Theater, and Pig Iron, with others coming into existence all the time. More established are Anne Bogart's SITI company, Elevator Repair Service, and the Builders Association. These groups often premiere their new work far from New York, even if the City remains the companies' home base. Ironically, given the hype that nothing could be further from Broadway than the avant-garde, the touring circuit and overseas commissions function just like Broadway's "out of town tryouts"—weeks on the road before opening on the Great White Way. Beginning out of town gives avant-garde groups the chance not only to polish their work but to collect critical acclaim used to promote "new" pieces to spectators willing to pay a pretty penny for tickets. For example, Elevator Repair Service's *Gatz*—an acclaimed six-hour performed reading of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*—arrived in New York in 2010 "at long last," as the ERS website put it, "five years after its creation and ten years after its conception."[9]

An even older cohort of avant-gardists are still producing works that gain widespread acceptance: the Wooster Group, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, Mabou Mines, and the Living Theatre ("founded in 1947 as an imaginative alternative to the commercial theater").[10] While the avant-garde was once considered the domain of the young, today's avant-garde community contains many who are in their seventies and show few signs of slowing down. It is not just that older artists produce experimental works—that has frequently been true—but that these artists and their works are embraced by younger artists. Certainly in the United States, probably in Europe, and possibly everywhere, what is branded as the avant-garde is not "avant" or "ahead" of anything. Quite the contrary, an avant-garde tradition has emerged, taken root, and guides the ongoing processes of development. This tradition is replete with identifiable lineages, styles, themes, and means of production. A related lineage could be drawn for avant-garde dance

going back to Anna Halprin and the Judson Church dancers; or even further, from Ruth St. Denis to Martha Graham and on to Merce Cunningham and beyond; or for performance art going back to John Cage and Allan Kaprow. These "founders"—in all the performing arts—are in turn linked to the historical avant-garde, to futurism, surrealism, Dada. The point I am laboring is that the so-called avant-garde has gotten older, and certainly better, in its uses of technology, media, and the Internet and in the quality of performing. But it is no longer, and has not been for many years, avant-garde in the common understanding of that term. The words "avant-garde" and "experimental" are useful for branding, but they are not descriptive. Even "alternative" begs the question, alternative to what?

Innovation and excellence are in an inverse relationship to each other. When innovation is high, excellence is low; and vice versa. This is not always true, but it operates as an overall tendency. It makes sense because when people experiment, most of what they try fails. In science and engineering the failures rarely reach the market; but in the arts—in performance, especially, because it is an art that needs an audience and an art whose works cannot be locked away awaiting more receptive times as novels and paintings can—failures of performances are enacted in full public view. But over time, as experimental processes are honed and new forms, new venues, and new styles of acting/performing are tried, tested, improved, and accepted, success replaces failure. Today we are in a period of high excellence and low innovation. Taking a long view, the avant-garde has not changed much in nearly one hundred years. Or, rather, it has not changed any more than, say, realism has changed over a similar span of time. The innovation/excellence see-saw explains why today exciting, stimulating performances abound, even though it feels to the connoisseur of the avant-garde that there is nothing new. For the more ordinary audiences enjoying the avant-garde in large established theaters there is the Miranda-of-*The Tempest* effect: groups and practices move from "off" sites to the mainstream, appearing to general audiences (and their mainstream press reviewers) as a brave new world ("'tis new to thee").

If there were more "bad" or "unacceptable" performances, that would signal the appearance of a real avant-garde, an actual "in advance of." Instead, what we have is so-called new work existing seamlessly side-by-side with reprisals, such as the 2010 production of Philip Glass's 1980 *Satyagraha*, the celebrated 2010 Abramović MoMA show, the Wooster Group's 2004 reinvention of Jerzy Grotowski and William Forsythe in *Poor Theater: A Series of Simulacra* and their 2007 *Hamlet* ghosting Richard Burton's 1964 live video broadcast.[11] Every brilliant use of media or

mixed media, each unorthodox use of space or site-specific work, every attempt to involve the audience, each knitting together of the performers' "real lives" and fiction, every—you name it—has been done before, but maybe not as well.

Along with these reuses of old ideas there is a strong return to the text. Rejections of literature, the text, authors, and authority were a hallmark of the historical avant-garde and even of the great burst of activity from the late 1950s through to the 1980s. Its rhetoric included burning the libraries, ransacking the museums. In theater, I was not alone in advocating rejecting the words-as-written by playwrights, starting instead with the people present in the room; deconstructing texts; twisting them; making collages of them; and so on. The Wooster Group in a series of well-known works from the mid-1970s through the 90s,[12] in *Nayatt School, Route 1 & 9, LSD: Just the High Points, Fish Story*, and *To You, the Birdie!* had its way with plays by T. S. Eliot, Thornton Wilder, Arthur Miller, Anton Chekhov, and Jean Racine. But around the turn of the century, a big change took place—text-as-text reasserted itself. Even as a section of *LSD* deconstructed Miller's *The Crucible*, the piece opened with Wooster performers holding books in their hands and reading some of their own favorite passages about mind-altering drugs. Wooster-influenced Elevator Repair Service took the text-as-text theater further by staging part of William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and then a reading of every word of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. These performances were not theater in the orthodox sense, nor were they "staged readings," such as new plays-in-development get in order to attract producers. The readings put the text—both as words heard and as physical object, the book—at the center of the performance. Performers uttered every "she said" and "he said," every descriptive phrase. The book as object was always present. Reading was combined with theater acting. The characters of the novels emerged both as "living" beings (theater) and "literary" objects (reading). This practice—which I think we will see a lot more of—is part and parcel with "texting" on cell phones, a blurring of the categories of visual speech and heard objects.[13]

III

The avant-garde advertises itself using the rhetoric of the new while practicing the already established. As noted, this is in keeping with progressive ideas of conservation and recycling rather than the historical avant-garde's advocacy of tearing everything down and starting from scratch. In the arts, the tendency to conserve and recycle is hugely helped

by the easy availability of what amounts to an infinite archive digitally preserved. In this circumstance, as David Savran writes, far from being in front of the rest of society, the avant-garde develops "distinctive logos and brand identities" in keeping "with major changes in the marketplace [just] as Calvin Klein, Nike, Starbucks, Martha Stewart, and the Body Shop (among many others)" do. Savran goes on to note that "ironically enough, the production of the avant-garde as brand, collective hallucination, and endlessly alluring and prestigious commodity, signals less a modification than a complete reversal of its original meaning."[14] So paradoxically the avant-garde exists in three realms simultaneously—as a living tradition, as a brand, and as the echo or ghost of the provocation it once was.

The avant-garde is conservative when it joins popular culture because pop culture is not only driven by advertising but merges with it. From Marcel Duchamp to Andy Warhol and Roy Lichtenstein on to today, the avant-garde differs from pop not because of specific actions or images, but because of the state of mind a viewer or listener brings to an activity. A urinal and the art object called *Fountain* are distinguishable from each other by nothing except the attitude of the viewer (and the opinion of the art scholar). The difference between the image of a "real" Campbell's soup label on the can and Warhol's rendition of a single Campbell's soup can or a panel of many of them (as on a supermarket shelf, sans shelf) is a difference of attitude and context. That was one of Warhol's key points: attitude and context are all. Similarly, long ago in dance, what separated the everyday from the avant-garde collapsed with the Judson's dancers' use of everyday movements and even talk. Ditto for the ritualized ordinariness of Kaprow's happenings. At this juncture, thanks to the esoteric and highly influential theories of John Cage—based on his devotion both to the "present-centeredness" of Zen Buddhism and to chance/indeterminacy as the overriding process of (musical) creation—the very act of disinterested looking (at what? at anything/everything) creates art. These all point to the dissolution of the avant-garde as a distinct formal category. Even the most commercial operations—from Broadway and Hollywood to video games and interactive internet sites—use ideas and techniques that remain the staple of the avant-garde. The exquisitely easy flow of, say, *The Lion King* from Hollywood to Julie Taymor's (once) avant-garde puppetry on Broadway is evidence of this conflation.

The avant-garde is in circulation—but that circulation is static. The same items, ideas, techniques, and kinds of shows go around and come around viewed by the same kinds of audiences. As already noted, the work is often of very high quality. The festival circuit follows world

markets, with North America-Europe and Asia-Australia dominating. Smaller markets link the Americas. In 2007, the nineteenth Experimental Theater Festival took place in Cairo with offerings ranging from Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* to *King Lear as a Sufi.* As artists make it in smaller markets, they are recruited for the larger—for example, Rabih Mroué of Lebanon is now a frequent presence in Europe. Sub-Saharan Africa either directly or through African American influence provides musics, languages, styles, and artists without yet participating in the touring circuit (except occasionally for South Africa). Despite this inequality of circulation, the avant-garde is increasingly intercultural in personnel, themes, and techniques. The audiences are tiny compared to pop music, film, video/DVDs, and the Internet. People who attend avant-garde performances know what they are in for and are generally in support of the work they see. The *épater le bourgeois* of the historical avant-garde no longer lances the spectators but, if operative at all, is aimed at governments, corporations, and other operators on the "dark side." The attacks are often in bad faith because the attackers appeal to the very governments, rich individuals, corporations, and foundations they attack. Avant-gardists—like stand-up comics (and some are standup comics)— seek acceptance and money from those they mock. Festivals are often supported from the public purse, not out of respect for art but because art is a tourist attraction. In relation to this larger world of which it is a part, even while playing the role of being apart, the avant-garde makes an annoying noise, "static" in the ear of the macroeconomy.

IV

Let us go a little deeper into the circumstances that converted the avant-garde from radical to conservative. 1968 was a watershed year with confrontations between youth rebels and conservative authorities in Mexico City, Paris, and Chicago. The conservatives defeated the students in the streets, but not (at that time) in their minds and imaginations. In the United States, the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy brought an end to optimism with regard to real change coming from or being forced on the ruling classes. Many intellectuals and artists took shelter in academia, where they created a powerful "avant-garde of theory" even as they withdrew from radical action in the streets. This withdrawal accelerated and deepened during the 1970s and 1980s. Those two decades were formative of performance studies, what I dubbed the "broad spectrum approach" to performances in all areas and aspects of life and thought.

Parallel to this, the late 1970s through to the early 90s saw the end to meaningful opposition to capitalism: in China, the reforms of Deng Xiaoping ("socialism with Chinese characteristics"); in Europe, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the USSR in 1991. In between came the May–June 1989 demonstrations by thousands of Chinese students who occupied Beijing's Tiananmen Square. These passionate advocates of democracy and transparency were gunned down by the People's Liberation Army. Marxism as an economic system and liberatory idea was dead, even if Communists were still in power in China, North Korea, and Cuba.

Among the tenured radicals who watched, wrote about, and had their memories stirred by these events, poststructuralism and performance studies were continuations in terms of theory of the failed political and economic leftist student-and-artist-led revolutions. As the world accepted or had forced on it a capitalist market economy, academic Marxists/deconstructionists imagined a world shaped by speech acts and performatives, with upended hierarchies, reversed binaries, and no more master narratives. In this world, actual change in favor of ordinary people was no longer enacted (how could it be, given the rise of globalization?); instead, change was "figured" as scholarship. Change was imagined and theorized inside the corporation; as such, this change could never become actual. What was not—could not be—accomplished by direct political action was "thought about" and "theorized" by professors and our students. Academic radicals, both faculty and students, made or studied performance art, participated in online actions, and exchanged ideas at conferences (academia's version of the touring circuit).

At present, in the United States, corporate-minded universities are ditching tenure for something more quantifiable in terms of productivity—witness the growth of adjuncts, short-term contracts, and part-timers. The university, no longer an ivory tower, is increasingly part of rather than apart from the corporate world. In this insecure academic environment, most students and their parents get the message and turn to business, the sciences, law, or engineering (STEM, again). For those in the arts, the majority seek practical training, hoping for a career in mainstream theater, media, or film. Some actually study avant-garde performance, as at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts Experimental Theater Wing. Also at TSOA is the Performance Studies Department, the avant-garde's academic partner. Many performance studies students are performance artists. Some also are active in "social theater," or Boal-like activist performance in schools, prisons, shelters, and the like. But there is very little street agitation. Even the word "workers" sounds quaint and outmoded in a world where everyone seems to want to be middle class

or richer. In a downsizing, outsourcing economy, workers are no longer an organizable category. Labor is another example of circulating stasis. A postmodern medievalism has settled in.

This medievalism is conceptual more than it is economic or political. It shows itself as the niche-garde I referred to earlier: the parsing of formerly big ideas into smaller packages of interlinking entities subsumed into the corporation. The corporation is a system that is so opaque that its operators do not, cannot, understand it. We are of it, in it, and governed by it without being able to comprehend it. Seen this way, the avant-garde—as a brand but also as a legitimate entity—lasted for a period of around one hundred years, roughly from Henrik Ibsen's *Et Dukkehjem* (*A Doll House*) in 1879 to the Wooster Group's *LSD*, 1983–85 (these dates encompassing the time from first public rehearsals to the opening of the "finished" work). Avant-garde artists prided themselves on originality, innovation, and the rejection, if not outright destruction, of the past. The avant-garde was populated with ideas and actions clustering around such words (in English with counterparts in other languages) as "new," "alive," "anti-," "aggressive," "violent," and so on, with the clear intent (rhetorical if not actual) to destroy both the existing sociopolitical and aesthetic order. Indeed, in the aesthetic sphere, new marched behind new, from futurism, cubism, and constructivism through surrealism and Dada and on to abstract expressionism, conceptual art, environmental theater, Pop Art, and the abolition of hierarchies, so that Allan Kaprow could confidently speak of "artlike art" and "lifelike art," preferring the latter to the former.[15]

The dynamic tension Kaprow enjoyed and exploited provided the energy for a burst of new performance activities during the 1960s and 70s, the last such nova. Happenings—what later was called performance art—as well as experimental theater of all kinds took place in storefronts, on the streets, in prisons and other "total institutions," in art galleries, anywhere. This activity raised deep questions: What is performance? Where does it take place? Can anyone perform? Should a performance event—no longer a play or concert, no longer theater, dance, or music as such, but an "event"—proceed in a linear way, and if not, what gives it unity? Does it need unity? What is unity? What is the relationship among the performing arts, popular culture, politics, rituals, therapy, sports, and play? And what about performances that are not art? Performances in everyday life, business, medicine, and so on? By the second decade of the twenty-first century, these questions seem settled, or absurd. Of course performance takes place anywhere and can include anything. And if not, so what? "What's next?" is no longer a relevant question— because anything can happen, will happen, and can be absorbed. That

is because the avant-garde is, as Savran notes "ineluctably tied to the modernist cultural hierarchy that opposes art and commerce, esoteric and popular, live and mediated, progressive and reactionary, avant-garde and kitsch. But this hierarchy no longer obtains, or at least no longer takes the form it did for most of the 20th century."[16]

<h1 style="text-align:center">V</h1>

A conservative avant-garde generating its own repetitions, such as the Abramović MoMA show, the Kaprow happening restaging, the redoing of The Performance Group's *Dionysus in 69*,[17] and the reperformances of many other works, can be at least partly explained in terms of the performance theories developed from the 1960s through the 1980s—and how these have affected today's artists. At school, young artists learn postmodern and poststructuralist theories. Formerly, class differences and struggles—Marxism—were offered as what determined social structure. A sense of worldwide collectives was at least imaginable. The more recent "post" theories privilege individuals and small groups, identity politics (race, ethnicity, gender, orientation, etc.), postcolonial studies, and critical analysis—all of which undergird the niche-garde. Furthermore, during the heyday of the historical avant-garde, artists were trained by means of apprenticeship and friendship, working with artists they admired and hanging out in places where artists associated with each other. It is not that learning by association and apprenticeship has stopped, but that university training is probably more important; and that once graduated from the universities, new artists seek fellow graduates to work with. "Starving artist," "down-and-out," and "waiting-to-be-discovered" models are no longer operative. Everything to be discovered is already available on YouTube, Vimeo, Facebook, etc. One can access, share, learn from, and sample stuff ranging from no-budget and low-budget works to blockbuster feature films. As for live performances, in New York alone there are hundreds of venues ranging from the very expensive to lofts and living rooms. Whatever your level of accomplishment and sophistication, there is a platform to show your stuff. Again, this profusion of opportunity leads to niches. People need to find their place or get lost.

Theory's role in leading to a conservative avant-garde is demonstrable. The poststructuralists and postmodernists so current from the 1970s to the turn of the twenty-first century (and far from passé today), and the "restored behavior" or "surrogation" advocates, emphasized repetition, citation, deferral of meaning, the circulation of ideas, and the impossibility of defining, no less finding, "originals."[18] Derrida's "il n'y a pas

de hors texte" (there is nothing outside the text) signaled the sea shift in archiving and sharing (sampling, stealing, reusing) made possible by the conjunction of digital technologies and the Internet. Old-fashioned photography and sound recording were difficult handcrafts. To be an accomplished photographer or recordist meant not only being able to take pictures and record sounds, but to work with paper and chemicals over time in a dark room and with complex circuits in a sound studio. Producing and circulating photographs and recordings was an expensive undertaking. Even more difficult than still photography and studio recording were motion pictures with quality sound. Miniaturization and digitization changed all that. Photography and digital acoustics management resulted in the wholesale exchange of images democratized by Photoshop (and its variations), file sharing, handheld cameras, and digital recorders. Websites cater to new generations of artists whose range of work, skill, and ability went from zero to off the charts. People who previously could not find their way around a dark room learned how to process audio-visual information. Millions had access to heretofore difficult techniques and formerly too-expensive equipment. The new digital literacy, like the onset of print literacy in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, is changing the way people think.

Ironically, the explosion of access to information—the endlessly "new"—generated a respect for the past. At first, perhaps, a personal past (my work, my family, my archive), but increasingly a shared set of domains—a digital past that begins in earnest, say, in the 1970s, but continues to add to itself as time marches on and reach further back as retrieval skills and equipment improve. Older nondigital works formerly locked in difficult-to-view archives are increasingly becoming widely available digitally. The "was" enters into an ongoing and ever expanding circulation. These relations to the past are both liberating and binding: there is so much that can be "done" to the data; yet also so much information reminding anyone who cares to examine it that there is nothing new under the sun—except perhaps at the technical level of finding new ways to access and circulate what is and was. Nothing is anymore permanently shut nor absolutely open.

Theory kept step with practice in these domains. In the late 1970s I began the thinking that led to various versions of the theory of "restoration of behavior" which achieved its more or less definitive shape in 1985 when it was published in *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Although I didn't see it when I was developing "restoration" and related theories, I see now that they were really undermining the ruling ideas of the historical avant-garde. This conservative theorizing took place at the same time as I was devising productions that were part of the avant-garde.

The basic thesis of "restoration of behavior" is well-known: restored behavior is living behavior treated as a film director treats a strip of film. These strips can be rearranged, reconstructed; they are independent of the causal systems (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence: they have a life of their own. The original "truth" or "motivation" of the behavior may be lost, ignored, or contradicted. Restoring behavior is the motor driving all kinds of performances: aesthetic, everyday, medical, popular, ritual, etc. Performance means: never for the first time. Performance is "twice-behaved behavior."

These ideas paralleled the thinking of feminist performance theorists such as Judith Butler, Peggy Phelan, Jill Dolan, and Sue-Ellen Case whose works take off in the late 1980s and continue into and beyond the 1990s.[19] The feminists often drew on Foucault's, Derrida's, and Lacan's notions of iteration, citation, and historiography. A little later, Diana Taylor took up the problem of the unstable relationship between embodied practice and the archive in her *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003). From a queer theory perspective, José Muñoz in *Disidentifications* (1999) and *Cruising Utopia* (2009) explored similar themes. All these scholars emphasize the performative construction of social identities and daily experience; the tension between embodiment and "recordings" (in that word's various meanings); some refer to the "deadness" of performance—not as an inactivity, but as an uncanny "presence-as-absence." Taken as a whole, these theories draw on, elaborate, and develop "restoration of behavior" and "surrogation."

Many artists-in-the-making studied with these and like-minded scholars. The Performance Studies Department at New York University—which I helped conceive in the late 1960s and 70s, and which took its current name in 1980—is populated not only by scholars but also by performance artists—directors, authors, monologists, actors, designers, media makers—taking a dip in the scholarly river. The number of "regular" theater people is small. But the combined fifty-plus yearly group of MA and PhD students use theory in their artistic work. "Performance as research" is an increasingly heard descriptor.[20] What has been happening at NYU for at least twenty years is the norm there and is becoming the norm at many other colleges and universities. Yes, orthodox theater, dance, and music departments remain—training people "just to be" actors, dancers, singers, designers, directors, choreographers, composers, writers, techies, and so on. But the most influential centers integrate theory, historiography, and practice. These are the places—in the Americas, Europe, and Asia—that are graduating the most advanced young artists, many of whom are well-versed in the theories that profoundly shape their thinking and practice. Theories that draw from and speak to performances: not mostly to the

performance of dramas—what theater used to be—but to performance art, media-driven performances, performance collages, and, increasingly, the "reperforming" of avant-garde performances.

Many of today's younger leading artists and groups globally are even more steeped in theory than their elders. The TEAM, Rimini Protokol, Gob Squad, the Nature Theater of Oklahoma, Vivarium Studio, Witness Relocation—and many, many more too numerous to list. Are these groups "avant-garde"? Yes, insofar as avant-garde is a style, an embodiment, and an investigation of theory. And no, insofar as the practice of these groups is not necessarily "ahead of" anything or proclaiming an aggressively destructive program in relation to the status quo—unlike the historical avant-garde. Are these artists conservative in the ecological sense that I used earlier? Yes, again.

VI

What is the underlying source of the circulating stasis that affects the avant-garde but is not limited to it? Taking a long view of history by reintroducing the often criticized but useful notion of the "master narrative," I propose that the peoples of the world are engaged in a tripartite struggle pitting Adam Smith's free market economy against Karl Marx's socialist-guided economy against religious fundamentalisms—Islamic, Christian, Jewish, and Hindu. Yes, these domains overlap and an individual can belong to more than one domain; it is even possible, perhaps inevitable, that a considerable number of persons are split inside themselves. But despite these overlaps and ruptures, human societies—and the individuals who comprise those societies—are in the midst of a centuries-long struggle about how to imagine and accomplish a "better society," whether by means of Smith's "invisible hand," Marx's "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs," or divine guidance (but under the aegis of which God?). When the narratives contradict one another, persons must choose which action to take, or refrain from taking. However, such choosing is not a matter of individual choice alone. Leaders—elected, imposed, designated—make choices that affect multitudes. These choices are neither determined nor the result of free will: there is as yet no means (and probably never will be) to determine what "guides" this kind of decision making. I place the verb in quotation marks because the systems in play appear to operate of their own accord, even as they are also clearly a function of human intervention and choice. Again, the corporation operates on its own. Most of today's intractable problems and flash-points are at

the fault lines of these thoroughly interlocked yet mutually contradic-
tory systems. The American "War on Terror" has the quality not only of
the Cold War but of the Crusades—on both sides. This crusaders' war
also is a struggle for the control of markets. So the War on Terror is
Janus-faced, looking backwards to the medieval epoch and forward to
advanced capitalism. The Chinese leadership has devised its own version
of a free market economy, while actively suppressing dissension and wor-
rying about the disintegration of the nation (Tibet, Taiwan, the Falun
Gong, other internal tensions). All this conflict without resolution keeps
things moving—not moving forward but around and around. And this
is where the avant-garde comes in. Mostly, the historical avant-garde was
anarchist or on the Left—self-identifying as "radical," "progressive," or
"alternative" and fiercely "against." Today's avant-gardists are not against.
Using New York as an example, young artists wait in line to clamber up
the ladder from performances in lofts to small theaters like the Collaps-
ible Giraffe to PS 122 or La Mama and on to where very few arrive: the
Lincoln Center Festival or the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave
Festival. From the midlevels on up, many of the artists and groups go
international. They premiere their work wherever the money is, wherever
sponsors can be found. Like Lexus or Sony, this avant-garde has been
tested and branded in the global market with a following in the press
and public. New York, actually, is home to relatively few premieres of
the older, more expensive groups. Even midlevel groups such as the
TEAM look outside the United States for sponsoring venues where the
creative core can devise new works. *Architecting*, its themes as American
as can be, premiered in Scotland. One cannot speak of a radical poli-
tics at the level of Robert Wilson, the Wooster Group, Elevator Repair
Service, Sasha Waltz, Heiner Goebbels, Sankai Juku, etc. Many of these
artists are on the Left personally, but in their artistic practice, in terms
of venues, audiences, and effects on the political world, this Left is apo-
litical, a style-Left rather than a workers Left. This niche-garde is what
moves around as the circulating stasis.

    For sixty-five years, since the end of WWII, humanity has suffered
incredibly but not generally. There has been no WWIII. Instead, there
is always a "small" war here, a genocide there, an ecological catastrophe
somewhere else, a terrorist attack, a reprisal. We live in an atmosphere
of impending doom forestalled by promises of huge technological
"breakthroughs." Will the icecaps melt, species diversity plummet, deserts
expand, and so on; and will genetic engineering, electric automobiles,
windmills, and solar panels save us . . . etc.? Even though their power is
decreasing, states remain strong enough to cause mayhem. The Internet
is impossible to govern—and that is both glorious and fearful. Terror-

ists operate outside of state control. Some regions such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Palestine-Israel, and parts of sub-Saharan Africa suffer for decades with no end in sight. American media create and export a new kind of infotainment by splicing human-made and natural disasters: a war, a tsunami, a famine, a spate of tortures, a car bomb, a plague, an assassination, a murder, an economic depression. In the American media, real events are dramatized and fictions are presented as real. It's all arranged in sequences that allow for maximum commercial exploitation. After genocide, Mylanta; and after the news, *The Simpsons*. Because of media—especially TV news and the Internet—events no longer seem to take place in specific times and places. One image recalls or replicates a host of others—as if everyone were attending the Wooster Group's *Hamlet*, where the attention swivels from Scott Shepherd's meticulous simulation of Richard Burton to the ghostly tremulous video of Richard Burton who seems to be vanishing as his own ghost as we watch him. For Wooster, Shakespeare-as-such is not important, only the hard-to-pin-down, the rendition, the ghosting.

Increasingly, artists respond to the global situation and their own attenuation by redoing avant-garde classics. MoMA's Abramović retrospective drew record crowds—to what? To a famous artist sitting in state? To see signature performances that were so edgy when first done but now safely museumified/mummified? A few months later, in September 2010, the Whitney Museum redid several of Trisha Brown's pieces from the 1960s and 70s, including "Man Walking Down the Side of a Building." Except that it was not a man but dancer Elizabeth Streb walking down the wall, which was not the side of a tenement building but the sleek exterior of the Whitney. I stood in the crowd and felt a thrill of recollection. I said to *TDR*'s Associate Editor, Mariellen Sandford, who was next to me, "This is good, it really is good. It hasn't aged." I was wrong, it had aged. We all have. And not even the most meticulous redoing can be the same as the first time. Circumstances change, audiences are different, memory itself deprives the reperformance of its shock of the new.

What these performances do is very different from what goes on at the Metropolitan Opera or at one of the great repertory theaters of Europe when a new interpretation of a classic is offered. The classic texts are supposedly reinterpreted, given new life, made relevant to "today." A certain thrill of treating the old in a new way delights audiences and sometimes distresses critics. How many ways can directors revamp Richard Wagner's *Ring* cycle? After what he did to Tennessee Williams and Lillian Hellman what will Ivo van Hove do next to . . . whatever?[21]

But in the reperformances of the avant-garde that I am discussing—the Abramović or Brown shows, the various redoings of past experimental

hits—the audacity of the first performance necessarily gives over to the nostalgia of the repeat. This nostalgia is as reassuring as it is depressing. When a big chunk of the avant-garde no longer lives in the future, but in the past, while another chunk is a brand, and still another is the niche-garde, we as people—not just as artists—know that we are living in a time of lost opportunities. In the twenty-first century even more than in the twentieth, we know what ails the world, but our leaders—and by proxy, ourselves—are unable to address, no less heal, what's wrong. The avant-garde answers not by blasting those who are corrupt, inept, and evil but by repeating itself.

Yet these cautious conservative enactments, so unlike what the avant-garde used to be, is in line with what, possibly, is the best, the wisest instruction: reduce, recycle, and reuse. Why shouldn't art go green and make a smaller footprint? Is it "bad" that the avant-garde is conservative? Can the best way forward under the circumstances be to not move at all? Or am I misreading what's going on? Rachel Chavkin, director of the TEAM, sees a different world than I do.

The work I was seeing while I was an undergraduate was often aesthetically and politically miraculous but also very often steeped in irony. I don't mean off-the-cuff ironic. There was a profound sense that change was not possible in human beings. The politics of the country at that time reflected this sensibility . . . My generation is the product of a new youth movement that I think—I hope—has been reinvigorated. It seems like political change is possible again and that the country believes in this possibility again.[22]

Show me.

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

NOTES

1   Name taken from the final episode of Franz Kafka's *Amerika*. Today's Nature Theater is very New York, no Oklahoma in sight.
2   Ironically, a stance-cum-rhetoric assumed by many of today's new groups.
3   An excellent look at this new work is in *TDR*'s recent special issue edited by T. Nikki Cesare and Mariellen R. Sandford; "Caught Off-Garde" 54, no. 4 (2010).
4   See my "9-11 As Avant-garde Art?" *PMLA* 124, no. 5 (2009): 1820–29.
5   An acronym for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Of course, the stem is the above-ground continuation of the root: what is essential and formative. Significantly, the arts are not part of STEM.
6   A group of hackers who in the backlash against WikiLeaks (the posting online of previously classified U.S. State Department memos), successfully attacked and temporarily brought down the sites of Mastercard, Visa, and Paypal because these sites refused to process donations to WikiLeaks. A cyberwar.

7   Beck's rally, "Restoring Honor," was parodied by Colbert and Stewart's "Rally to Re-store Sanity and/or Fear." But entertainment is at the heart of both—the title banner on Beck's website proclaims "The Glenn Beck Program—the Fusion of Entertainment and Enlightenment" (*http://www.glennbeck.com/content/articles/article/198/44980/*).

8   There are many accounts of the MoMA Abramović show. I recommend Judith Thur-man's "Walking Through Walls," *The New Yorker*, March 8, 2010, 24–30.

9   *http://www.elevator.org/shows/show.php?show=gatz*

10   *http://www.livingtheatre.org/history.html*. The founding dates of the others: Wooster Group, 1967 (as The Performance Group, with the name Wooster Group appearing for the first time in 1980); Richard Foreman/Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, 1968; Robert Wilson/Byrd Hoffman School of Byrds, 1969; Lee Breuer/Mabou Mines, 1970.

11   Wooster's *Poor Theatre* consists of carefully reproduced exact simulations of a lecture demonstration by choreographer William Forsythe and of the concluding sections of The Polish Laboratory Theatre's Grotowski-directed *Akropolis*, along with some brief "original" sections on Max Ernst. Wooster's *Hamlet* projects on a large screen sections of Burton's *Hamlet* while live Scott Shepherd "redoes" Burton as precisely as possible. For careful analyses of these productions, see David Savran, "The Death of the Avantgarde," *TDR* 49, no. 3 (2005): 10–42 and Kermit Dunkelberg, "Confrontation, Simulation, Admiration: The Wooster Group's *Poor Theatre*," *TDR* 29, no. 3 (2005): 43–57.

12   This work began when what was to become the Wooster Group in 1980 was still part of The Performance Group, which I founded and was artistic director of until 1980.

13   The TEAM's 2008 *Architecting* is related but not identical in its bringing the text-as-text to the fore. In *Architecting*, Margaret Mitchell—her *Gone With the Wind* physically in hand—is presented as a consultant for a new film version of her novel, this time directed by an African American. Mitchell argues that the new film—full of politically correct rhetoric regarding "enlightened" race relations—is as false to her novel, and to history, as was the David O. Selznick-Victor Fleming 1939 movie. All this in the context of post-Katrina New Orleans and in the shadow of a man silently constructing a large model of Chartres Cathedral: a model of a model of collective creativity. For nuanced discussions of the TEAM in general and *Architecting* in particular, see Carol Martin, "What Did They Do to my Country!: An Interview with Rachel Chavkin," *TDR* 54, no. 4 (2010): 108–17; Maurya Wickstrom, "The Labor of *Architecting*," *TDR* 54, no. 4 (2010): 118–35; Rachel Daniel, "Art in the Age of Political Correctness: Race in the TEAM's *Architecting*," *TDR* 54, no. 4 (2010) 136–54.

14   Savran, "Death of the Avantgarde," 36.

15   See Allan Kaprow, "The Real Experiment," in *Essays on the Blurring of Life and Art*, ed. Jeff Kelley (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1983), 201–18.

16   Savran, "Death of the Avantgarde," 35.

17   In 2009, by Austin's Rude Mechanicals. The Rudes tried in their production to du-plicate the Brian DePalma 1969 movie of The Performance Group's 1968 production. Ironically, a performance that changed nightly was first edited and frozen by DePalma and then recreated in that form by the Rudes whose production won the 2009–10 theater award of the Austin Critics Circle.

18   See my *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadephia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2003), and Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1996).

19   To name a few key texts of these writers from the period I am discussing: Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1991), Jill Dolan *Presence and Desire* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1993); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York: Routledge, 1993), Judith Butler, *Excit-*

able Speech (New York: Routledge,1997); Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked* (New York: Routledge, 1993), Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

20   See Shannon Rose Riley and Lynette Hunter, eds., *Mapping Landscapes for Performance As Research* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

21   Noted for his radical interpretations, Dutch director van Hove staged *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1999 and Hellman's *Little Foxes* (2010) at the New York Theater Workshop in brilliantly atypical ways—putting Blanche in a steamy onstage bathtub, doing away with all the furniture in the Hubbard home.

22   Martin, "What Did They Do?" 110.

It's Not Over ('Til It's Over)

Martin Puchner

WRITING THE HISTORY OF THE AVANT-GARDE is a melancholy business. Through the confluence of unique historical forces, it is often claimed, an unprecedented radicalism across the arts emerged in the early twentieth century, lasting to the late thirties. According to this story, individual artists and art collectives took on all hitherto accepted artistic forms, blasting nineteenth-century reformism, the high modernist religion of art, and the bourgeois institution of the museum. But the avant-garde was not only "against," although it certainly was against almost everything. Its creative destructions resulted in astonishing inventions from collages to nonsense poetry, with artists often smashing the different arts together in cabarets, little magazines, or impromptu galleries. There had been heroic attempts at breaking with convention before, and the avant-gardists sought to enlist these predecessors in their efforts, but for the most part they had to do the heavy lifting themselves. The story usually ends on a sad note with the observation that things have not been the same; all that is left for us to do is to celebrate in hindsight what we must call the *historical* avant-garde. Put another way, the avant-garde as we know and love it is history.

Where does this story come from? Historically, one of its first promoters were avant-garde collectives of the sixties such as the Situationists, who declared that the original avant-gardes had failed when they had been absorbed into the art market and the academy; if a new and true avant-garde was to emerge, it first had to learn from the failures of the older one. Soon this belief that the historical avant-garde had failed and was thus irredeemably lost to history was taken up by theorists. An influential representative is Peter Bürger, who viewed the avant-garde of the early twentieth century as a historical one, whose original achievements could never be replicated.[1] The historical avant-garde was unique, he claimed, just as it was also doomed to failure when its ambitions could not be realized nor its achievements maintained by its successors. Behind Bürger's theory stands nothing less than a Hegelian conception of history, which posits the grand project of sublating art and life. Few scholars now believe in this immensely successful claim that the historical avant-garde sought to merge art and life, but the grand history, accord-

ing to which the historical avant-garde was both unique and doomed to failure, still wields considerable influence, just as avant-garde research continues to focus to a large extent on this historical period.

More recently Bürger's history has been joined by neo-Marxist variants, which are no less wedded to a grand theory of history. Here the most compelling and influential work has been done by the likes of Fredric Jameson and Perry Anderson, whose economic and sociological histories of the avant-garde seek to explain why the historical avant-garde is irredeemably historical and why we cannot have anything like a real avant-garde today.[2] The reason mustered for this claim is a theory of global capitalism. In the early twentieth century, this theory holds, we still had tensions between capitalism and older forms of production, and it was on these tensions that modernism and the avant-gardes thrived. Today, we live in a world entirely saturated by capitalism, so that the conditions of possibility of an avant-garde have disappeared. Not everyone subscribes to the economic determinism driving this history, but its conclusions have found surprisingly widespread acceptance nonetheless: the avant-garde is over because its socioeconomic conditions of possibility are gone.

The problem with these theories is that the news of the end of the avant-garde seems not to have arrived in the relevant quarters. Everywhere across the arts, individuals and groups continue avant-garde projects. There are two possible attitudes one might take towards these recalcitrant vanguardists. One is to tell them that they are simply wrong, that what they mistakenly take for avant-garde practices are really something entirely different (postmodernism; nostalgic return to an avant-garde that is lost; empty repetition and imitation). The other is to acknowledge that what is wrong is the conception of the avant-garde as something firmly and safely lodged in the past. I think the only possible path is the second. Since history cannot be anything but a critical reconstruction of the past as it actually occurred—and this must include the history of the present—the very fact that there are all these unexpected avant-gardes springing up among us today should force us to take note; dismissing them as so many mistakes is simply unconvincing. The problem is not with the current avant-gardes; the problem is with the historiography that had declared them to be impossible.

Fortunately, in taking the new avant-gardes seriously, we do not have to throw history overboard entirely. Rather, we must conceive of a different type of history, one that avoids the nostalgic trap of an original, authentic avant-garde that is then variously betrayed by its successors. What kind of history would avoid the false conception of an authentic avant-garde that is irredeemably lost? A history not based on progress and points of no return, but one open to the possibility of repeated

avant-gardes, in short, a history of repetition. One illustration of such a history of repetition is the history of the avant-garde manifesto. I tried to write such a history in *Poetry of the Revolution*.[3] Its approach was historical, but it showed how history repeats, tracking the many ways in which avant-garde groups used manifestos to found new movements only to find that such foundational acts needed to be repeated over and over again.

There is one problem with such a history of repetition: the avant-gardes themselves have been quite insistent on creating points of no return. So isn't such a history of repetition precisely a history of failure? This is the case only if we posit that their purpose was to avoid any form of repetition in the first place. But no avant-garde and no manifesto can be accused of such naïveté. To be sure, few manifestos openly admitted the necessity of repetition in advance—this would have rendered their foundational force inoperative. But no writer of avant-garde manifestos had any illusions about the chances of success. Indeed, talk of success and failure raises the question of what kind of criteria one should use as a measure. We can't take manifestos and their revolutionary ambition at face value and assume that every avant-garde act and manifesto failed if they did not lead to an instant and complete revolution of art and society. Rather, success and failure should be measured by the force, inventiveness, and wit of these acts of rebellion themselves. In a world where manifestos sprang up everywhere, no one expected to write the only or the last manifesto. The act of writing manifestos would be repeated over and over again, and there was nothing wrong with that, as long as some manifestos made it even if others didn't.

I tracked political and art manifestos from the *Communist Manifesto* through the sixties, detailing the different phases, differences, and repetitions of avant-garde groups and their manifestos. But as this history came closer and closer to the present, I found myself becoming uncertain about how to proceed. I knew I needed to resist the lure of historical closure, the claim that the time of the manifesto was over, as Hegelian, Marxist, and other prophets of the end of the avant-garde were wont to do. But how should I know for whom and in what way manifestos were being written today? And should my book end with a prophecy of its own, or perhaps with a manual for writing manifestos in the future?

I left things open, not knowing what to do. Fortunately, other people did. After my book was published, they started sending me their manifestos in scores, including a poet and union activist working in Pretoria, South Africa, and the author of the *Hacker Manifesto*. Having written a history of the avant-gardes that, hesitantly, went up to the present, I found, to my great surprise, that I was drawn to the periphery of various kinds of avant-garde activities myself. What was more, these avant-

garde activities were not shallow repetitions, empty commodifications, or otherwise betrayals of the original and authentic avant-garde, nor anachronistic acts executed by idiots who somehow had failed to notice that the time of the avant-garde and hence the time of the manifesto had come to an end. Rather, many of them proved to be extremely canny in negotiating the complex history of repetition that connected them to the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century without succumbing to a history of decline and no return. The four case studies that follow illustrate how current avant-garde groups draw on the history of the avant-garde, using it as a springboard for their own practices.

Rett Kopi Documents the Future

Rett Kopi is a Norwegian cultural magazine, which devoted an elaborate special issue to the genre of the manifesto, published under the editorship of Karin Nygaard and Ellef Prestsaeter in 2007.[4] *Rett Kopi* started out as a philosophy journal, but when the two editors began working on the manifesto issue, Mr. Prestsaeter writes, the material "forced us to rethink the whole concept of *Rett Kopi.* Confronting the manifesto we felt a need to change our approach and consequently developed the strategy one reviewer aptly described as 'archival activism.'"[5] A handsome large-format publication running to over two hundred pages, this manifesto issue of *Rett Kopi* moves between English and Norwegian. The first part presents translations into Norwegian, often for the first time, from the history of the manifesto, including the first futurist manifesto of 1909 and up to the recent *Hacker Manifesto* by McKenzie Wark. This very span is notable. Even in this historical section, called *Manifestsamling* (collection of manifestos), the editors opted not to replicate the history of the *historical* avant-garde, but to bring the history of the genre right up to the present.

The second section moves into a different, and on the face of it extremely scholarly, mode: *Sluttnoter* (endnotes). Aren't endnotes, born of the university, inimical to the manifesto? Not in the way they are done here. Among the "endnotes" selected, very cunningly, is Gertrude Stein's spoof of Marinetti, "Mary Nettie," as well as texts by authors of manifestos commenting on their own manifestos, such as Donna Haraway or McKenzie Wark. These texts are not so much endnotes as responses, reflections on the form and history of the manifesto by scholars and authors of manifestos alike. It is important to realize that this form of metamanifesto has been part of the history of the manifesto from the beginning, at least since Tristan Tzara's *Manifesto Dada 1918*, which is also included in the first section.

The next part is called "articles" and consists of essays on manifestos by scholars such as Janet Lyon and Marjorie Perloff (and myself). But the collection does not end there, moving from the history of the manifesto, via the endnotes, to essays. There are two more sections consisting of short texts that undertake a reflection on the manifesto in yet another mode, by reflecting on the project of *Rett Kopi* itself. The first consists of responses to the journal's title, "*Rett Kopi* Documents the Future," in the form of a question: "Can the future be documented?" followed by an *ordliste* (dictionary) of six keywords closely associated with the manifesto: document; future; the futurist moment; manifesto; revolution; utopia.

The conception of the entire project, beginning with the title, "*Rett Kopi* Documents the Future," is attuned to the temporality of the manifesto and can be interpreted as acknowledging that the act of documenting the history of manifestos amounts to a history of the future. It is thus a historical project, although precisely not a nostalgic history of no return. As one reviewer put it: "Rett Kopi recycles a selection of more or less classic and well-known manifestoes, precisely not in a nostalgic-retrospective spirit, but rather as fuel for renewal or even progress (a word few people have dared to use lately)."[6] The act of documenting the future can be interpreted as an orientation not only towards the past, but also towards the future. Indeed, the publication itself is indebted to the collage style of avant-garde manifestos. More important, the volume's documentary effort was meant to spark an interest in future manifestos. In fact, this manifesto issue did much to introduce the manifesto genre to Norway, soliciting reactions across a wide spectrum from the National Art Academy to a private marketing college. Documenting the past, especially in the canny way done here, has done its part to bring about the manifesto's future.

The use of the past for the purposes of the future is established avant-garde practice. The surrealists, for example, were keenly interested in their predecessors, including lists of protosurrealists in their manifestos. Every future-oriented act reconfigures history. In this sense, *Rett Kopi* recognized an essential feature of the so-called historical avant-garde and translated this feature into the present. Only purist historiographies that buy into a simplistic story of no return and a pseudohistorical understanding of singularity find something wrong or contradictory in this dynamic between reconstructed past and envisioned future.

Serpentine Gallery Manifesto Marathon

Like *Rett Kopi*, the Serpentine Manifesto Marathon was highly conscious of the history of avant-garde manifestos and the temporal intricacies

manifestos invariably get caught up in. Its collection of manifestos, published in 2009 by Koenig Books in London, is a large-format book of about 230 pages.[7] Where *Rett Kopi* had opted for a collage in white and blue, the Serpentine Gallery created a red cover, on which is printed in white letters a veritable manifesto, or rather, a metamanifesto, whose six points amount to a defense of the avant-garde of the present.

1. The Historic avant-gardes of the early twentieth century and the neo-avant-gardes in the 1960s and 1970s created a time of radical manifestos.

The Serpentine Gallery is aware of the two major waves of previous avant-gardes and their manifestos. This history did not need to be repressed, or dismissed as a history of failure. It was a history of repetition, in which the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century were repeated, with a difference, in the sixties and seventies.

2. We now live in a time that is more atomized and has less cohesive artistic movements.

There is a hint of the Hegelian/Marxist history of progress and decline here that seems to explain a demise of the avant-garde through a broad sociological history of an increasing atomization of society. I think this history is problematic—was society really more cohesive, less atomized one hundred years ago? But then this pessimistic note is immediately followed by a third point:

3. At this moment, there is a reconnection to the manifesto as a document of poetic and political intent.

The notion of a possible reconnection to the manifesto as a genre is presented as a way of overcoming the sociological history of decline hinted at in the previous point. The stage is set, therefore, for new manifestos and new avant-gardes. Atomization turns out to be not so bad after all, or else it does not really matter. Who knows, perhaps atomization is good for manifestos, since manifestos thrive in an atmosphere of competition, attack, and defense. There is an echo here of *Rett Kopi*'s description of itself as seeking to "document the future"—indeed Hans Ulrich Obrist, who conceived of Serpentine's Manifesto Marathon and edited the volume, also contributed to the *Rett Kopi* special issue.

4. This is a declaration of artistic will and newly found optimism.

From the past tense of the first point, and the historical view of the present in the next two, we are now moving into a new mode in which the

text we are reading is identifying itself as a manifesto in its own right. Deictically, the manifesto is here pointing towards itself and evokes the proper spirit of optimism that goes with the writing of a futurist text.

5. New modes of publication and production are a means to distribute ideas in the form of texts, documents, and radical pamphlets.
6. This futurological congress presents manifestos for the twenty-first century. This book is urgent.

These final two (equally deictic) points sketch a theory of the manifesto as something that brings together a literary genre, a mode of publication, and a means of distributing ideas, adding that this indeed is the purpose of the manifestos collected here. The last sentence has once more the character of a metamanifesto: all manifestos are urgent, aiming at the moment when words become actions.

Between the covers, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Julia Peyton-Jones assemble reflections on the history of the manifesto as well as historical manifestos. More important, however, are the more than fifty new manifestos written in response to their call. They come from different art forms and disciplines, including film, performance art, and architecture, starting, in alphabetical order, from Marina Abramović through Brian Eno, Rem Koolhaas, and Yoko Ono to Yvonne Rainer and Lebbeus Woods. Together, they compose a panoply of manifestos and the various attitudes one might take towards the genre and its history. There are manifestos that declare what they are against and what they are for. Many manifestos include commentaries on the genre of the manifesto and its condition in the twenty-first century, even the impossibility of writing manifestos. Some manifesto use large, bold letters, others are less declarative and more essayistic; some take the form of a dialogue with different voices, while others speak for a group rather than an individual. Some are handwritten, while others include images and drawings. They variously call for political revolution, the end of abstract cinema, and an end to the ban on smoking; they are against modernism, as well as for a return to modernism. One simply states, in white letters against a black background, across two pages: "It doesn't get better." That, one assumes, is not an optimistic manifesto.

Two things stand out. For all the variety and hand-wringing about the possibility of manifestos, they are all manifestos or responses to the genre of the manifesto. Indeed, both the variety and the hand-wringing were part of the manifesto all along. Like the opening metamanifesto on the cover, many manifestos mention previous manifestos, but this history is seen, for the most part, not as disabling; rather, as in the case of *Rett Kopi*, it becomes part of what it means to write a manifesto now.

History, once it abandons the progressive history of no return that must ignore the manifestos of the present, is an ally, not an enemy, of the avant-gardes of the present.

The most notable thing about the Serpentine Gallery Manifesto Marathon was that it was precisely that, a marathon. The manifestos were not just written documents, but performed. The Serpentine Gallery is located near Speaker's Corner—the organizers mention the proximity to Marx. The marathon occurred in a pavilion designed by Frank Gehry. The performance style varied, but invariably, manifestos were treated as a performance genre, as something charged by the presence of speaker and audience. This performance character leaves traces on the manifestos themselves. The best example of this is Ben Vautier's manifesto, which includes stage directions of acts Vautier performed while reciting the manifesto, namely ripping pages out of a Serpentine catalogue.

In this context, it might be interesting to detail how the history of the avant-garde was included in this marathon. Many of the manifestos—as well as the metamanifesto on the cover—refer to the history of manifestos in the twentieth century, some even harking back to the *Communist Manifesto*. The catalogue opens with essays on the history of manifestos (including one by me). These historical reflections, however, played no role in the performed Marathon. In this sense, a distinction was made between a purely historical reflection, even one open to the future, and manifestos, including those that reflected on the genre's past.

There was one exception to this rule. Hans Ulrich Obrist engaged in a dialogue with Eric Hobsbawm about manifestos and revolutions. This was a dialogue, to be sure, and not a manifesto, but then again, some of the manifestos collected here opted for the form of the dialogue. Indeed, even Marx and Engels had toyed with the idea of writing their *Communist Manifesto* in dialogic form, and the final text still bears traces of this origin. In its own way, the Manifesto Marathon thus preserved a crucial feature of the historical manifesto, namely its performative dimension, and translated this feature into the present.

537 Broadway, New York City

The constructive relation between the history of the avant-garde and its future becomes visible when one visits important sites of previous avant-gardes. The first such site I was drawn to was 537 Broadway, which has had a varied history. The loft was bought by George Maciunas, leader of Fluxus, in 1966. Space was very cheap, and 537 was one of several buildings that Maciunas turned into fluxhouses, sometimes with the

support of the NEA. In 1975 he received a severe beating ordered by his creditors, which would have killed him had not a dancer opened the door and scared off the attackers (later Maciunas was married in the same spot). After Maciunas died in 1978 he left the space to Jean Dupuy, a performance artist. By the early eighties Emily Harvey, an art consultant, began renting the space from Dupuy. Dupuy, Harvey, and her husband Christian Xatrec turned the space into the Grommet Gallery, devoted to Fluxus and other avant-garde art. In 1985 Harvey bought the space from Dupuy and renamed it the Emily Harvey Gallery, focusing its programming more fully on Fluxus and its latter-day performance-art inheritors.

I got involved with 537 briefly when Stephen Squibb contacted me about doing a manifesto-centered event there.[8] The event took place under the auspices of International Pastimes, a series of performance events combining theory and art making, organized by Squibb and Bosko Blagojevic. International Pastimes got involved with 537 indirectly. Christian Xatrec had given the space to Joao Simoes, giving him carte blanche for programming, and Simoes in turn had invited International Pastimes, giving them a free hand; he only reserved the right to turn the event into material for a film.

The event itself thus had at least two dimensions. From one perspective, it shared many features with an academic discussion. The official topic was my book *Poetry of the Revolution*, and after I had given a short summary, Stephen, Bosko, and I talked about manifestos and then opened the discussion to the approximately forty people who had showed up, a combination of scholars and artists. The result was one of the best discussions on manifestos I have participated in, with the history of the manifesto being brought to bear on the particular challenges faced by the artists interested in this genre today.

At the same time, the event was itself an exhibit, a curated event in a former Fluxus space under the ultimate auspices of an artist, who used it as material in a film. I don't know what has happened to the material that the audience, Stephen, Bosko, and I provided, but one thing is certain: if Simoes ends up using it, it will not be as a mere documentation of a discussion.

Soho is not what it used to be, what with skyrocketing real estate prices and gentrification. Fluxus can be said to have contributed to the gentrification of Soho, and the changing use of the space does reflect a certain commercialization. For example, Emily Harvey used the space for her work as an art consultant, selling paintings and prints to corporate clients. At the same time, the space is not used for commercial purposes now. Indeed Fluxus itself was never free from market forces. Although

space was quite cheap, Maciunas had the capital to start fluxhouses, and sometimes received government funding to support his activities. The space and its owners have variously tried both to preserve and to continue the Fluxus history, without being stifled by this double imperative. The gallery is devoted to preserving the Fluxus legacy, but it also leaves programming in several hands without exerting control. My own presence, as a historian of manifestos, is perhaps the best proof of this incorporation of history into art making. 537 Broadway is not a museum dedicated to Fluxus, but a space that has adapted to the changing environment of New York City in the twenty-first century.

Spiegelgasse 1, Zurich

Going back in time, my final destination was one of the original places of the original avant-garde: the Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich at Spiegelgasse 1. Here, no one had invited me: I went there, let us say, as an avant-garde tourist. Spiegelgasse 1 is located in the old city center of Zurich, close to the Limmat, in a maze of small streets on a pretty steep incline. When you approach the house, located on a corner, you get the impression that you are faced with a museum. There is a plaque on the outside alerting the passerby that this is the place where the historical Cabaret Voltaire had taken place once upon a time.

That time had not lasted very long. The Cabaret Voltaire was in operation only for three months, in 1916, before it was kicked out due to noise complaints. After that, the space continued to exist as a bar, until it was closed permanently, again due to noise complaints, in the 1950s. It was not until 2002 that a group of artists, intent on both preserving this historical avant-garde space and using it for their own productions, occupied the building. In response to this action, a committee was formed to save the space. An early supporter was Swatch, the large Swiss watch manufacturer, which offered funds, provided that the city of Zurich supported the project as well. This happened, and the building was turned once again into a bar and performance space.

The new Cabaret Voltaire manages the balancing act between history and present with considerable sophistication. One of the organizers, Adrian Notz, represents the historical face, the attempt to preserve Dada's legacy. There is a glass display case that contains Dada publications as well as some scholarship on Dada near the entrance. Once again, histories of the avant-garde play a role in the formulation of new avant-gardes. Notz, who calls himself a Dadaologist, also travels to conferences and seeks out traces of Dada around the world. In fact, Spiegelgasse 1 was

a veritable excavation project. Documenting history, the website of the new Cabaret Voltaire details the various uses of the house before and after Dada. The space looks quite different, although the archaeologists managed to preserve a characteristic pillar in the middle of the room. Being interested in Dada today is, among other things, an archaeological endeavor.

Philipp Meier represents the current face of the Cabaret Voltaire. He curates the performance space, although without exerting much control in order to preserve the free-wheeling spirit of Dada. Paradoxically, he explained to me on the phone, this means that performances do not always have a close connection to the original Dadaists.[9] For public events, no rent has to be paid, only a modest contribution to expenses. The space can also be rented for private events for a fee.

Philipp Meier also uses his name and that of the new Cabaret Voltaire to support other events with advertising and logistics. In the midst of the financial crisis, a former professional swimmer, Roland Wagner, announced his participation in a Swiss swimming competition, declaring that he would achieve a new world record. To the great surprise of the sports fans, he stopped halfway, returned to the beginning and acted as if he had won the race. He let it be known that his performance was meant as a critique of the performance-oriented mindset that had caused the financial crisis.

Avant-garde purists have frowned upon the combination of art and commerce at work in the new Cabaret Voltaire, protesting as much against the involvement of the city government as against corporate sponsoring. Wasn't this precisely what Dada was against? Not really. From the beginning, Dada maintained a playful attitude towards commerce. After all, the whole reason why the group had been invited to provide entertainment at Spiegelgasse 1 was to increase sales. Several Dadaists developed their collage techniques by working as graphic designers. And Dada promoted itself through forms of publicity not dissimilar to advertising, manifestos among them. The purism associated with the original Cabaret Voltaire is a product of progressive history, of stories of decline, of a nostalgia for a time when true avant-gardes were still possible.

In this context, it might have amused the Dadaists, rather than outraged them, that in order to finance its support, Swatch created a Dada watch, Dada Traces, whose limited edition contains small bits of original Dada documents. Not only the Swiss corporate world has embraced the Dadaists, who once upon a time printed business cards identifying their gallery as the Dada World Headquarters. The Swiss republic has embraced Dada as well, putting Sophie Täuber, one of the few women associated with Dada and one of the few Dada Swiss citizens, on the fifty franc note.

As the Dadaists recommended back in the teens, a piece of advice that has never been as sound as it is today: "Invest your money in Dada."

Appendix: Five Theses on the History of the Manifesto[10]

I. *The manifesto interprets the world—and changes it.*

Although related to other future-oriented genres such as the apocalypse, the Jeremiad, the prophecy, and the oracle, the manifesto is unique in that it purports to participate in bringing about whatever future it predicts. While those other genres merely serve to reveal a future that is going to take place anyway, the manifesto is an active genre, one that wants to contribute to the making of the future. This conception of the manifesto was centrally shaped by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels when they wrote what would become the most influential manifesto in that genre's history and therefore the text that has defined what it means to write a manifesto ever since. The *Communist Manifesto* announces a break, a revolutionary upheaval, and it itself, qua its own speech acts, enacts this break as well. In this way, the *Communist Manifesto* adheres to Marx's eleventh thesis on Ludwig Feuerbach, that philosophers should not only interpret the world, but (also) change it.[11]

Another way of characterizing the manifesto's relation to the future is to say that the *Communist Manifesto* documents the future. It does so to the extent that it lays out general laws of history. But it also tries to occupy the future in an act of prolepsis, of creative anticipation. This documentation must be conceived of as an active, even an activist act, as a documentation that itself produces what it documents. Future manifestos must find ways of arriving at compelling interpretations of the world, but they must also develop ways of involving their own speech acts in the project of changing it.

II. *The manifesto is a revolutionary genre; it can only function within a revolutionary horizon.*

The *Communist Manifesto* has become the defining genre for political manifestos but also, since the late nineteenth century, for art manifestos. Due to this inheritance, one can speak of a revolutionary horizon of the manifesto. It is against the *Communist Manifesto* and its particular notion of revolution that all subsequent manifestos, from Dadaist manifestos and the foundational manifestos of the various communist internationals to the manifestos of the 1960s, have had to establish themselves. Indeed, the different forms the manifesto has taken in the last hundred and fifty years can be attributed to changing meanings of the concept of revolution.

To articulate this revolutionary horizon, I use a phrase from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire,* "poetry" of the revolution, with which Marx captured the rhetoric or form of the revolution as opposed to its content.[12] The writer Marx here thinks about the relation between literature broadly conceived and the world. The manifesto, I think, is this poetry of the revolution, the way in which different revolutions are articulated and articulate themselves. The future of the manifesto will depend on our ability to invent a new poetry of the revolution within a given revolutionary horizon.

III. *The art manifesto and the political manifesto are closely intertwined; the future of the one hinges on the future of the other.*

The uncertainty about how and in what form manifestos can and should be written now is undoubtedly related to a general political crisis of the Left. This does not mean, however, that art manifestos are simply secondary formations, that they copy from political ones and that if we want a new art manifesto we need to have a new political manifesto first. For the history of the manifesto is a double history, entailing both political and art manifestos. Only by understanding their connection can we conceive of new and timely forms of manifestos. Needless to say, it does not make sense to advocate a return to Dada or Lenin, neo-Dadaism or neo-Bolshevism. But no art manifesto can exist without having established a relation to political manifestos and conversely, no political manifesto will have force without reflecting on its relation to art, to literature, to the poetry of the revolution.

IV. *No avant-garde manifesto has ever been outside the spectacle.*

The myth of the purity of the historical avant-garde and its later cooptation by the society of the spectacle is untenable. Usually it is Dada that is called upon to guarantee the purity of the avant-garde and, by extension, the purity of the manifesto. The avant-garde, in this view, was radically anticommercial, dedicated to a purely anarchic politics; it preserved a pure opposition in the still center of the Great War. But in fact the historical avant-garde has never been entirely outside the spectacle. The avant-garde manifestos themselves are the best proof of this. F. T. Marinetti used the manifesto as part of an advertisement campaign, which included paid advertisements in newspapers, and the Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire was initially a business proposition meant to provide entertainment to boost sales. Indeed, many Dadaists worked in advertising and graphic design. To be sure, the avant-garde spectacle was a peculiar kind of spectacle, mixing art and revolution, opposition and cooptation, but it was not something that can be meaningfully described as having taken place outside the spectacle. Future manifestos

should not speak as if from outside the spectacle especially if they want to establish a critical relation to it.

V. *The manifesto encodes grand narratives.*

Beginning with the first sentence of the *Communist Manifesto,* manifestos have often engaged in narrative history. More recently, historians of postmodernism (such as Perry Anderson) have declared the end of grand narratives and sometimes concluded that for this reason there can be no more manifestos. They were right to notice the connection: the manifesto is a genre premised on a grand narrative. But their predictions turned out to be wrong. For now that the prominence of the postmodern is on the wane, grand narrative and thus the manifesto is on the rise again. The task today is more than ever to invent new narratives, even perhaps grand or grandiose ones. The future of the manifesto will depend on our willingness and ability to construct narratives. And new manifestos can become the mode through which such new narratives will be articulated.

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

NOTES

1   Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974).
2   Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991). Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998).
3   Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006).
4   Ellef Prestsaeter and Karin Nygaard, eds., *Rett Kopi Dokumenterer Fremtiden: Manifest* (Oslo: Rett Kopi, 2007).
5   Ellef Prestsaeter, email to author, May 27, 2010.
6   Tania Ørum, Kritiker, quoted from the *Rett Kopi* website, http://www.rettkopi.no/eng/poster.htm.
7   Nicola Lees, ed., *Serpentine Gallery Manifesto Marathon* (London: Koenig Books, 2009).
8   In addition to inviting me to the gallery, Stephen Squibb is also responsible for researching its history. I would like to thank him for both.
9   I would like to thank Philipp Meier for talking to me about Cabaret Voltaire.
10   This text first appeared in *Rett Kopi Dokumenterer Fremtiden: Manifest* (Oslo: Rett Kopi, 2007): 182–83, and was also published, in a translation by Ellef Prestsaeter, as "Fem teser om manifestets framtid," *Klassekampen*, June 29th, 2007, 14–15. I would like to thank the publisher for the permission to reprint this text here.
11   Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto and Other Writings*, ed. Martin Puchner (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2005), 181.
12   Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto,* 66.