

NEO- AVANT- GARDE

Edited by David Hopkins

AVANTGARDE
CRITICAL STUDIES

NEO-AVANT-GARDE

AVANT-GARDE CRITICAL STUDIES

20

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NEO-AVANT-GARDE

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PREFACE

This volume of essays represents the outcome of a conference titled 'Mapping the Neo-Avant-Garde' which took place at the University of Edinburgh between 23rd–25th September 2005. Most of the contributors took part in that conference, but I have commissioned three new essays (from Richard Williams, Anna Katharina Schaffner and Martin Dixon). Needless to say, the essays in the book often depart considerably from their original form as papers, but the affirmative ethos of this collection as a whole owes much to the spirit of that conference. The fact that the event was so constructive in tone was remarkable given that it took place so shortly after the tragically sudden and unexpected death of Dietrich Scheunemann, the instigator of the research project on the European avant-garde at the University of Edinburgh which reaches its conclusion with the current volume. 'Mapping the Avant-Garde' was the fourth in a sequence of conferences at Yale and Edinburgh concerned with re-defining the theorisation of the concept of the avant-garde. (The first conference at Yale resulted in the publication 'European Avant-Garde: New Perspectives' in Rodopi's 'Avant Garde: Critical Studies' series [no. 15, ed. Scheunemann, 2000], and the outcomes of the previous two conferences at Edinburgh are 'Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde' [no 17, ed. Scheunemann, 2005] and 'Avant-Garde Film', to be published later this year.) Everybody involved in the conference felt Dietrich's loss very deeply, and it was only due to the commitment and tenacity of certain of his former students, notably Dr Anna Katharina Schaffner and Dr Ruth Hemus, that I was able to go ahead with the conference which I had originally planned in collaboration with Dietrich. Naturally the character of the event changed fairly rapidly with my own bias as an art historian becoming much more apparent. The strongly interdisciplinary ethos of the event, however, which I discuss in the introduction, still spoke of its intellectual roots in a department of comparative literature.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of several individuals and funding bodies in bringing this collection of essays to fruition. I am

particularly grateful to Dr Ian Revie, Head of the School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh who has been unstinting in his support of the project. The entire enterprise would undoubtedly have ground to a halt after Dietrich's death without Dr Revie's backing. I am also grateful to Professor Alison Yarrington in my own department at Glasgow University for granting the research leave which allowed me to work on this volume. In terms of funding, thanks are due to the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) which funded the three year research project at the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow that culminated in this and two other publications (see above). I should also like to thank Professor Sarah Colvin who took on certain of Dietrich's administrative duties as director of the project from the Edinburgh University end, allowing me to concentrate on editing the book in my role as the research project's co-director from the University of Glasgow end.

A word of special thanks is due to Dr Anna Katharina Schaffner who, as already noted, has proved so essential to the realisation of this project over the last year. Anna has worked tirelessly as editorial assistant for this publication, and her practical and intellectual expertise have been absolutely fundamental to its success. I would like finally to thank both Anna and the other authors of the essays in this volume for working so hard in producing such a stimulating reconsideration of the neo-avant-garde. It has been a great personal pleasure to work with such a talented group of scholars.

David Hopkins
University of Glasgow

June 2006

INTRODUCTION

DAVID HOPKINS

As far as I am aware, the present volume is the first substantial collection of essays which deals with the concept of the neo-avant-garde from an interdisciplinary standpoint. Although the majority of essays in this book conform to a common tendency in writings on the neo-avant-garde to concentrate on fine art, particularly painting and sculpture, thereby adding significantly to the growing art historical literature in the field, a number of the contributions focus on poetry, performance, theatre, film, architecture and music. Given that there are also major essays in this collection dealing with geographical blind spots in current neo-avant-garde studies, with important thematic issues such as art's entanglement with gender, mass culture and politics, with key neo-avant-garde publications, and with the purely theoretical problems attaching to the theorisation of the topic, this collection offers a distinctly multi-dimensional approach to the subject.

At the same time, this book can be read as an over-view of the neo-avant-garde in its historical time frame, from approximately the mid 1950s to the mid 1970s, although it can hardly claim to be exhaustive. It might initially be worth saying something about this issue of periodisation. Strictly speaking, the neo-avant-garde is a theoretical construct, which stands in a dialectical relation to the notion of the 'historical avant-garde' of the early twentieth century; it is not a term which has any agreed periodising function (Bürger 1984). The fact is, however, that the concept is generally assumed to delimit a particular historical period and range of art movements and cultural manifestations. Most accounts of the neo-avant-garde tend to stick to the 1950s and 60s, giving special emphasis to trends and formations in fine art in the USA and Western Europe such as Neo-Dada, Nouveau Réalisme, Fluxus, Pop, Minimalism and Conceptual Art. Important literary manifestations of the neo-avant-garde include the 'Nouveau Roman' novelists such as Robbe Grillet and the concrete and sound

poets, while music is most famously represented by John Cage. Key political-cum-cultural formations include the Situationist International in France.

In terms of the visual arts, some accounts stray into the 1970s with a cut-off point frequently coming in the mid 70s with some of the later manifestations of Conceptualism, Land Art and Performance/Body Art. (It is worth noting in passing that some writers even see aspects of 1980s and 1990s neo-conceptualism as neo-avant-garde in spirit.) The termination date for neo-avant-gardism is often placed somewhere between the late 1960s and late 70s and is normally seen as a consequence of key social and economic shifts in society that occurred around this time. According to this view, which dovetails with certain accounts of the shift from a modernist to a postmodernist cultural ethos, the mid to late 1970s witnessed profound structural changes in the institutional role of the arts such that it became increasingly difficult to talk of the avant-garde having any distance from social processes (Jameson 1991). Broadly speaking, the present volume accepts the most generous estimations of the historical scope of the neo-avant-garde, while hoping to intervene pointedly in terms of the narrow conceptualisation of the geographical parameters of the topic, which habitually limits it to the USA and Western Europe.

If I have talked, possibly prematurely, of the demise of the neo-avant-garde in the later 1970s it is because I wish to contrast this with the question of the conditions of its emergence as an idea. The notion of the 'neo-avant-garde' appears hardly to have been entertained until the mid 1970s although there is a sense in which neo-Dada manifestations in America in the 1950s were understood to have a close relation to the avant-garde activities of the early twentieth century, the label 'neo-Dada' having first been employed by the American art historian Robert Rosenblum in 1957 in a review of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns.¹ Strictly speaking the term 'neo-avant-garde' is the brainchild of Peter Bürger who famously asserted in his book 'Theory of the Avant-Garde' that the neo-avant-garde activity of the 50s and 60s which looked back to the example of 'historical avant-garde' movements such as Dada, Futurism, Surrealism and Constructivism – and his primary examples were the French Nouveau Réalistes and Andy Warhol – could only be seen as an inauthentic reformulation of the historical avant-garde since, as he says, "the neo-avant-garde *institutionalizes the avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions" (Bürger 1984: 58).

Bürger's view that the experimental and socially engaged art of the fifties and sixties was a betrayal of the spirit of the 'true' avant-garde (which, in his terms, had failed in any case to live up to its own aspirations for a sublation of art into life praxis) has cast its shadow over much theoretical discussion of post-war art, and the current publication is partly committed to questioning Bürger's pejorative attitude and attempting to make more positive use of the concept of the neo-avant-garde (although by no means all the writers in this collection are comfortable with the label). However, it might be worth briefly entertaining Bürger's central perception that not just the neo-avant-garde project but effectively the entire project of avant-gardism in the last century was hobbled by the structural embeddedness of oppositional and experimental art in the institutional infrastructures of the West; a process which might arguably be traced back to the 1950s and the rise of governmental annexation of the arts (for instance the emergence of institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and the curatorial ratification of oppositionality). Surely this is far too blunt and summary a dismissal of a whole tract of cultural history. The arts themselves hardly stand to be blamed for the way in which they are absorbed by the culture industry, however much one longs for them to act as tokens of resistance to such processes, and the efficacy of the arts should not be solely indexed to their economic and social positionality. It might therefore be useful to sideline Bürger's sweeping denunciation for a moment, and to hold in abeyance questions regarding art's inexorable entanglement within capitalism. Instead, to remind ourselves of the historical conditions from which the neo-avant-garde emerged, it might be productive to go back to two statements on the avant-garde impulse which can be seen as a prelude to the way in which its post-war manifestations would conceptualise themselves.

The statements, made at the end of the 1930s, could not have been produced at a more dramatic juncture in twentieth century history. European democracy was seriously under threat from Fascism and Stalinism. The first statement, from the American critic Clement Greenberg's seminal text on avant-gardism, 'Avant Garde and Kitsch' (1939), can only be properly understood, like his other central statement on the subject 'Towards a Newer Laocoon' (1940), in relation to this historical moment. As is often noted but just as frequently under-emphasised, Greenberg had not yet developed his view of Modernism as synonymous with formal purity. As a Marxist with Trotskyist leanings he was more concerned at this stage of his

career with understanding the social emergence of the avant-garde as a counterpart to mass culture. Greenberg felt that, acutely conscious of its position within processes of social and cultural modernisation that had been ongoing since the early nineteenth century, the avant-garde had necessarily had to detach itself from social concerns and to turn inwards upon itself. Hence in 'Avant Garde and Kitsch' he wrote:

The revolution was left inside society, a part of that welter of ideological struggle which art and poetry find so unpropitious as soon as it begins to involve those "precious" axiomatic beliefs upon which culture thus far has had to rest. Hence it was developed that the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to 'experiment' but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence. Retiring from public (life) altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. "Art for art's sake" and "pure poetry" appear [...]. (Greenberg 1985a: 22-3)

The second statement had been produced slightly earlier. In 1938, two noted exiles, the former Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky and the former 'Pope' of Surrealism, André Breton, had written in 'Towards a Free Revolutionary Art':

It should be clear [...] that in defending freedom of thought we have no intention of justifying political indifference, and that it is far from our wish to revive a so-called pure art which generally serves the extremely impure ends of reaction. No, our conception of the role of art is too high to refuse it an influence on the fate of society. We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution. But the artist cannot serve the struggle for freedom unless he subjectively assimilates its social content, unless he feels in his very nerves its meaning and drama and freely seeks to give his own inner world incarnation in his art. (Trotsky 1970: 127)

In effect these two statements can be seen as projecting two very clear perceptions of the avant-garde project into the future: artistic autonomy conceived as involving a complete withdrawal from the twin distractions of political struggle and the culture industry, and artistic autonomy considered as inextricably bound up with radical political (leftist) convictions. It is important to note that the latter

position – that of Trotsky and Breton – in no way countenanced a propagandist art; in fact quite the opposite; art in these thinkers' terms should be concerned entirely with developing its own expressive resources. In that sense the idea of 'experiment', which is so explicitly rejected by Greenberg, is implicit in the Trotsky-Breton view of aesthetics. But both statements have more in common than is sometimes supposed; both presuppose a degree of autonomy for art, which is something that often gets lost sight of by theories of avant-gardism which assume that artistic autonomy is in some way the enemy of an art affiliated with 'life'.² It perhaps goes without saying that as the Greenbergian doctrine hardened into an account of an elitist Modernism (capital M) it became something which descendants of the Trotsky-Breton position would increasingly define themselves against; in that sense much avant-garde activity of the 1950s and 60s which considered itself as both artistically and politically radical was even more determinedly antimodernist than it had been prior to WWII. But it is important to appreciate that post-war artistic radicalism had its roots in ideologically-driven notions of artistic freedom and self-sufficiency which were quite different from the roots of the historical avant-garde.

One should be wary, therefore, of too quickly assimilating post-war avant-gardism to pre-war avant-gardism in the way that Bürger does, and attend as sensitively as possible to the developmental nuances of the neo-avant-garde. To simplify matters, as time went on certain distinct patterns emerged in the evolution of post-1945 avant-garde production. In America, where there had been much less of a coherent avant-garde tradition in the pre-war period, antimodernists were frequently directly engaged in a dialogue with the tenets of Greenbergian formalism, whilst those based in Europe were concerned with trying to build on the legacies of the likes of Duchamp or the Constructivists which had been lost sight of, particularly in countries such as Germany and Italy where there had been such an overwhelming totalitarian presence. As avant-garde art strove for its own autonomy in American and European contexts it did so, therefore, with different emphases. Whilst exceptions to the rule abound, it is broadly the case that if Greenberg's ideas necessarily had to be addressed in America, in Europe there was some continuity between a Breton/Trotsky position and a neo-avant-garde sensibility which might well be seen as coming to a head with the Situationists of the 1960s and effectively ending with the revolutionary upsurge of

May 1968; this arguably being a convincing end-point for a periodisation of the neo-avant-garde in Europe.

On top of all this, the situation, needless to say, becomes more complex in non-European countries which assimilated European and American avant-garde and modernist currents in the context of their own post-colonial political and social set-ups. (The two essays on Brazil in this volume are particularly interesting in this respect.) Peter Bürger's theorisation of the neo-avant-garde is permeated by a sense of loss of the avant-garde project in Europe, particularly post-1968, but it could be asserted that the differential perceptions of what artistic radicalism might amount to in American and European contexts rather pass him by, as does the whole question of the way a post-colonial global situation might affect the terms in which avant-gardism is understood. A careful re-historicisation of the phenomenon of the neo-avant-garde is thus called for, and the essays in this volume represent an attempt to set that process in motion.

Whatever adjustments we might make to the overall schematisation of the neo-avant-garde in historical terms, we still have a largely negative verdict on the neo-avant-garde's achievements, largely thanks to Bürger. How can we be more positive about it? Two key American arguments, largely concerning the visual arts, have come from the critics Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster. Buchloh's initial arguments, in a review of 1984, centred on the remarkable narrowness of Bürger's knowledge of 1960s art, citing figures like Daniel Buren, Marcel Broodthaers and Michael Asher who explicitly interrogated art's institutional conditions and therefore arguably returned art to praxis (Buchloh 1984). More recently, in his collection of essays 'Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry', Buchloh has further clarified his departure from Bürger, arguing for instance that it was not until the rise of Conceptualism from circa 1968 to the mid 1970s (i.e. later than the period considered by Bürger) that a truly politicised post-war neo-avant-garde emerged (Buchloh 2000: xxiv). If we are back again with questions of periodisation, Foster also attempts to supply some precision for Bürger's overall concept; drawing a distinction between phases of neo-avant-garde activity in the 1950s and 1960s, and seeing the first phase (exemplified by Rauschenberg and Allan Kaprow) as being concerned with the institutionalisation of the avant-garde, and hence tying in with Bürger's analysis, and the second 1960s phase (exemplified once again by Buren and Broodthaers) as pledged to institutional critique (Foster 1996: 20). Clearly, a real attempt is being

made here to see the neo-avant-garde in a positive light, via a more considered overview of its historical unfolding.

Another point Foster makes in relation to periodisation is that, rather than cancelling the project of the historical avant-garde, in the way suggested by Bürger, the neo-avant-garde “comprehends it”, in Foster’s words, “for the first time” (Foster 1996: 15). I have already noted that a delay in the reception of the historical avant-garde was inevitable, given the rise of Fascism and its aftermath (i.e. a period between roughly the mid 1930s and the late 1940s), and that certain principles had inevitably to be ‘re-discovered’ or recuperated in a renewed campaign of avant-gardism from the early 1950s onwards. But whereas Foster seems to see this as a project that runs across the entire post-war avant-garde (although his own examples are almost exclusively drawn from American art), I would wish, once again, to assert that it has differential time frames and emphases in European and American contexts.

Foster’s general point is extremely useful, however, in conceptualising the neo-avant-garde as performing a historical unravelling of the knot of issues and innovations introduced by the historical avant-garde. This model incidentally broadly echoes the way in which art historians once thought about the relationship between the Renaissance and Mannerism in Italy. If the Renaissance was the decisive period of innovation, Mannerism was its historical ‘tail’ during which the various achievements of the Italian masters were exploited and tested; think for instance of the attenuations and distortions of perspectival devices in the likes of Tintoretto, Parmigianino and El Greco. Something slightly similar might be said about the endless variations on Duchamp’s readymade principle in the post-war period, although Foster’s point is substantially different from this, since he suggests that a period of amnesia or forgetting intervened prior to the neo-avant-garde’s reception of the historical avant-garde.

This leads us to Foster’s most challenging suggestion, which is that the historical avant-garde should be understood in psycho-analytic terms as fundamentally traumatised; in Foster’s terms “a hole in the symbolic order of its time” (1996: 29), with the neo-avant-garde functioning as the agent of its eventual self-comprehension. This is a subtle model since it makes the historical and neo-avant-gardes mutually dependent. Hence, in Foster’s words:

historical and neo-avant-gardes are constituted in a similar way, as a continual process of protension and retension, a

complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts – in short, in a deferred action that throws over any simple scheme of before and after, cause and effect, origin and repetition. (Foster 1996: 29)

The reverberations of this powerful thesis can be found in several essays in this book, but it should finally be noted that in Foster's more recent general book on twentieth century art – 'Art Since 1900' – co-authored with his fellow editors of the American journal 'October', Benjamin Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois – Foster and his collaborators appear to have retreated from granting the concept of the neo-avant-garde much importance. The entire history of oppositional art in the late twentieth century appears for them to be melancholically blighted by what Buchloh, in post-Situationist terms, characterises as a totalisation of spectacle. Foster wearily argues that "[t]oday the recursive strategy of the 'neo' appears as attenuated as the oppositional logic of the 'post' seems tired" (Foster 2004: 679). Admittedly Foster is acting more as a critic than a historian here, signalling that the concept of the neo-avant-garde seems as incapable as that of postmodernism of rallying opposition to the market-driven ethos of early twenty-first century art, but one senses that he is also drawing a line under the neo-avant-garde as a viable historical formulation.

The writers who are grouped together in this collection are generally much more committed to employing the neo-avant-garde as a workable concept, at least for the purposes of trying to pinpoint the defining features of the cultural production of the 1950s, 60s and 70s. There are certainly writers here who question the usefulness of the concept (Friedrich W. Block) or who wonder whether the neo-avant-garde should not simply be seen as a continuation of a larger tradition of vanguardism in the twentieth century (Tania Ørum, Günter Berghaus). There are equally several who suggest various modifications to the concept (Frances Stracey, Anna Dezeuze). I will return to such questions shortly. Generally speaking, though, few writers included here would give up on the project quite so despairingly as the 'October' critics appear to have done.

It seems appropriate here to outline the structural rationale of the volume. Thematic considerations have largely determined the grouping of the essays although a schematic historical logic has been preserved as far as possible. As a consequence essays referencing Minimalism for example (by Hopkins, Ørum and Bruce Elder), occur in different sections of the book while the Brazilian post-war avant-

garde is taken up by Anna Katharina Schaffner in the section on experimentation across the arts as well as by Claus Clüver and Richard Williams in the section devoted to challenging the Eurocentric bias of current discourse on the neo-avant-garde.

The book opens with three essays dealing with what might be regarded as the 'classic' avant-garde topos of the relation between art and life as this was taken up in American art of the later 1950s and early 60s. My opening essay deals with the problem directly, in the context of the immediate post-war reception of Duchamp by the sculptor Robert Morris, arguing that art-life rhetoric in post-war art was frequently heavily ironic. The subsequent pieces by Silverberg and Dezeuze show how permutations of the desire to interrogate the relation between art and lived experience enter into aspects of the poetry of Frank O'Hara and the 'junk'/assemblage aesthetic of the 1950s and 60s. Silverberg produces a close textual analysis of the way that O'Hara developed a literary equivalent of the 'process' aesthetics of the likes of Jackson Pollock, thereby keeping art and life "in play, as perennially contingent categories" rather than bringing about an over-arching sublation à la Bürger. Dezeuze carries out a broader investigation of the implications of 'Neo-Dada', showing how the embrace of processes of changeability and mobility in works by artists such as Rauschenberg and George Brecht, which went hand in hand with the deployment of junk materials and Zen philosophy, mounted a challenge to an "increasingly commodified subjectivity".

Art/life crossovers and the notion of 'Neo-Dada' play a further role in Berghaus' essay which simultaneously functions as the first of three essays announcing a key concern of the volume as a whole; namely the cross-disciplinary take-up of avant-garde strategies in the 50s, 60s and 70s. Hence Berghaus considers the case of what would eventually be termed performance art, producing a very useful overview of the way that the Dada impulse was revived in various contexts by Yves Klein, Piero Manzoni, the European 'Fluxus' movement and American 'Happenings'. Moving to another art form, Anna Katharina Schaffner next looks at concrete poetry, with particular emphasis on Eugen Gomringer and the Brazilian 'Noigandres' group, and Bruce Elder considers the case of structural film and its critical reception.

The latter two essays in particular foreground the extent of formal innovation in the aesthetic experimentation of the period. Schaffner considers the dialectical tension between tradition and innovation in concrete poetry, assessing the extent to which the exponents of this art form consciously interrogated the achievements of their earlier

twentieth century predecessors in the light of a deeper analysis of the nature of the linguistic sign and of signifying processes. Elder is particularly interested in the way that the critic P. Adams Sitney attempted to clarify the distinctive features of Structural film, via notions such as the pre-eminence of 'shape' or the presence of 'minimal content', and hence drew on a critical language that was being developed in the mid to late 60s in relation to Minimalist sculpture.

As noted earlier, Elder's concentration on Minimalism is carried over into Ørum's essay which begins the next section. However, in connection with the theme of centres/peripheries, Ørum shifts attention from the traditional art historical understanding of Minimalism as a primarily New York-based phenomenon and looks at its impact in Denmark, eschewing some of the better-known American names for key Danish figures such as the sculptor Peter Louis-Jensen or the composer Henning Christiansen. The pressing need to shift neo-avant-garde studies away from the concentration on the traditional geographical centres is further taken up in the two essays by Claus Clüver and Richard Williams on the situation in Brazil in the 1950s and 60s. Both of these writers underline the interdisciplinary ethos of the collection as a whole by ranging across art forms, with Clüver covering music and poetry as well as the visual arts, and Williams honing in on aspects of architectural discourse in 1960s Brazil. These writers also produce a telling indictment of familiar ways of conceptualising the neo-avant-garde, with Clüver producing an important overview of the 'cannibalistic' attitude of the Brazilian 'vanguardas' towards the modernist and experimental traditions of the colonial powers, which served as the means of creating a peculiarly Brazilian avant-garde cultural identity, and Williams pinpointing a social/political urgency to the neo-avant-garde in the Brazilian context which was arguably absent in North America and Europe.

The revisionary aspect of these essays is taken up in the next two sections of the book concerned with the relations between 'high' and 'low' culture and body/gender issues. Keith Aspley backtracks, to a degree, to the historical avant-garde with his discussion of the way in which two former French Surrealists, Phillipe Soupault and Robert Desnos became involved in radio in the 1940s and 50s and hence with what might once have been considered the populist or 'lowbrow'. This blurring of the relation between 'high' and 'low' art forms opens onto the question of whether the differently configured relations between

mass culture and 'high art' from the 1950s onwards necessarily meant that neo-avant-garde activity had a different cast from that of the historical avant-garde. Ben Highmore pursues this further in his study of the iconography of the domestic interior in the work of the British Pop artist Richard Hamilton, additionally questioning whether the interpenetration of the public and private spheres in the period fundamentally affected the structural character of avant-garde production, and asking whether its formal idiosyncrasies can in fact be understood as a realist reflection of new psycho-social conditions.

The next two essays, on body/gender questions, extend this enquiry concerning the interface between personal identity and a changed post-war social ambience. Katharine Swarbrick is close to Highmore in seeing a very different 'feeling tone' characterising neo-avant-garde art. Using a Lacanian approach, she asserts that the body, as represented in post-war art, suffers from a much more acute crisis of symbolisation than was the case earlier in the century and risks psycho-somatic invasion from a threatening external sphere. By contrast, Gavin Butt suggests that a certain levity might strategically be in play in areas of post-1950s art (which connects his argument with that of Hopkins foregrounding the ironic mode). Both Swarbrick's and Butt's essays, while ostensibly dealing with the issue of gender, nevertheless sidestep the rather crude black-and-white distinctions that often characterise feminist, 'queer theory' or 'masculinity theory' approaches. Hence Swarbrick asks whether body (as opposed to gender) issues might be involved in the work of the Venezuelan artist Marisol Escobar, and Butt, rather than seeing the gay artist he is dealing with (Joe Brainard) as a 'special case', and thereby effectively colluding in the marginalisation of homosexual artists, perceives him as mounting a 'queerly serious' attack on the presumption of 'seriousness' in avant-garde art.

The political inflections of the previous two essays (in so far as identitarian concerns are 'political') are taken up again in the section concerned with formations of neo-avant-garde artists. Michael Corris shows how the English conceptual art group Art & Language, with which he himself was affiliated in America in the early 1970s, developed a 'dialogical' view of their practice, such that the group not only functioned as a collective, pooling ideas, but also attempted, in projects such as the 'Indexes' of the early 70s, to enter into dialogue with their audience, eschewing the traditional art object completely. If Art & Language sought to develop a new conversational aesthetic, Frances Stracey shows how the French Situationists, one of the

foremost examples of a counter-cultural neo-avant-garde formation of the 1960s, attempted to forge a fully politicised link with life praxis (hence functioning as a post-war successor to Surrealism). Given that the Situationists were careful not to be assimilated into the art world of the period, Stracey nevertheless discusses the one known instance of the Situationists exhibiting work in a gallery context. Interestingly, she argues that this cultural-political formation challenges the ‘before and after’ logic of Bürger’s schematisation of the avant-garde since Situationist theory sees avant-garde activity taking place “immanently in the ‘now of time’”.

The final two sections of this book are intended to raise questions of a more broadly methodological nature. The section devoted to ‘Dissemination’ contains case studies of two key publications relating to neo-avant-garde activity in poetics and performance studies/theatre, returning us to the leitmotif of interdisciplinarity. Block’s essay on the seminal 1960 German anthology of texts and images, ‘*movens*’, edited by the poet Franz Mon, closely examines the programmatic, ‘processual’ ethos of this publication, concentrating particularly on its advocacy of Carlfriedrich Claus’ work in sound and visual poetry in the GDR in the 1960s. Martin Puchner tracks the shifts in editorial policy of the key American mouthpiece of avant-gardism TDR (*The Drama Review: A Journal of Performance Studies*) from the 1960s to the 1980s, concentrating specifically on its engagement with the manifesto form, which, in the pages of this journal, can be shown to metamorphose from a vehicle of engagement to one of theoretical self-reflection. These essays provide working models of how highly focused work on the dissemination of avant-garde principles in the post-war period might clarify what the ‘neo-avant-garde’ amounts to, although Block is deeply sceptical of the term, pointing out that the phrase ‘avant-garde’ was resolutely avoided in ‘*movens*’, and Puchner makes us reflect on the problems of speaking of the ‘neo-avant-garde’ as though it were a unified entity.

By contrast to the highly specific nature of Block’s and Puchner’s essays, the three essays in the last section of the book assume a much broader approach, dealing with larger theoretical/philosophical questions. The first of these, by Hubert van den Berg, makes the point that, while the avant-garde is conventionally thought of as preoccupied with technological change and urban experience, and while Bürger argues that the avant-garde work of art is fundamentally non-organic, neo-avant-garde tendencies such as Land Art, in the tradition of historical avant-garde figures such as Hans Arp, can be

seen as evincing strong ecological concerns. The next essay, by Martin Dixon, returns to one of the central theorists of the neo-avant-garde, John Cage, utilising a provocative combination of Adornian and Heideggerian philosophy to reflect on the ontological nature of late avant-garde activity. Accepting that, according to Bürger, the avant-garde uncovered the generality of the category of technique (in so far as the avant-garde has no identifiable 'style'), Dixon suggests that the neo-avant-garde tendency, in Cage in particular, to make the disclosure of the means of production of the work of art synonymous with its content might be one way of characterising its aesthetic distinctiveness. Finally, Dafydd Jones adopts a post-Structuralist vision of the non-unified subject (drawing on the likes of Baudrillard and Deleuze) to suggest that the only way out of the impasse created by Bürger's and Paul Mann's sense of the death of the avant-garde project is via the imagining of a subject-in-process, capable of rupturing, or transgressing, the current limitations of thought. Repetition, in Jones' terms, is not necessarily a negative condition in so far as, following Foster, it may be a constitutive feature of avant-gardism. Jones thus argues affirmatively, and in a spirit not far removed from Stracey, for the "continually deferred completion" of the avant-garde project.

Jones's call for renewal provides a suitable way of ending this book, but it should not be assumed that all the writers in this book would subscribe to a similar viewpoint. Each of the essays in this volume develops its own position vis-à-vis the idea of the neo-avant-garde, and it would be wrong to assert that some spurious commonality of outlook underlies the essays. However, it might finally be worth re-emphasising some of the theoretical advances that this collection as a whole represents. Firstly, as I have repeatedly stated, the interdisciplinarity manifested throughout this publication argues against the usual bias in post-war avant-garde studies towards fine art, while a reconsideration of the way centres and peripheries are customarily defined is treated as a particularly urgent concern (Ørum, Clüver and Williams). Certain writers argue that, contrary to the recent pessimistic pronouncements of the 'October' group, there are ways in which the neo-avant-garde actively re-interpreted and built on the achievements of early twentieth century avant-gardes (Schaffner, Berghaus, van den Berg). Indeed, several writers are happy to build on Hal Foster's earlier sense that a 'traumatic' logic might be seen as actively binding the neo-avant-garde in dialectical rapport with its historical 'other half' (Hopkins, Dezeuze, Swarbrick). Following a

slightly different tack, a number of essays indicate that a subtly different mode of sensibility nevertheless underpins post-war avant-gardism (Hopkins, Butt, Highmore, Swarbrick, Puchner). In the end, it seems that few writers are truly in despair about the possibility of late twentieth century avant-gardism; Stracey and Jones are positively upbeat in warning us not to lose the possibility of imagining an avant-garde project existing in the ‘now’.

All of this provides a particularly constructive outlook to this, the last in a sequence of four conference-related publications on the avant-garde deriving from the major research project set up at the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. If the neo-avant-garde has frequently been seen as the poor relation of its early twentieth century predecessor, this publication assertively lays the foundations for a way, or series of ways, in which it might productively be re-thought.

Notes

¹ The first usage of the term ‘Neo-Dada’ was by the art historian Robert Rosenblum in a review of an exhibition which included Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns at Leo Castelli’s gallery, New York, May 1957.

² For a fascinating recent discussion of the implications of the term ‘autonomy’ in post-war art see Potts (2004).

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ART AND LIFE

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‘ART’ AND ‘LIFE’... AND DEATH: MARCEL DUCHAMP, ROBERT MORRIS AND NEO-AVANT- GARDE IRONY

DAVID HOPKINS

Peter Bürger charges avant-garde art of the 1950s and 60s with inauthenticity; Hal Foster implicitly sees its task as working-over and revivifying the historical avant-garde; numerous writers in this volume and elsewhere argue over the extent to which genuinely new advances were made by this avant-garde, questioning the extent to which the ‘neo’ label has explanatory value. Given all of the pressure placed upon it, could it be that we have simply expected too much of the neo-avant-garde? Perhaps we have been too desperate to cast this post-war phenomenon in the guise of its early twentieth century forerunner. Granted that there are many structural affinities between, say, Dada and Fluxus, or Surrealism and Situationism, but could it be that the general tone of feeling of much avant-garde art production in the post-war period differed significantly from earlier in the century?

One way of characterising avant-garde art of the 1950, 60s and 70s is to say that its operations are simply less ambitious, its provocations and gestures less full of bombast, than was the case with its early twentieth century predecessor. Frequently it can be seen as driven by a spirit of self-parody or self-ironisation (partly inherited from Dada it must be admitted) which means that it eschews the big statements of the early twentieth century, whether in terms of montage, the readymade or the utopian pronouncement, however much these legacies have been absorbed into it. John Cage is the exemplary neo-avant-garde spokesman in terms of this self-deflating position. Rather than dealing, like the Dada of the historical avant-garde, with the thematics of shock, he once noted that his neo-Dada boasted “an emptiness that it formerly lacked” (Cage 1980a). What if the tone of the neo-avant-garde, at base, is simply more intrinsically ironic? What I want to examine in this essay is one of the most oft-cited notions in use in neo-avant-garde discourse, especially in relation to the post-

Dada tendencies of the 1950s and early 60s, namely the idea of a merging of art and life. I will then circle back to the notion of the neo-avant-garde forging an ironic relation to the heroic stance of the originary avant-garde in order to modify the assumption that the art-life relation necessarily has affirmative or liberatory underpinnings.

Art historians have tended to shy away from the optimistic ‘art’ and ‘life’ rhetoric of 1950s and 60s artists in recent years. The concepts are seen as too woolly and general; faintly embarrassing totalisations which, if forgivable in utopian moments of the historical avant-garde when sublation seemed like a real possibility in highly charged political circumstances – I am thinking here of the position of Dada in Berlin and Zurich or Constructivism in revolutionary Russia –, seem tired and too-easily invoked in the context of the 1950s and 60s. Hal Foster, for instance, points out that the very art/life conjunction, which in Bürger’s prescription for avant-gardism will be exploded by the avant-garde’s challenge to art’s autonomy in favour of a re-connection of life and art, tends to “cede to art the autonomy that is in question, and to position life at a point beyond reach”. As he further elaborates: “life is conceived here paradoxically – not only as remote but also as immediate, as if it were simply there to rush in like so much air once the hermetic seal of convention is broken” (Foster 1996: 15).

With his talk of air and hermetically sealed containers Foster might conceivably be alluding, although highly obliquely, to Duchamp’s ‘Paris Air’, the ampoule purporting to contain 50cc of Paris air which Duchamp had sent from Paris in 1919 to his patron Walter Arensberg in America, which could be seen as one of the earliest artistic formulations of the life/art relation. I suspect, however, that Foster would feel that with the likes of the Duchampian readymade there is a sense of the dialectical interplay of the categories which art/life rhetoric often lacked as it entered common parlance in the 1950s and 1960s. Duchamp seems to have been pre-eminently capable of thematising the tension of the paradox, and he will shortly figure prominently in this discussion, but it is initially worth looking at certain permutations of art/life discourse from the 50s and 60s in order to tease out some of its ironies and anxieties.

Let us start, then, with the art/life merger at its most obvious. Here is the American 'Pop' artist Claes Oldenburg writing in his 'Store Days' book of 1967:

I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself [...]

I am for the art of punching and skinned knees and sat-on bananas. I am for the art of kids' smells. I am for the art of mamma-babble.

I am for the art of bar-babble, tooth-picking, beerdrinking, egg-salting, in-sulting. I am for the art of falling off a barstool [...]

I am for the art of underwear and the art of taxicabs. I am for the art of ice cream cones dropped on concrete.

I am for the art of dog turds, rising like cathedrals.

(Oldenburg 1988: 105-6)

By contrast to Oldenburg's heady optimism and Zen-like acceptance of experiential flux, which was an attitude common to many 1960s artists involved with movements such as Fluxus and Pop, it is instructive to turn next to an early 1960s work by the American artist Robert Morris, who was later to be associated with Minimalism.

Morris' 'Metered Bulb' of 1963 (fig. 1) consists quite simply of a light bulb which hangs from an inverted L-shaped armature directly above an electric meter. It is evident that the bulb and the meter are mutually dependent. In the tradition of Duchamp's 'Paris Air' readymade the sculpture can be seen as concerned with the art/life dialectic although it represents a considerably more ironic response to the issue than Oldenburg's statement. Duchamp was in fact a major reference point for Morris who recapitulated several of the readymades in his work in the early 1960s. Although it seems to have eluded commentary so far, the exact source for the metered bulb is probably one of Duchamp's darker and more cryptic notes for the so-called 'Green Box', the collection of notes which he had produced in tandem with the 'Large Glass' and which had been published in an English translation in 1960. The note in question reads: "Establish a society in which the individual has to pay for the air he breathes (air meters; imprisonment and rarefied air, in case of non-payment simple asphyxiation if necessary (cut off the air))" (Duchamp 1976: s.p.).

What exactly this note meant for Duchamp is open to question, although it may have some connection with the 'Paris Air' readymade. Morris, however, seems to have borrowed the idea of

metering from Duchamp and annexed it in his work to the expenditure of light. Rather than Duchamp's dystopian vision of a futuristic world in which our air supply will be cut off if we fail to pay the tariff Morris produces a work of art which can literally be cut off. But light, of course, has metaphorical links with notions of illumination, understanding and so on, and can therefore be seen to be as vital, as essential to life, as air. There is thus an extremely sardonic dimension to Morris' work. Ultimately, by contrast to the fairly straightforward interchange between art and life envisaged by Oldenburg, Morris implies that life's availability to art is not just a matter of its being 'on tap' (to mix metaphors rather) but that a measurable relation necessarily exists between the terms. Or perhaps he is literally asserting that life *is* available 'on tap', albeit to the extent that the collection or gallery housing Morris' work will eventually have to foot an electricity bill.

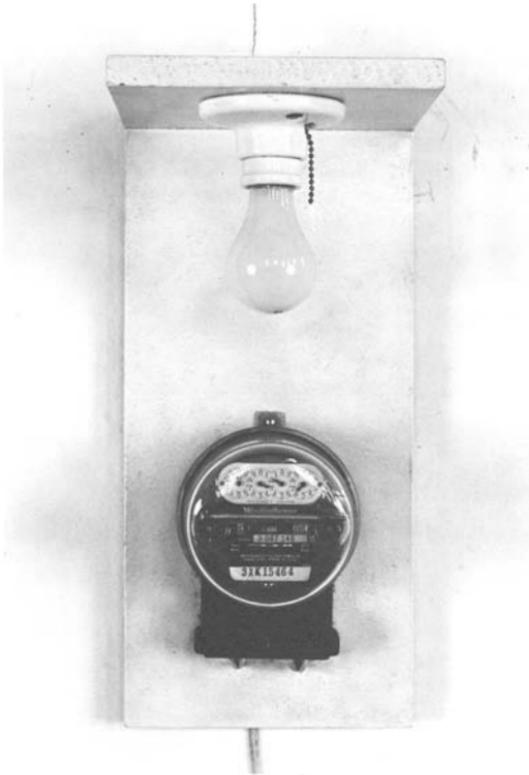


Fig. 1: Robert Morris, *Metered Bulb*, 1963

It is interesting that Morris recapitulates certain themes here that had been current in American neo-Dada art production during the previous few years, and in fact harks back to Dada itself in its specifically American incarnation. Francis Picabia had, in the context of New York Dada, produced two extremely provocative images of lightbulbs; firstly a line drawing of a portable electric lamp, with fitted bulb, titled 'Voilà Haviland' (published in '291', July-August 1915) and secondly a retouched photograph of a lightbulb which he significantly titled 'Américaine' (published in '391', July 1917). These early precedents were undoubtedly at the back of Jasper Johns' mind when, at the turn of the 1960s, he produced several light bulb sculptures in which the notion of the lightbulb as metaphor for illumination, or enlightenment, was set against the procedures of art (usually in these works an actual bulb was completely covered over in sculpmetal or cast in bronze). Robert Rauschenberg had also produced certain 'combines' in the mid to late 1950s (such as 'Charlene' of 1954) in which a light bulb is set apart in a niche within the overall construction. By the time of 'Metered Bulb', then, the lightbulb had a very particular currency in terms of metaphoricising the art/life relation. It is important here to note that Robert Rauschenberg had been and continued to be one of the great exponents of the art/life continuum, although he famously claimed to be working in the 'gap' between the two; a fact which suggests, as Foster remarks, that he wished to sustain a tension between art and life rather than reconnecting them (Foster 1996: 16). One should also note in passing that John Cage, an ally of Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns in the 1950s, was crucially involved in theorising the art/life relation, although Cage would later see his own desire to "erase the difference" as somewhat opposed to Rauschenberg's position (Kostelanetz 1970: 181).

Even this thumbnail sketch of the situation in America in the 1950s and early 60s serves to indicate that the art/life dialectic was hardly reducible to one particular viewpoint, although this often seems to be the case when avant-garde theorists talk of art and life as if the latter in particular was self-evidently available. As in Morris' later résumé of the problem, the question of the measurability of the relation was often implicit in the way it was articulated. Cage is worth turning to again in this respect. In one of his lectures reprinted in the 'Silence' collection of 1961 he talks about his sense of music as something which changes like life itself. To illustrate the point he makes use of an item of daily life: milk.

TALKING FOR A MOMENT ABOUT CONTEMPORARY MILK:
 AT ROOM TEMPERATURE IT IS CHANGING, GOES SOUR ETC., AND
 THEN A NEW BOTTLE ETC., UNLESS BY SEPARATING IT FROM ITS CHANGING
 BY POWDERING IT OR REFRIGERATION (WHICH IS A WAY OF SLOWING
 DOWN ITS LIVELINESS) (THAT IS TO SAY MUSEUMS AND ACADEMIES ARE
 WAYS OF PRESERVING) WE TEMPORARILY SEPARATE THINGS FROM LIFE
 (FROM CHANGING) BUT AT ANY MOMENT DESTRUCTION MAY COME SUDDENLY
 AND THEN WHAT HAPPENS IS FRESHER

Fig. 2: John Cage, *Silence*, 1961 (Cage 1980b: 44)

Here, then, various conditions of milk (powdered, refrigerated etc.) become ways of metaphoricising the degrees to which life can be admitted into art.

To return to Morris, it is not surprising to find that he was preoccupied with more literal notions of measurability or quantifiability, in terms of the art/life relation, in other works of the early 1960s. A good example is ‘Three Rulers’ of 1963 in which three varying lengths of wood, with markings which paradoxically assert an identity of length, are lined up side by side. The allusion once again is a Duchampian one; namely to the ‘Standard Stoppages’, the three metre-long strings which Duchamp had, in a gesture of 1913, dropped from the height of a metre to produce three variations on a standard measure. But Morris also alludes to Jasper Johns once again here. In paintings such as ‘Painting with Ruler and Gray’ (1960) Johns juxtaposed measuring devices with painterly gestures as though as to question the apparent spontaneity of the expressive mark.

Johns himself was extremely well-versed in Duchamp and knew about the French dadaist’s use of principles such as ‘delay’ in the ‘Large Glass’ whereby curbs had deliberately been placed by the artist on his own arbitrary aesthetic impulses. The ‘Standard Stoppages’ had actually been used by Duchamp as one means of reining-in his own taste. Essentially Duchamp used the ‘Stoppages’ to derail one commonly-agreed system of measurement and to create another, alternative one (which was actually used to determine the positioning of elements in the ‘Bachelor’s Domain’ of the ‘Large Glass’) (Schwarz 1997: 127-30). The ‘Stoppages’ thus exemplify Duchamp’s particular understanding of chance, which ironically amounted to the production of a new set of laws. (He himself referred to this as “canned chance”.) All in all, then, there is a distrust in the whole Duchampian-Johnsian discourse of a too-easy surrender to the spontaneous, to ‘life’. Rather than rushing in like air, life is measured

out, albeit in the service of a new artistic logic. Morris' later 'Metered Bulb' can thus be seen as the very emblem of this jaundiced, negativistic rejoinder to the notion that some kind of blithe importation of art into life might be achieved. And, given the centrality of Duchamp in all of this, it is worth noting how differently he emerges here than from Bürger's account of the historical avant-garde where Duchamp's 'Fountain' is made the lynch pin for the sublation principle (Bürger 1974: 52-3). Given that Duchamp is one of the few figures of the historical avant-garde to have played a key role in the theoretical underpinnings of the neo-avant-garde it is clear that any attempts to re-think relations between them, let alone the nature of the neo-avant-garde on its own terms, will have to make considerable allowances for past misreadings of his work.

Let us at this point move away from the Duchampian distrust of the spontaneous and expressive and return to the opposite, affirmative viewpoint, not so much in terms of Oldenburg, as quoted earlier, but of Oldenburg's own theoretical touchstone in the writings of Allan Kaprow, another American artist of the late 1950s concerned with art/life crossovers. In an essay of 1958 Kaprow, who was gradually making a name for himself at this time as one of the pioneers of 'Happenings', discussed the legacy of Jackson Pollock, who had died a couple of years previously. In a reading of Pollock diametrically opposed to the proto-Modernist, formalist reading of Clement Greenberg which was then becoming canonical and which saw Pollock as grappling with purely painterly problems such as 'allover' composition and the assertion of the flatness of the picture plane, Kaprow tried to articulate how dramatically the visual arts would have to change in the wake of a painter who had found it necessary, in Pollock's famous phrase, to literally be 'in' his paintings. Hence Kaprow wrote:

I am convinced that to grasp Pollock's impact properly, we must be acrobats, constantly shuttling between an identification with the hands and body that flung the paint and stood "in" the canvas and submission to the objective markings, allowing them to entangle and assault us. This instability is indeed far from the idea of a "complete" painting. The artist, the spectator, and the outer world are much too interchangeably involved here. [...]

Pollock, as I see him, left us at a point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall

utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, food, electric and neon light, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists. (Kaprow 1958: 55-7)

To repeat once more, this is a profoundly different reading of Pollock than that of Greenberg which had turned the Abstract Expressionist's paintings into the very exemplars of modernist formalism, and Kaprow should be understood as implicitly countering Greenberg's social detachment. In effect Kaprow opposes a free-wheeling experiential-cum-artistic autonomy (which would actually be translated into 'Happenings', as discussed in Günter Berghaus' contribution to the current volume) to a narrowly aesthetic understanding of autonomy. Significantly, however, Kaprow's writing is curiously apolitical, possessing none of the radicalised tone of the Breton-Trotsky position, which was shown in my introduction to this volume to represent a lingering model for vanguardist autonomy. It is also very different in tone from Duchamp, who provided the other compelling model of a non-formalist outlook. We might expect Robert Morris, with his sardonic 'Metered Bulb', to be considerably removed from Kaprow's position. This is largely the case; but as an ambitious American artist, Morris was as interested in Pollock as Kaprow was. He would eventually reveal this debt in his writings on anti-form, although in these it was clearly Greenberg's conception of Pollock that Morris felt compelled to engage with, much as this preoccupation with Greenberg sat oddly alongside his Duchampian sympathies.¹ (Greenberg was notoriously unsympathetic to Duchamp. In a late essay of 1970, for instance, he asserted that Duchamp, as a founding father of what Greenberg disparagingly called the "popular" avant-garde, had simply been the proponent of a gratuitous search for novelty, misguidedly attempting to transcend the question of quality – good and bad – in art [Greenberg 1993: 301-2]).

There is thus an important Greenbergian dimension to 'Metered Bulb'. On a certain level, the work surely metaphoricises the self-referring, autonomous nature of the artwork as a 'closed system', with its own internal rationale, just as much as it parodically quantifies the art/life relation. One could view this as satirical of Greenbergian notions of formalist self-sufficiency but at the same time there is a certain recognition of the aesthetic logic of the critic's position. All of

this means that in 'Metered Bulb' the Greenbergian discourse enters into an unholy alliance with the Duchampian one.

Possibly this says something about a peculiarly American situation in the early 1960s, where those involved in attempting to explore the relationship between art and life nevertheless felt impelled to keep one eye on modernism. (Andy Warhol is an excellent example of this. Even his most uncompromising mergers of art and mass culture read as part of a dialogue with the orthodoxies of post-Greenbergian aesthetics [Hopkins 2000: 114 –7]). Another way of making the point is to say that various conceptions of artistic autonomy co-exist in 'Metered Bulb'. The formalist one dovetails with the radicalised, avant-garde one. Duchamp's structural role in this, as a European artist who had to all intents and purposes made New York his home, was decisive. With his background as the most stringent dadaist scourge of traditional aesthetic values, he was ideally placed to affect the terms in which an American artist such as Morris reacted to the rigours of Greenbergian doctrine (which partly, of course, explains the vehemence with which Greenberg in turn dismissed Duchamp).

The Duchampian input goes a long way to explaining the satirical edge of Morris' lightbulb, and particularly its thematisation of an inextricable link between art and a lifeworld in which energy is necessarily apportioned out by bodies such as electricity companies (although, resistant as he was to any set political position, Duchamp can in no sense be aligned with the politicised conception of artistic autonomy synonymous with the avant-gardist tradition stemming from Breton-Trotsky).² To underline this social dimension of 'Metered Bulb', which involves an acknowledgement that the art/life relation is at base a measurable, economically accountable one, such that even the light shed by a work of art has a commercial corollary, it makes sense here to turn to another vein of late 1950s/early 1960s art concerned with the art/life problematic precisely in terms of quantifiability and monetary exchange.

In 1959 the French artist Yves Klein carried out performances in which wealthy buyers purchased from him portions of what Klein described as 'Immaterial Pictorial Sensitivity' but which the insensitive might choose to describe more mundanely as 'thin air'. The buyers paid for these works by Klein in gold leaf, but were then persuaded to destroy the receipts they had received by setting fire to them since, as Klein asserted, outward manifestations were only the "ashes of his art" (Stich 1995: 155-6). In an equally pointed gesture of 1961 the Italian artist Piero Manzoni stipulated that the cans of

‘Merda d’artista’ (artist’s shit) which he was then producing were to be sold by weight according to the current price of gold (Criqui 1991: 21-3). In both of these paradigmatic neo-avant-garde gestures relating to life/art conjunctions there is a transmutation from something identified with life and bodily processes (i.e. air, excrement) to something of immense social prestige and value, and in both cases there exists a fascinating interplay between the imagery of alchemical transubstantiation, with all the spiritual connotations this carries, and the brute operational machinations of mercantile transactions. One might add in passing that gold continued to be evoked ironically in neo-avant-garde art production as a poignant signifier of a lost spiritual dimension to art: Warhol’s ‘Gold Marilyn’ of 1962, consisting of a solo silk-screened image of the movie star’s head surrounded by a gold-painted field, turns the image of a commodified idol into a Byzantine icon (Hopkins 2000: 116). The main point, however, is that the sublation of art into life which Klein’s and Manzoni’s gestures ambiguously seem to countenance, is shown to be underpinned by the logic of exchange.

This could be read, of course, as a massive betrayal of the utopianism of the historical avant-garde, and the very exemplification of Bürger’s sense of the neo-avant-garde’s failure to separate itself from the institution of art, but, in the context of what has so far been said about the art/life relation, Klein and Manzoni show themselves to be very clear about the price of autonomy in an age of mass culture. In a world increasingly governed by the economic availability of standardised commodities, they ironically raise the value of the artistic gesture to rarefied heights, simultaneously referencing archaic mystical systems which speak of the unique and revelatory. Perhaps it was only given to European artists such as these to be able to express such contradictions explicitly, without simultaneously being in thrall, as so many artists in the US were, to modernist versions of autonomy predicated on the ‘purity’ of formal means (although American artists involved with ‘Happenings’ and early performance art are often exceptions to the rule). But Morris also echoes this parodic discourse around exchange or transaction, drawing, as I have suggested, on the Duchampian side of his sensibility (Morris significantly appears to have been impressed early in his career by the example of the German artists Joseph Beuys, particularly in his utilisation of felt as a sculptural medium, and Beuys also manifested a typically European preoccupation with metaphors of spiritual transmutation [Hopkins 2000: 151]).

In the end it might be argued that Morris simply produces an impasse in terms of the art/life transaction, which is then overlaid with the stasis represented by Greenberg's self-referring aesthetic system. However, this does not necessarily have to be seen as a negative state of affairs. Indeed Hal Foster has brilliantly argued, in his essay 'The Crux of Minimalism', that Morris' subsequent work as a minimalist would hold in dialectical tension precisely this sense of the limits of formalist logic and the claims of the 'expanded field' of artistic activity as theorised by Rosalind Krauss, and which, for the purposes of this discussion, we should see as something broadly equivalent to 'life' in the art/ life conjunction (Foster 1986; Krauss 1985).

But in the end, what exactly is the 'life' that is being glimpsed here? How liberating will it be? As noted earlier, the sublation of art into the praxis of life in the midst of a revolution is considerably more attractive than it might be in more stable circumstances. In many ways the parodic concentration in Duchamp et al with quantifying, measuring and apportioning out the flow of life into art might amount to a realisation that once you have it, in abundance, so to speak, life is not always what it is cracked up to be. Perhaps it needs to appear ungraspable; its flow within an aesthetic economy ironically metered and regulated.

With this observation in mind, it seems appropriate to finish by shifting attention to one of the most compelling statements of the art/life relation, which appeared in the context of Michael Fried's great diatribe against minimalism, 'Art and Objecthood' of 1967. Here the American artist Tony Smith, discussing his move to a proto-minimalist sculptural practice, reflected on a night time car journey he had undertaken with some students, having somehow managed to get on to the then unfinished New Jersey Turnpike:

It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings, or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance. [...] This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand it did something for me that art had never done. [...]

The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognised. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most painting looks pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it. Later I discovered some abandoned airstrips in Europe – abandoned works, Surrealist landscapes, something that had nothing to do with function, created worlds without

tradition. Artificial landscape without cultural precedent began to dawn on me. There is a drill ground in Nuremberg large enough to accomodate two million men [...]. (Fried 1968: 130-1)

Fried famously used this anecdote of Smith's to talk about the experience of 'endlessness' in minimalism which for him was the antithesis of the 'presentness' accorded the viewer in contemplation of autonomous, self-possessed works of art produced according to Greenbergian criteria. There is a sense in which Fried finds the experience of endlessness disturbing, but in much of his essay he uses the less-loaded term 'theatricality' to designate an order of aesthetic experience in which art's parameters are transgressed in favour of a merging with life, however that is to be understood. It could be argued, however, that, much as Smith was elated by his epiphany on the road, there is a dark undertow to his account. It is striking that towards the end of it his thought turns to images of airstrips and Nazi parade grounds; militaristic imagery which seems out of kilter with his rhetoric of release and new beginnings.

It might finally be worth dwelling briefly on the image of 'abandoned airstrips'. Smith himself talks of these evoking for him "Surrealist landscapes", and it seems likely that he had a very specific image at the back of his mind: Man Ray and Duchamp's 'Dust Breeding', a photographic image by the former of the lower half of the latter's 'Large Glass' covered in dust, which had been published in the proto-Surrealist journal 'Littérature' in 1922 and described there, in order to compound the ambiguities of the image, as a 'view from an airplane' (fig. 3).

Smith must also have known John Cage's famous description of Robert Rauschenberg's 1951 'White Paintings' as "airports for the lights, shadows and particles" given that Rauschenberg's all-white canvases were central points of reference for any artist of the minimalist generation concerned with expunging extraneous aesthetic 'content' from his/her work (Cage 1980c). Cage's invocation of Rauschenberg's works as landing strips for particles of dust is a clear indication that he himself had been thinking of 'Dust Breeding' in line with the fact that the 'White Paintings' were primarily understood by Cage and Rauschenberg as receptors for external influences (Cage would later compose his own '4'33'" as a similar invitation for spectators to shift their attention from the art object/event to its external environment). Cage thus appears to have made a mental leap, so to speak, from the aerial view, or rather 'view from an airplane'

implied in the 'Dust Breeding' image, to the surface on which the plane will alight.³



Fig. 3: Marcel Duchamp/Man Ray, *Dust Breeding*, 1920

What is particularly intriguing here is that the Man Ray/Duchamp 'Dust Breeding' photograph is a strangely double-edged work. On the one hand, it records Duchamp's introduction of a further chance-inducing operation into the creation of the 'Large Glass' other than the 'Standard Stoppages' mentioned earlier; namely the procedure by which dust was allowed to settle on the sheet of glass constituting the 'Bachelor's Domain' of the work for several months prior to Duchamp carefully wiping it away from certain areas and preserving it in the region of 'The Sieves' (Schwarz 1997: 130). This is undoubtedly the dimension of the photograph, concerned with memorialising Duchamp's idiosyncratic introduction of uncontrollable, external phenomena into art, which initially attracted Cage (see note 3 above). On the other hand, the very title of the photograph – 'Dust Breeding' – evokes a more sinister coalition of life and death. In French the note for the 'Large Glass' from which Duchamp took the title reads: 'élever de la poussière' (Duchamp 1976: s.p.). Strictly speaking the word 'élever' here means to raise, although with the added connotation of rearing/breeding, which was consolidated when the photograph became known as 'élevage de poussière', which translates more exactly as 'dust breeding'. There is

an odd sense that dust – a substance synonymous with death and decay – is being coaxed into life. Given that the photograph would be described in ‘Littérature’ as a ‘view from an airplane’ and that it was produced shortly after the end of the First World War, the image could easily be understood as an allusion to aerial views of battlefields, with the tufts of cotton visible on the surface of the Glass in the photograph uncannily evoking plumes of smoke. This would make the title even more loaded in terms of ideas of death, resurrection and so on, providing the image with a pronounced metaphysical inflection. Cage, one suspects, may have intuited this at some level. Smith, having absorbed Duchamp, Cage and Rauschenberg, completed a kind of unconscious trajectory in his textual slippage from an exhilarating sense of boundlessness to a sense of the foreboding, militaristic connotations of his “Surrealist landscapes”. But the full force of this shift from life to death, to use a very appropriate metaphor, remained “buried”.⁴

Bearing in mind that Rauschenberg’s ‘White Paintings’ are paradigmatic examples of an attempt to work in the ‘gap’ between life and art, with the white-painted surfaces conceived, as I have said, as registers for a dimension external to art, we have to conclude that death was always lurking within the art/life relation, not least in so far as Duchamp, once again, was the instigator of many of the metaphors (particularly ones relating to chance) in play in the development of art/life discourse. In pointing to this example of a ‘return of the repressed’ in the context of the heady post-war rhetoric of art-life crossovers, I find myself concurring to a degree with Foster’s model of traumatic deferral as a structuring principle in pre-and post World War II avant-gardism (Foster 1996: 28-32). Given that Rauschenberg’s ‘White Paintings’ were produced only a few years after the end of World War II, it is surely possible to see Cage’s reading of them as ‘airports’ as simultaneously repressing memories of the recent carnage – in favour of life, no less – whilst curiously re-discovering the latent traumatic content of Duchamp’s ‘Dust Breeding’, an image produced in the aftermath of a previous world war.

If this essay has ended on a mournful note this is not in order to suggest that death in some way underlies neo-avant-garde activity (although the conceptualisation of the topic has actually utilised a notion of theory-death, and there may be considerable mileage in looking at the way death is thematised in neo-avant-garde production to express perceptions of historical stasis, finality or journeying into the unknown) but rather in order to indicate the extreme elasticity of

life/art discourse and to tilt it in the end towards a negativity which is alien to familiar accounts of the relation as blithely affirmative in the spirit of, say, Kaprow or Oldenburg (Mann 1991). The strange dialectical impasse reached by Robert Morris in 'Metered Bulb', taken alongside Tony Smith's capitulation to images of an endlessness akin to death, suggests that the territory reached once art has been supplanted is as disturbing as it is liberating. Quite possibly we venture onto a terrain here which Duchamp himself once glimpsed when, avoiding being characterised as 'anti-art', he reflected on what it might be to be an 'anartist':

I am against the word 'anti' because it's a bit like an atheist, as opposed to a believer. And an atheist is just as much a religious man as the believer is, and an anti-artist is just as much of an artist as the other artist. Anartist would have been better. [...] Anartist, meaning no artist at all. (Duchamp 1959)

Peter Bürger, of course, does not countenance this strangely self-abnegating, nihilistic dimension to Duchamp, but it was one of the many directions signposted by the readymade, which Bürger takes to be the avatar of a new relation between art and life.

To conclude, I have tried to show that there is a parodic and at times deathly edge to art/life discourse in the post war period. This could, I think, be read as an extended, and deeply ironic, commentary on the historical avant-garde's utopian orientation. In spite of its euphoric moments, neo-avant-garde artistic sensibility is frequently haunted by a sense that a chasm (rather than a gap) might suddenly open between art and life. This sense of existential contingency, which is rarely felt so acutely by artists of the historical avant-garde, is powerfully exemplified by Tony Smith's (to say nothing of Jack Kerouac's) sense of being 'on the road'.

Notes

¹ For Morris on the notion of 'anti-form' see his 1968 essay of this title, plus other essays dealing with Pollock's legacy such as 'Some Notes on the Phenomenology of Making: The Search for the Motivated' (1970) (Morris 1995: 41-51 and 71-95).

² The question of Duchamp's political commitments, in so far as he had any, is an interesting one which has barely been explored in the vast literature on the artist. Significantly, it was during the early 1940s, in the period immediately after the Breton-Trotsky manifesto of 1938, that Duchamp's political and social concerns came closest to the surface, although they involved a general contempt for American

chauvinism and militarism, alongside a generalised leftist orientation, and no direct political allegiance can be established (Hopkins 2003: 56-66).

³ How Cage himself picked up the ‘airport’ metaphor is an intriguing question. It is unlikely that he would have seen the original 1922 edition of ‘Littérature’ in which the formulation was first employed. The likelihood is that he was familiar with an essay by Harriet and Sidney Janis in a special 1945 issue of ‘View’ magazine which served as a key introduction to Duchamp for an American audience and in which the authors discussed the ‘Dust Breeding’ photograph in terms of the “traces of a lost civilisation spotted from an airplane”. The Janises also elaborated here on the complexities of Duchamp’s utilisation of chance in this aspect of the ‘Glass’: “Duchamp dropped fixative on the glass where the dust covered the cones, using the mottled effect of discoloration as a color externally imposed. Preserving this as a memento of a condition prevailing at a given moment, he cleared away the remainder of the dust and began to work again. Here he submits to, but is not dominated by, the inevitable” (Janis 1945: 53). An image of ‘Dust Breeding’ was also reproduced in the same issue of ‘View’ as the Janis article, overlaid with a poem by Charles Henry Ford (View 1945: 4). With regard to Cage’s switch from the aircraft’s aerial viewpoint to the surface of the airport in his discussion of Rauschenberg’s ‘White Paintings’ it is interesting that inversions of above and below were in operation when Rauschenberg first exhibited these paintings during the legendary ‘happening’ at Black Mountain College, North Carolina, in the summer of 1952. It appears that on that occasion the ‘White Paintings’ were hung in cross-formations from the ceiling.

⁴ Significantly, another American artist, Bruce Nauman, was preoccupied with the ‘Dust Breeding’ photograph at about the same time as Tony Smith. Nauman was to produce two photographic works in explicit homage to the Man Ray/Duchamp image in 1966 and 1967: ‘Flour Arrangements’ and ‘Composite Photo of Two Messes on the Studio Floor’ (Van Bruggen 1988: 226; 248-9)

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WORKING IN THE GAP BETWEEN ART AND LIFE: FRANK O'HARA'S PROCESS POEMS

MARK SILVERBERG

In the mid 1940s Jackson Pollock took an important step in his painting that would become a provocative symbol – not only of Abstract Expressionism, but also for neo-avant-garde artwork in general in the 1950s. Around this time, Pollock began tacking his large unstretched canvases to the floor of his tool shed studio on Long Island, and painting in a spontaneous, “direct” manner. The movement from easel to floor marked a decisive step in what Harold Rosenberg would come to call “Action Painting”. With the canvas on the floor, Pollock could not only approach his work from all sides and at all angles, he could also, as he famously stated, be “literally *in* the painting” (Shapiro 1990: 356).

Pollock explained that this new method allowed the artist to treat the painting as an extension of the body and as a process of discovery rather than an act of intention. The subject of the painting was not an external object to be represented, but an internal state whose process was simultaneously discovered and defined in the act of painting. Pollock's work became one of the most successful examples of what was soon called “process art”, a term used to denote the shift from end result (product) to creative behaviour (process) that is highlighted not only in Pollock's action painting, but also in many contemporary neo-avant-garde forms: John Cage's aleatory music, Robert Rauschenberg's chance-inspired Combines, Merce Cunningham's unscripted dance Events, and Allan Kaprow's Happenings, among others. In contemporary poetry, process was highlighted by many practitioners: from Charles Olson's emphasis on breath (in his famous manifesto “Projective Verse” [1950]) to Allen Ginsberg's and Jack Kerouac's method of “spontaneous bop prosody”, to the painterly “action poetry” of Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch and others.

Willem de Kooning once remarked that Pollock “broke the ice” for American painters. One of the many reasons Pollock looms so large in

the American cultural imagination is that his “breakthrough” signified a shift not only in painting but in all the arts: a shift from product to process, from representation to dramatisation, from contemplation to action. Pollock’s “breakthrough” seemed to open a new painterly and metaphorical space (which, Pollock’s promoters would have us believe, allowed both for a new kind of painting and a new kind of relation between artist and work). But though Pollock was repeatedly heralded as a path blazer in fact what he did, like so many artists of the neo-avant-garde, was to reprise techniques of the historical avant-garde (here in particular surrealist automatism – though now in a plastic form). Along with the foregrounding of the artist’s process, his gesture or action, Pollock’s work productively revived the dilemma of the relationship between art and life. By blurring the line between unconscious gesture and premeditated brushstroke, between body and canvas, in other words, between life and art, Pollock brought to the fore the problematic at the centre of Peter Bürger’s well-known theory of the avant-garde.

Over the past decade Bürger’s work has come under intense scrutiny from many quarters, and in particular his central idea that the avant-garde sought to reintegrate art and life has been seen as “precipitate and overly simplistic” in the words of Richard Wolin (quoted in Murphy 1999: 27). A major problem is that Bürger totalises and dehistoricises the infinitely multifaceted categories of “life” and “art”. By removing their historical specificity, and setting them up as binary opposites, Bürger makes “art” and “life” unproductive abstractions. “What is art and what is life here?” Hal Foster asks in *The Return of the Real*.

Already the opposition tends to cede to art the autonomy that is in question, and to position life at a point beyond reach. In this very formulation, then, the avant-garde project is predisposed to failure. (Foster 1996: 15)

And of course fail it does in Bürger’s theory – though as Foster points out, from Bürger’s point of view the avant-garde fails “heroically, tragically” (1996: 13). I want to suggest that neo-avant-garde art, and process art in particular, asks us to question the sense of some absolute, utopian sublation of life and art, and instead keeps art and life in play, as perennially contingent categories. For the neo-avant-garde Bürger’s “reintegration” is less “a concrete goal to be implemented”, as Richard Murphy (1999: 259) has noted “than a general orienting principle to be borne in mind, a question to be

reflected upon, and even an aporia to be experimented with and ‘worked-through’”. I want to continue, then, by considering New York School poet Frank O’Hara, whose work continually raises the problematic of life and art, not with the imposing goal of finally resolving or reintegrating the two, but with the more modest aim of “perpetual[ly] testing the conventions of both” (Foster 1996: 16). O’Hara’s work resonates well with that of Robert Rauschenberg who famously commented: “Painting relates to both art and life. Neither is made. I try to act in the gap between the two” (Stiles and Selz 1996: 321).

Frank O’Hara has rightly been called “the vital center of the New York School” (Lehman 1998: 7). Perhaps the most frequently painted, sculpted, and otherwise represented writer of his generation, O’Hara seemed to be everywhere in the 1950s: a regular at the Cedar Bar and Artist’s Club; a contributor to key little magazines and the central figure of Don Allen’s landmark 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*; a playwright and actor in the Poet’s Theater; and a collaborator in many media with a host of artists including Larry Rivers, Grace Hartigan, Al Leslie, Joe Brainard, and Norman Bluhm. Since Marjorie Perloff’s groundbreaking *Frank O’Hara: Poet Among Painters* (1977), O’Hara’s star has steadily risen so that he has become not only one of the most imitated but also one of the most discussed post-war American poets. In his day job, O’Hara climbed from selling postcards in the gift shop to the position of Associate Curator in the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art. He was also an editorial associate at *Art News* and the author of the first American monograph on Jackson Pollock (1959) – among several works of criticism. O’Hara provided support and encouragement for dozens of artists and acted as a crucial bridge between artists and institutions like the Museum of Modern Art. His intimate understanding of and work within one of the most powerful “institutions of art” (to concretise another key term from Bürger’s analysis) is one of the things that most uniquely separated O’Hara (and the New York School poets in general) from other writers of their generation. All the New York School poets (O’Hara, John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, Kenneth Koch, and James Schuyler) spent a great deal of time looking at and writing about visual art. Their careers as critics and curators required them to think frequently and deeply about art’s commerce with society, and this heightened consciousness about the institution of art had an important impact on their own writing. Indeed, I argue elsewhere that what most uniquely

characterises the New York School as a group (and I suspect what characterises the neo-avant-garde in general) is their keen awareness of the institutionalisation of the avant-garde (Silverberg 2003: 136-42). Having seen Jackson Pollock domesticated by the market and conscripted to promote Country Homes real estate and couturier fashion, and having watched the once outcast Beat writers now being used to sell everything from pulp fiction paperbacks and Hollywood films to “beachnik” swimsuits, the New York School poets were highly attuned to the dangers and enticements of the culture industry. Unlike their historical avant-garde predecessors, neo-avant-gardists faced the new and unusual problem of *success*. The danger for young experimentalists, John Ashbery argued in “The Invisible Avant-Garde”, was not neglect or hostility, as in the past but, ironically, a too easy and too quick acceptance. According to Ashbery, these artists had to guard against winding up “Joining Andy Warhol and Viva and the rest of the avant garde on *The Tonight Show*” (Ashbery 1989: 392).

Working with major artists and theorists of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art made O’Hara a much more sophisticated artist than was frequently realised in his time. His particular form of process art combined the self-conscious and self-mocking camp of Pop with the more self-congratulatory “rigor” of Abstract Expressionism. This mixture produced a unique postmodern poetry that seemed to register both irony and sincerity simultaneously. And, as I will argue, this combination gives the O’Hara poem a new way of approaching the art/life problematic.

A STEP AWAY FROM THEM

It's my lunch hour, so I go
 for a walk among the hum-colored
 cabs. First, down the sidewalk
 where laborers feed their dirty
 glistening torsos sandwiches
 and Coca-Cola, with yellow helmets
 on. They protect them from falling
 bricks, I guess. Then onto the
 avenue where skirts are flipping
 above heels and blow up over
 grates. The sun is hot, but the
 cabs stir up the air. I look
 at bargains in wristwatches. There
 are cats playing in sawdust.

On
 to Times Square, where the sign

blows smoke over my head, and higher
the waterfall pours lightly. A
Negro stands in a doorway with a
toothpick, languorously agitating.
A blonde chorus girl clicks: he
smiles and rubs his chin. Everything
suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of
a Thursday.

Neon in daylight is a
great pleasure, as Edwin Denby would
write, as are light bulbs in daylight.
I stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET'S
CORNER. Giulietta Masina, wife of
Federico Fellini, è bell' attrice.
And chocolate malted. A lady in
foxes on such a day puts her poodle
in a cab.

There are several Puerto
Ricans on the avenue today, which
makes it beautiful and warm. First
Bunny died, then John Latouche,
then Jackson Pollock. But is the
earth as full as life was full, of them?
And one has eaten and one walks,
past the magazines with nudes
and the posters for BULLFIGHT and
the Manhattan Storage Warehouse,
which they'll soon tear down. I
used to think they had the Armory
Show there.

A glass of papaya juice
and back to work. My heart is in my
pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy. (O'Hara 1995: 257-8)

“A Step Away from Them” is both a meditation on death and the fleeting nature of time (“First/ Bunny died, then John Latouche,/ then Jackson Pollock . . .”) *and* a celebration of Coca-Cola, chocolate malteds, ladies with poodles in fox furs, and *hot* (glistening, sweaty, sexy) construction workers. I want to use this work, one of O’Hara’s best known “I do this, I do that” poems, to illustrate his poetics of process which, like other process work, plays with the line between action and object, life and art, without holding out the hope of some final reconciliation.

Harold Rosenberg famously described the Abstract Expressionist painting as a kind of autobiographical action:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one
American painter after another as an arena in which to act –

rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, or 'express' an object [...] What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. (Rosenberg 1959: 25)

Rosenberg takes pains to explain that this painting should not be read as a psychologically-oriented autobiography of the person but a process-oriented transcription of the moment. Nonetheless, it is clear that what is enacted on the canvas is an identity that precedes the moment of expression – that's why, particularly for Pollock or DeKooning, the persona of the painter is so important to the quality of the painting. O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poems are similarly performative events of the poet's daily life, chronicles of personality in process. It is the "action" of O'Hara's life and the movement of his body that both inspires his poetry and constitutes its subject. The poems enact Frank's lunchtime strolls from his MoMA office on West 53rd to restaurants, bookstores, artists' studios, nightclubs, parties, movies, concerts, and other favourite spots. However, unlike the Abstract Expressionists' gesture – or for that matter the self-revelatory, confessional gestures of a Robert Lowell or Anne Sexton – O'Hara's poems are not portraits of a stable identity (an identity which precedes writing), but rather postmodern studies of identity *in action/through language*. O'Hara's is a performative self which exists contingently in the time span of the lunch hour and the space between West 53rd St. and Times Square (in this case).

As with Rauschenberg, neither "art" (the poem) nor "life" (the "I") is already made; both are in the process of becoming. The poem is in large part about its own becoming – the way it generates itself as it goes along. What is interesting in O'Hara, contra Lowell or Sexton, is not a sense of psychological depth (an identity anterior to the poem) but a vibrancy of painterly surface, a surface which is both poem and identity, art and life. Readers follow the poem's and the poet's progress through a variety of routes. For example, we are offered an excursus on the colour yellow (from the hot sun and the yellow helmets, through the hum-coloured cabs, to the final glass of papaya juice); we journey through a variety of textures (glistening torsos, blowing smoke, falling water, ticking clocks); and, as the last item suggests, we experience a brisk meditation on fleeting time (from the passing of the lunch hour to the passing of friends). Whatever "personality" readers may find in O'Hara (a poet who made "Personism" not Personality his central credo) is mitigated by the work's high level of stylisation. This can be seen, for example, in O'Hara's grammatical awkwardness: in his frequent use of misplaced

modifiers (“... with yellow helmets on”), fragmented clauses (“... And a chocolate malted”), shifts in pronoun (“I stop for a cheeseburger at JULIET’S CORNER. . . . and one has eaten and one walks . . .”) and shifts in tone (like the move from the colloquial to iambic pentameter in “But is the earth as full as life was full, of them?”). All these defamiliarising gestures make “O’Hara” seem less a *person* (“literally *in* the poem” as Pollock would have it) than a linguistically produced *subject* (an “author-function” as Foucault would have it).

O’Hara’s intention was to create poems (as he thought Pollock created paintings) that were events as much as objects. Another way of putting this is that he wanted to make poems that were not about experiences but that *were* experiences – and thus poems that brought readers into the process. As he explained in “Personism: A Manifesto”, his goal was to put the poem “between two persons instead of two pages” (O’Hara 1995: 499) – another metaphor for the erasure of the boundary between art and life. So, how does he go about doing this? We can see the poet labouring towards this effect (though not very successfully) in an early poem of 1950 or ’51:

Let’s take a walk, you
and I in spite of the
weather if it rains hard
on our toes

we’ll stroll like poodles
and be washed down a gigantic scenic gutter
that will be

exciting! (“Poem”, O’Hara 1995: 41)

While this early attempt reads more like bad A.A. Milne than typical O’Hara, what we are witnessing is the makings of an important strategy for transforming a poem into an event by presenting it as a communal journey (“between two persons instead of two pages”). It took some time for O’Hara to find more sophisticated and convincing ways of bringing readers into the poem, but with Lunch Poems like “A Step Away from Them”, “The Day Lady Died”, or “Personal Poem” (1959) he had succeeded.

Now when I walk around at lunchtime
I have only two charms in my pocket
an old Roman coin Mike Kanemitsu gave me
and a bolt-head that broke off a packing case

when I was in Madrid the others never
brought me too much luck though they did
help keep me in New York against coercion
but now I'm happy for a time and interested

I walk through the luminous humidity . . .
("Personal Poem", O'Hara 1995: 335)

These poems create effects of spontaneity, immediacy, and inclusion which together contribute to the feeling of the poem as event rather than object. One key realisation O'Hara came to over this period is that the reader need not be addressed specifically, but instead the *manner* of address could imply and thus produce a sense of intimacy. O'Hara was among the first and the most successful poets at creating the illusion of acquaintance by building an enticing community which readers are invited to join. His poems, with their seemingly personal talk, their striking use of proper names, their soliciting tone, and their unique employment of gossip, tempt readers into the poet's circle. In "Join the Club", a review of O'Hara's *Selected Poems* for the *Village Voice*, Peter Schjeldahl foregrounds this quality of inclusiveness:

At Frank O'Hara's funeral in 1966 [...] his friend Larry Rivers said, "There are two-hundred people in New York who thought of Frank as their best friend." Vicariously, that original group keeps expanding, as readers discover a poetry more deliriously intimate than anything in English since Whitman. (Elledge 1990: 71)

The *delirium* of this intimacy (Schjeldahl's particularly apt adjective) derives in part from O'Hara's constant confusion or conflation of person and persona (the "real" Frank O'Hara and the subject of the poems). On one hand, this blurring of the boundaries between art and life helps produce the sense that what we are getting is not a poem but a person. The subject and speaker in almost every work in O'Hara's five hundred page *Collected Poems* is putatively the author himself and indeed, as one reviewer noted, the entire volume can be read as one long poem which is equivalent to our acquaintance with O'Hara (Elledge 1990: 55). However, unlike Pollock and the Abstract Expressionists, or for that matter the confessional poets, self-conscious artifice is at the top of O'Hara's list of commitments. Readers are constantly reminded that what they are getting is not a person but a text, not life but art, not the secret heart but a half-concealed book of poems (by Pierre Reverdy or Frank O'Hara). Contra Peter Bürger, O'Hara doesn't take the possibility of closing

the gap between life and art seriously. Instead, he plays with the possibility, thematising it in almost all his work: holding out reconciliation with one hand only to withdraw it with the other. O'Hara's "life" is everywhere and nowhere in the work; he is constantly and enticingly deferred. His whole oeuvre might be better seen as our *pursuit of* rather than our acquaintance with O'Hara, a "figure" whose compelling presence presages its equally effective absence.

The final trope of "A Step Away From Them", the book of poems in the pocket, can be read as a metaphor for the O'Hara "author-function" – not the person but the "existence, circulation, and operation" of the author's name in the poems (Foucault 1977: 124). The figure offers the poet's "heart" (itself a synecdoche for the author), but concealed. Rather than "on his sleeve", his heart is in his pocket: we know where it is, but we can't quite reach it. Moreover, O'Hara's heart is not quite his heart. The heart, that is, the transcendental signified (meaning, soul, presence) is persistently deferred. Its vehicle, appropriately, is "Poems", but more troublingly these poems are by *somebody else* – so that the author/heart is no longer self-identical. This last gesture (the sudden introduction of Reverdy) stages another level of deferral by a poet who is always hiding in plain sight, a poet who refuses to settle on "art" or "life" but persistently works in the "open" gap between the two:

MY HEART

I'm not going to cry all the time
 nor shall I laugh all the time,
 I don't prefer one "strain" to another
 I'd have the immediacy of a bad movie
 not just a sleeper, but also the big,
 overproduced first-run kind. I want to be
 at least as alive as the vulgar. And if
 some aficionado of my mess says "That's
 not like Frank!", all to the good! I
 don't wear brown and grey suits all the time,
 do I? No. I wear workshirts to the opera,
 often. I want my feet to be bare,
 I want my face to be shaven, and my heart –
 you can't plan on the heart, but
 the better part of it, my poetry, is open.

(O'Hara 1995: 231)

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‘NEO-DADA’, ‘JUNK AESTHETIC’ AND SPECTATOR PARTICIPATION

ANNA DEZEUZE

A ‘hysterical’ neo-avant-garde?

The term ‘Neo-dada’ was used to describe works in North America in the 1950s and early 1960s. From the beginning, the comparison with Dada served to disparage the more recent artistic practices as repetitions of past avant-garde experiments (Hapgood 1994). In this sense the reception of Neo-dada largely conformed to Peter Bürger’s well-known critique of what he called the neo-avant-garde: where Dada subverted the institution of art, the argument goes, its Neo-dada repetition only served to confirm the avant-garde’s failure to evade museification (Bürger 1984). Hal Foster has demonstrated the limits of the temporal model underlying Bürger’s argument about the neo-avant-garde, and offered in its place a fruitful rethinking of the neo-avant-garde not so much as a repetition as the delayed recovery of a repressed avant-garde (Foster 1996). If Foster successfully suggests methodological tools to counter Bürger’s account, he does not, however, do much to rehabilitate the fate of Neo-dada, which still remains a little-researched field of enquiry. Cast as the first neo-avant-garde, which “often literally” recovers the historical experiments of Dada, Neo-dada in this account appears simply as the first step towards a more complex analysis of the avant-garde by later critical 1960s practices. Foster pursues the analogy with psychoanalysis as he sets out a new teleological narrative in which “the trauma is acted out hysterically, as the first neo-avant-garde acts out the anarchistic attacks of the historical avant-garde”, before being “worked through laboriously, as later neo-avant-gardes develop these attacks” (Foster 1996: 31).

Although Foster acknowledges elsewhere the significance of figures such as Robert Rauschenberg and Allan Kaprow, the term “hysterical” sounds dismissive, re-defining Neo-dada as a symptom of

a return of the repressed, condemned, by its lack of critical distance, to entrench the failures of the avant-garde. As both a “malady through representation” (Freud, quoted by Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 195) and “an illness of reminiscence” (Didi-Huberman 2003: 155), hysteria does indeed appear as the most adequate pathological description of the neo-avant-garde. Yet it is crucial to acknowledge that the hysterical patient’s theatrical enactments of traumatic memories are far from straightforward repetitions of the past. The unconscious operations which convert the initial trauma into symptoms are as complex and varied as the symptoms themselves. Instead of dismissing them, I would like to analyse some of these processes in this paper, by focusing in particular on two “hysterical” symptoms of Neo-dada: its widespread use of so-called “junk” materials and the artist’s desire to encourage active spectator participation. I will be exploring these issues by addressing more specifically the Neo-dada works of Robert Rauschenberg, George Brecht, and Allan Kaprow.

‘Junk’ and the enumeration of the everyday

Installation views of one of the landmark exhibitions of Neo-dada, the 1960 *New Media-New Forms* at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York, bear witness to the variety of works encompassed by this umbrella term. The show included works by over seventy artists, ranging from early avant-garde pieces by Hans Arp, Joseph Cornell and Kurt Schwitters, to recent works such as Claes Oldenburg’s corrugated cardboard cut-out from his 1960 installation *The Street*, John Chamberlain’s brightly coloured car-metal sculptures, a suspended assemblage by Jim Dine and Rauschenberg’s *Odalisque*, a boxed construction, framed between a pillow and a stuffed chicken, which was irregularly lit up from inside by coloured light bulbs. The catalogue included an essay by Allan Kaprow, which would later become part of his important book on *Assemblages, Environments and Happenings* (Kaprow 1960). The other essay by Lawrence Alloway introduced another term associated with Neo-dada: “junk aesthetic” (Alloway 1960). A year later, this trend culminated in *The Art of Assemblage*, a touring exhibition curated by William Seitz at the Museum of Modern Art.

To Neo-dada’s hunger for new, found and readymade materials corresponded a compulsive tendency to make lists of objects. “[P]aint, chairs, food, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog,

movies" figure on Allan Kaprow's list of materials for a new generation of artists in his 1958 text on "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock" (Kaprow 1958: 9). In his essay on "Junk Aesthetic as a Tradition", Lawrence Alloway cites an inventory of objects in Rauschenberg's 'combine' paintings, including "table cloths, kitchen utensils, light bulbs, animals, baseballs, reproductions of Old Masters, hats, packing crates, comic strips, love stories, Coca Cola" (Alloway 1960: n.p.).¹ While Alloway (1960: n.p.) recalled the futurist Umberto Boccioni's own 1912 list of new materials (including glass, wood, cardboard, iron, cement, horsehair, leather, cloth, mirrors, and electric lights), artists including Kaprow found inspiration in Kurt Schwitters' programme for a MERZ theatre involving objects such as a dentist's drill, a meat grinder, a car-track scraper, buses and pleasure cars, bicycles and tires (Hapgood 1999: 24).

This enthusiastic embrace of new materials marked a return of the repressed after Abstract Expressionist abstraction and the painterly medium-specificity praised by Clement Greenberg. The lists, it seems, act as fragile mnemonic devices against oblivion. Rather than a rediscovery of the past, however, the everyday reality celebrated by Neo-dada was strongly associated with a contemporary industrialised urban context. In his essay for *The Art of Assemblage*, Seitz described the so-called American "rurban" environment as "an unplanned assemblage of animated gasoline displays, screaming billboards, [...] graveyards of twisted and rusting scrap, lots strewn with bed springs and cracked toilet bowls" (Seitz 1961: 76). Claes Oldenburg (1994: 122) remembers how he was impressed by a statement by Rauschenberg explaining how "you can go stand in an empty lot and make art out of what you find there"; indeed, in a 1961 photograph, Rauschenberg is pictured casually reading a newspaper in a derelict lot, surrounded by broken, discarded junk. This focus on marginal sites was associated by many with the fringes of American society. One hostile reviewer of *The Art of Assemblage* condemned the majority of works as "the aesthetic counterpart of the social deficiencies that land people in the clink on charges of vagrancy" (Seitz 1962: 34).² At the opposite end of the critical spectre, philosopher Donald Clark Hodges compared the rebelliousness of the "new dadoid constructions" to that of "the current epidemic of white negroes, hipsters and junkies" (Hodges 1962: 34). While John Canaday (quoted in Alloway et al. 1961: 142) bemoaned the assemblagists' ideological, spiritual and aesthetic "bankruptcy", Clark Hodges celebrated their "criticism of the thoughtlessly wasteful habits

of the Affluent Society” (1962: 34). “They re-investigate the brutal facts of poverty in the midst of plenty”, he continued, “while exploding the illusion that ‘dirt’ no longer exists” (1962: 34).

Like Clark Hodges, Alloway acknowledged that “[t]he source of junk culture is obsolescence, the throwaway material of cities” (Alloway 1960). Another list later in his essay conjures a darker image of accelerated obsolescence: “We eat seven hundred times our own weight in food, if we live long enough, and I don’t know the figures for suits, shoes, razor blades, radios, records, friends” (Alloway 1960). Alloway’s disposable “friends” are related to Clark Hodges’s connection (1962: 34) between “discarded (superfluous) wealth” and the “rejected (superfluous) men” excluded from society. Seitz (1961: 89) went even further, when he noted that some works in the exhibition bring to mind “the anguish of the scrap heap; the images of charred bodies that keep Hiroshima and Nagasaki before our eyes”. Even the optimism of Kaprow’s ode to the everyday is tainted by “cold war anxieties”, as Judith Rodenbeck (1999: 51) has pointed out. Kaprow speaks of “garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies”, and “dreams and horrible accidents”, and paints an image of everyday urban existence, which according to Rodenbeck (1999: 51) is little else than a series of “anomic social sites”.

Junk’s ambivalent oscillation between an embrace of the newly discovered real on the one hand, and, on the other, an implicit critique of planned obsolescence and the omnipresent hold of the commodity, was played out in different ways in the varied works that were grouped under this label. In his book *On Garbage*, John Scanlan argues that the use of junk in art only serves to bring to the fore the nature of the creative act as a process of sifting through the formlessness of perceptual data. Like knowledge, art explores the way in which garbage is formed as “the result of the separation – of the desirable from the unwanted; the valuable from the worthless” (Scanlan 2005: 15). (The word garbage, Scanlan points out, was originally a synonym of “offal”, what remains after the main parts of the meat have been cut out.) As it turns out, it is this very process of creating order and meaning out of the inchoate heap of society’s rubbish that lies at the heart of debates regarding the nature of Neo-dada collage and assemblage. Discussions of Neo-dada assemblages often hinged on the relations between the parts and the whole, and the extent to which individual elements were recognisable. Irving Sandler has argued that in Neo-dada works, unlike their Cubist or Dada precursors, “the found objects, often little if at all transformed, called

attention to their prior 'real' roles so strongly that their function as components of 'abstract' designs was neglected or even overlooked entirely" (Sandler 1978: 148). Within Neo-dada itself, some assemblages such as Chamberlain's, Richard Stankiewicz's, or Jean Follett's for example, can be described as more 'abstract' than others, and could thus more easily be assimilated into an aesthetic canon of forms and painterly gestures. In contrast, Seitz (1962) admitted that the most controversial works in the *Art of Assemblage* were those in which craftsmanship seemed to have been erased and objects were presented in a little-transformed state – as in the torn street posters displayed by Raymond Hains and Mimo Rotella or César's compressed cars. Thus, in this first set of terms articulating the language of junk, the less abstract and aesthetic the assemblage, the more it is seen to approximate its original condition as garbage.

The second set of descriptive tools focuses on the degree to which junk art not only explicitly refers to its origin as discarded objects but also mimics the process through which, according to Scanlan (2005: 43), things are stripped of "any descriptive characteristics that allows us to individuate" them. As Leo Steinberg (1972: 32) pointed out, the deliberate reduction of compositional structure in Rauschenberg's combines redefines the canvas as an image of the mind that acts like "a dump" in which objects have been apparently randomly thrown together. Many writers have commented on the levelling activity at the heart of Rauschenberg's combine paintings, in which paint and images of masterpieces are contaminated by what Scanlan has termed "the taint of garbage" (2005: 43). In some works, the smears of paint themselves become dirt and evoke mud, petrol stains, excrement, or dried blood. If Rauschenberg's combines are more garbage-like than Chamberlain's or Stankiewicz's assemblages, they still remain, however, more closely related to "things" than to "junk", as the artist himself highlighted.³ For the evocation of garbage does not impinge on the identity of the objects included in the combine: it is still possible to recognise individual things. In contrast, Joachim Jäger (1999: 69) has suggested, the objects in works such as Jim Dine's 1959 *Household Piece* have been subsumed into the amorphous, un-individuated mass of junk; it is "an image of chaos". In the context of the language of junk, the device of the list brings together the two descriptive systems that I have just outlined: if you cannot enumerate the objects contained in an assemblage, explains Jäger, then it means that the objects have been transformed beyond recognition either because they have been stylised into an abstract form (as in

Stankiewicz's assemblages) or because they have been merged into an indeterminate mass of garbage (as in Dine's works).

The trash on the street reminds us, according to Julian Stallabrass, that commodities are "just stuff", contrary to what advertising and packaging want us to believe (1996: 175). Emphasising the fragmentary nature of rubbish against the unreal wholeness of the commodity fetish, Stallabrass brings out the allegorical nature of trash in a Benjaminian sense. "Allegory, in showing us images of death and of a mortified nature, also reveals the fixed and arbitrary systems which are responsible" (1996: 179). This definition of allegory is precisely the one mobilised by Peter Bürger when he discussed the relation between fragment and whole in the avant-garde work. The avant-garde montage according to Bürger is allegorical because it "calls attention to the fact that it is made up of reality fragments; it breaks through the appearance of totality" (1984: 72). The neo-avant-garde operation of junk aesthetic is thus twofold: not only is it, like the avant-garde montage, a self-consciously constructed artwork, but it also reveals the existence of commodities in general to be an illusion. If, as Sandler pointed out, Neo-dada is more literally junk-like than Dada, then it also brings to the fore more forcefully the arbitrary order of consumer society. Within the category of "junk aesthetic" itself, it would follow from this analysis that the degree of criticality of each work can be evaluated according to its embrace of the formlessness of junk: the less recognisable the objects, the more critical the work's relation to society. This would, however, reduce the neo-avant-garde to a repetition and extension of an allegorical and melancholy avant-garde. When Alloway (1961: 122) described Dine's *Household Piece* as a type of assemblage in which objects "are presented in terms that dramatise the spread, flow, tension, trespass" he put his finger on what is most interesting about junk aesthetic in the 1950s: rather than binary oppositions between whole and parts, criticality and affirmation, it is the movement *between* these oppositions – the dynamic passage between the recognisable object and the transformed artwork or the "stuff" of junk – that is at play here. In this context, the formal devices of repetition and composition used by Nouveaux Réalistes such as Rotella, César, Arman, or Daniel Spoerri can be seen as arresting this dynamic movement. Moreover, I would argue, the spectre of petrification that haunts Dine's assemblages of household junk or Bruce Conner's mummified objects similarly operates to slow down the "flow" that Alloway suggested they dramatise: although they betray a greater preoccupation with the entropic processes of

degradation than either the Nouveaux Réalistes or the more “abstract” assemblagists, their *memento mori* quality ultimately drags them into an infinite stillness.

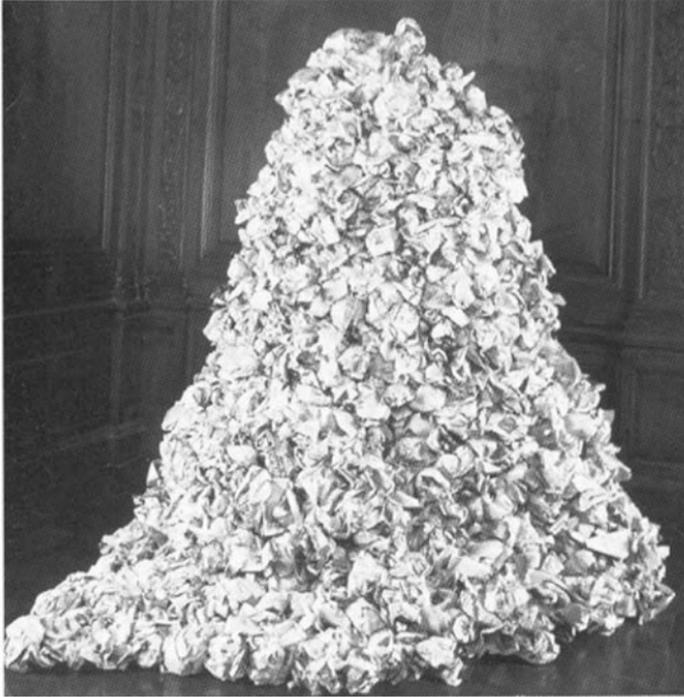


Fig. 1: Allan Kaprow, *Untitled (Mountain)*, 1959. As reconstructed for the 1993 exhibition Neo-dada for the American Federation for the Arts. (Photograph: Oren Slor)

In contrast, the use of junk for Kaprow was linked to “a philosophically greater preoccupation with *the changeable* as a *raison d’être*” (1960: n.p.). Recalling the attraction of junk in the late 1950s, Kaprow emphasised that the availability of the materials on the street meant that the works could be thrown out at the end of an exhibition. The 1959 construction of crumpled newspaper balls built into a mound by using chicken wire and tape (fig. 1) is such an ephemeral work, and was recreated in 1993 for an exhibition on Neo-dada (Hapgood 1999). As William Kaizen (2003: 94) has put it, Kaprow’s assemblages and environments created “a momentary space of anti-entropy in the life of the commodity, where it is temporarily reinvested with value, only to be disposed of once the environment is destroyed”. Although conceived as lasting artworks, Rauschenberg’s

combines seek to imply a similar mobility. For what seems to count above all in the combines is not so much the relation between the parts and the whole as the suggestion that this relation remains fluid, like the flow of differentiation that allows us to construct knowledge out of trash. In this sense, Branden Joseph (2003) has argued, Rauschenberg's response to late capitalism can be constructed *neither* as an aesthetics of negation, following the shock tactics of montage, *nor* as a melancholy embrace of society as a given, which Bürger condemns in Surrealism as an expression of alienation. According to Joseph, Rauschenberg was able to move "away from the increasingly reified and regulated social sphere and toward an immanent, indeterminate force of difference coursing through its interstices" (2003: 157).

Movement and spectator participation

Kaprow's and Rauschenberg's brand of junk aesthetic clearly opposed both the staged formality of abstract constructions and the moribund, static assemblages of garbage. This radical embrace of mobility could also be found in the work of George Brecht, whose 1959 *Wall Cabinet* visitors to the *New Media-New Forms* exhibition were invited to open in order to handle and exchange the objects it contained. In notes regarding the display of the work during the touring version of *The Art of Assemblage*, Brecht emphasised that "the aspect of this work which [...] is of most interest is not the object-like part, that is, the cabinet and its contents, but rather what occurs when someone is involved with its object-like part" (1961c: 230). The MoMA's installation of *The Art of Assemblage* included a similar work, *Repository*, which was also conceived, in Seitz's words, not "as a self-contained whole, but as the focus of human activity" (1962: 30). Unfortunately, as Seitz himself acknowledged, the MoMA's "museum installation frustrated this intention", as viewers were not encouraged to handle the objects (30). Although Seitz had dismissed spectator participation as "whimsical" in the exhibition catalogue (1961: 89), he later acknowledged the wider implications of Brecht's work in terms of undermining "the separation of the plastic and graphic arts from ordinary life" and demonstrating "the inadequacy of the museum, as it is now conceived, to deal with mutating categories" (1962: 30). Significantly, Seitz attributed the very same characteristics to Kaprow's "loosely constructed", "rambling 'environments' of fragile waste materials" (which had been excluded from *The Art of*

Assemblage) (1962: 30). Alloway (1961: 122), for his part, situated Brecht's appeal to participation within a general attempt, on the part of many "junk" artists, to supersede the fetishistic nature of Surrealist assemblages.



Fig. 2: Robert Rauschenberg, *Black Market*, 1961

With Brecht's appeal to spectator participation, mobility was introduced into the artwork as the intersection between object and activity rather than between "things" and the "flow" of junk. And just as the problematics of junk can be read through different sets of issues, spectator participation could take on different forms within Neo-dada, as a comparison of participatory works by Brecht and Rauschenberg can reveal. Rauschenberg's *Black Market* (fig. 2) was created for the 1961 European touring exhibition *Bewegung Bewegung (Art in Motion)*, in which Brecht was also included. The exhibition's theme seems to have encouraged Rauschenberg to find a means to literalise the implicit mobility of his *Combines* in a work that would physically change through spectator participation. In this sense, *Black Market* is the work that is closest to Brecht's early practice: like

Brecht's 1959 *Suitcase* (fig. 3), Rauschenberg's work includes a case full of objects, and an invitation to handle them.⁴ According to the invitation to Brecht's 1959 *Toward Events* exhibition (Brecht 1959: 42), *Suitcase* could be "approached by one to several people and opened. The contents are removed, and used in ways appropriate to their nature. The case is repacked and closed". In Rauschenberg's work, instructions are more complex: firstly, spectators were invited to take one of the four numbered objects from the case and replace it with another object of their choice which they were asked to stamp with the corresponding number (stamps and an ink pad were included in the box); secondly, they were to open the correspondingly numbered clipboard attached to the canvas, unclip the drawing of the object which they had taken away, and draw the newly-added object on a piece of paper.⁵ This meant that as the "black market" exchanges occurred, the four objects in the box would always be simultaneously depicted in four corresponding drawings attached to the painting, while the drawings in the box would act as records of the objects that had been removed. In both cases, Rauschenberg and Brecht sought to involve the spectator in order to minimise the distance between the artwork and its viewer – a leitmotif of Neo-dada, also achieved through the use of recognisable objects, the emphasis on low-value materials, the downplaying of the artist's technical skill, the creation of ephemeral works, and what Alloway described as the "obtrusion" of junk "into our space" (1961: 122). The relations between the artist, the participant and the work are not, however, set up in the same way in both Rauschenberg's and Brecht's works. In Rauschenberg's *Black Market*, the stamps bearing numbers operate to affix the new objects added by viewers to the artist's "composition", extending rather than abolishing the artwork's frame, reinforcing the difference between everyday objects and art objects. In contrast, Brecht allowed objects to remain independent fragments of the everyday, thus deliberately reducing his authorial control.

Writing to William Seitz in relation to *The Art of Assemblage*, Brecht pointed out that he liked the term "arrangement" better than "assemblage" because it suggested a temporal rather than spatial cluster in space (1961b: 230). Like a Rauschenberg combine, *Cabinet*, *Repository* or *Suitcase* are structured as frames for gathering together disparate, found or bought, objects. However, the fact that the frame is in fact a common container itself, that it is used to store such objects in everyday life, and that viewers are invited to handle them independently, clearly set Brecht's works apart from other assembled

or collaged Neo-dada work. No glue, paint, bolts or joints link the objects together to form even a semblance of a composition, in contrast with assemblage which, according to the dictionary definition cited by Seitz, involves “the fitting together of parts and pieces” (Alloway et al. 1961: 159). Brecht appropriately titled his first solo show at the Reuben Gallery in New York *Toward Events: an Arrangement*.



Fig. 3: George Brecht, *Suitcase*, 1959

The term “arrangement” chosen by Brecht evokes the world of music, and Brecht was keen to highlight that his work was “more in the nature of a performance (music and dance) than of an object” (1961c: 230). Indeed, Brecht’s “arrangements” were closely related to his other work of the time: the “event scores”, verbal instructions to be performed by the reader like a musical score. By the time Brecht attended John Cage’s classes at the New York School for Social Research in 1958, Rauschenberg had been a close friend of the composer’s for some time. It is well known that Cage found

inspiration for his 1952 *4'33''* in Rauschenberg's 1951 *White Paintings*. What linked Rauschenberg and Cage was the notion of the work as a receptacle to be filled with the everyday, whether it is the noise occurring during four minutes and thirty three seconds of silence, the shadows cast by the viewer of the *White Paintings*, or the dust, and later junk, gathering on the surface of Rauschenberg's canvases.

In contrast, what Brecht borrowed from Cage was the notion that all activities could be seen as musical events occurring in time. Rather than the spatial dimension of *4'33''* and Rauschenberg's assemblages, Brecht's emphasis was on duration. The sounds or images produced by the event scores and objects were considered by Brecht to be incidental to the performance of an action. Alloway argued that junk works "do not disappear into the environment as anonymous objects but stick out like islands" (1961: 122). I would like to argue that, in contrast with spatial assemblages, the temporal dimension of Brecht's "arrangements" is *precisely* what allows Brecht's works to "disappear" into the everyday.

With *Three Chair Events*, his contribution to the 1961 exhibition *Environment, Situations, Spaces* at the Martha Jackson Gallery, Brecht abandoned the framing device of the everyday container that still served to keep together, if precariously, the objects of his earlier *Cabinet, Suitcase, or Repository*. Three chairs were placed in different locations in the gallery. A white wicker chair was spot lit in one of the exhibition rooms, while a black one stood discretely in the toilet. A yellow chair was placed at the entrance, and since nothing suggested that it was an artwork, visitors sat on it, much to Brecht's satisfaction. *Three Chair Events* corresponded to a shift in Brecht's conception of the event score. The Martha Jackson Gallery installation was in fact a direct realisation of a score of spring 1961, which reads:

- Sitting on a black chair. Occurrence.
- Yellow chair. (Occurrence).
- On (or near) a white chair. Occurrence.

Brecht wrote apropos of this piece that "[t]he score is an event; so is finding an incident of it" (1961a: 226). Brecht's use of the term "occurrence" highlighted this idea, suggesting that "sitting on a black chair" and finding a "yellow chair" can equally be considered to be "events": occurrences need only to be perceived by the viewer in order to become events. All existing objects, it follows, can potentially be seen as events.

Brecht recalled in a 1967 interview that he had once tried to sit down on the chair attached to Rauschenberg's *Pilgrim*, only to be told that he was not allowed to, in contrast with his three chairs in the Martha Jackson Gallery. In 1962-63, Brecht made other works which were everyday objects that could be used. When Brecht was planning to sell one of these works, a 1962-63 *Sink*, he planned to put in three ads in *The Village Voice* describing it in different ways as firstly a "white sink, porcelain, on stand, with chrome faucets" in "excellent condition", secondly a "sculpture" entitled *White Sink*, and thirdly a "white sink and certificate entitling you to all the events in which it takes part" (quoted by Robinson 2005: 64). Although Brecht playfully planned to price each item differently, it is striking that these three descriptions could, indeed, accurately apply to one and the same object. In contrast, Rauschenberg's combines effectively articulate an either/or logic in which an object belongs either to the sphere of everyday life or to that of art: in fact, if you could sit on the chair in *Pilgrim*, you would in fact be turning your back on the painted canvas to which it was attached.⁶ Brecht's *Sink* could be a sculpture *and* a prop *and* a banal sink; it could be used, destroyed, or left behind.

The "structure of experience"

"The obsession for the 'contemporary' (any object wrenched from, and unmistakably marked by today)", speculated Barbara Rose in 1963, "may represent the artist's desire to take hold of a reliability which moves too fast to be apprehended by ordinary means" (1963: 26). For many, the interest in change, mobility and transformability demonstrated by Cage, Kaprow, Rauschenberg and Brecht seemed to confirm that "[i]mpermanence is a fact of our existence" (Rose 1963: 26). What distinguished these Neo-dada works from earlier avant-garde artists concerned with the impermanence of modern life was a focus on the *experience* itself of apprehending this changeability and mobility. The Neo-dada concerns with "flow", process and performativity, it seems, came together in the notion of experience. The 1959 press release for Brecht's *Toward Events* show had explained for example that the works "suggest that art is to become actively rather than passively existent, to be enjoyed as an unfolding experience" (quoted by Robinson 2005: 36). Writing about his 1958 environment at the Hansa Gallery, Kaprow pointed out: "What has been worked out [...] is a form that is as open and fluid as the shapes

of our everyday experience but does not simply imitate them” (1958b: 12).

According to D.T. Suzuki, the main populariser of Zen Buddhism in the United States, both Zen and pragmatism “accept experience as the basis of their theorisation” (1956: 264). It is thus unsurprising that these philosophies were particularly appealing to many artists concerned with the experience of change. Kaprow’s debt to the writings of pragmatist philosopher John Dewey has been documented by Jeff Kelley (1993). As Kelley pointed out, Kaprow’s interest in Dewey’s conception of lived experience as a means to counter the fragmentation ensuing from man’s instrumental approach to the world made him particularly receptive to Zen Buddhism. Cage, who actually attended classes by Suzuki, undoubtedly played a crucial role in introducing both Kaprow and Rauschenberg to Zen. Brecht had been interested in Zen even before meeting Cage, as his 1957 essay on *Chance Imagery* demonstrates. In this early text, Brecht explored the role of chance as a way for the artist to enter “a oneness with all of nature” (1966: 7).⁷ (Kaprow [1994: 116], for his part, recalled that the attraction of using junk was that “[i]t was very liberating to think of oneself as part of an endlessly transforming real world”.) For Brecht, as for Cage, mobilising chance in the creation of artworks was an effective way of acknowledging the changeability of experience. If in 1957 Brecht was still discussing the merits of chance devices such as die, coins, or random number tables in the creation of works, by 1959 he had introduced spectator participation as a chance effect beyond the author’s control. This “resolution of the distinction between choice and chance”, as he termed it (1966: 15), may have been encouraged by the Zen belief that “there is no duality, no conflict between the natural element of chance and the human element of control” (Watts 1957: 174) because, as Brecht understood, “chance and randomness are aspects of the way in which we structure our universe” (1966: 2).

Brecht’s interest in the “structure of experience” (1958: 107) was no doubt related to the Zen demonstration that “human experience is determined as much by the nature of the mind and the structure of its senses as by the external objects whose presence the mind reveals” (Watts 1957: 119). In one of his notebooks, Brecht mapped out, in a diagram, the various means used to approach reality (1958: 122-123). Ways of structuring knowledge including art, science and religion, were opposed by Brecht to the “direct”, “non-symbolic” engagement with the world enabled by Zen. D.T. Suzuki elaborated on the importance of the “direct method” in Zen, explaining that it is an

attempt “to get hold of this fleeting life as it flees and not after it has flown” (1956: 130). Language in this case becomes an obstacle rather than a vehicle, and Zen masters systematically subverted the use of language as an explanatory tool. For example, it is reported that when a monk asked the Zen master Yun-Men the question “Who is the Buddha?” Yun-Men simply answered: “The dried-up dirt-cleaner” – a common object that would have been seen lying around (Suzuki 1956: 142). Language is here used not to communicate complex religious concepts, but as a means of “direct pointing”, as Alan Watts put it: it seeks to “thrust the real immediately to our notice”, while simultaneously bypassing any “conceptual comment” (1957: 127-28). As Suzuki explained, the direct method is “the responding to a call, the listening to a murmuring stream, or to a singing bird, or any of our most ordinary everyday assertions of life” (1956: 131). The “direct”, “non-symbolic” “engagement” referred to by Brecht is defined as a “response” to the world, rather than an attempt to control it. As Brecht reflected in a later notebook on different “ways of treating objects in order to see them” (quoted by Robinson 2005: 62), his aim was to highlight the experience itself of engaging with the real, whether it is a “dried-up dirt cleaner”, a pile of junk, or a chair. Similarly, Kaprow explained of the new generation of artists that while they would “discover out of ordinary things the meaning of ordinariness” they would “not try to make them extraordinary but will only state their real meaning” (1958: 9). If, as Dorothy Seckler pointed out in 1961, many Neo-dada artists felt “the urge to create that paradoxical moment, exalted in Zen philosophy, when the real is the most unreal” (quoted by Jacobs 1999: 96), this did not entail an irreversible transformation of the everyday into unfamiliar new objects. Rather, as Suzuki explained, the experience of Zen enlightenment (*satori*) is a dynamic cycle in which assumptions are challenged, and the world made “unreal”, only as a means to affirm the real in its “suchness”, beyond conceptualisation.

Suzuki introduced the notion of “formlessness” (his translation of the Chinese *wu-hsing*) as a characteristic of the concrete “suchness” of the world. “By formlessness is meant to be in form and yet to be detached from it”, Suzuki explained (1956: 189), because what is “formless” simply exceeds any concepts of form. In this light, the opposition between recognisable “thing” and formless “junk” which I examined earlier can be rephrased beyond binary oppositions. For those who seek to capture the “suchness” of concrete reality, form is no longer a relevant term to structure the approach to experience. This

shifting conception of the world's "suchness" is inherently linked to a new definition of the self: "it becomes vividly clear", Alan Watts (1957: 120) explained, "that in concrete fact I have no other self than the totality of things of which I am aware". Realising that "we cannot find any mind apart from the very experiences which the mind – now vanished – was trying to grasp", we can only be more willing to try and capture these experiences as they occur (Watts 1957: 131).

In his *Theory of the Avant-garde*, Bürger lamented that "the culture industry has brought about the false elimination of the distance between art and life", and adopted Adorno's pessimistic belief that authentic experience is no longer available to the subject of late capitalism (1984: 50). Rather than escaping this reality through empty neo-avant-garde repetitions, Neo-dada artists directly addressed the problem of experience in the context of an increasingly commodified subjectivity. Zen provided artists with the possibility of countering the artificially-centred subjectivity of consumerism with the performative attempt to capture the flowing, elusive realm of experience. This dynamic movement is what rescues garbage from the mournful melancholy of a fetishised assemblage that risks transforming waste into another commodity; it is also what allowed some Neo-dada practices to plumb the interstices between art and life instead of trying to overcome this opposition. As Jochen Schulte-Sasse has pointed out, Bürger's definition of experience as always already shrunken, "prevents" him "from focusing on the discrepancies between sensuous-material experiences and general interpretation patterns", and the "contradictions and tensions" between "subject and society" (Bürger 1984: xliii). By focussing specifically on this passage, on the dynamic movement which emerges from these discrepancies, Neo-dada artists such as Kaprow, Rauschenberg and Brecht suggested an alternative framework to Bürger's binary model of the avant-garde as *either* critique *or* affirmation. Kaprow's conception of experience as a breach within capitalist society is articulated through the very flows of junk that structure the consuming subject. Indeed, it is worth remembering that even Dewey's celebration of an authentic experience was based on an awareness of the paucity of modern experience (Adorno himself would praise Dewey's perceptivity). Branden Joseph (2003) has suggested that Rauschenberg did not believe that an access to immediate experience was possible, but worked instead in the gap between control and flow, object and process, commodification and subjectivity. In Brecht's participatory works, Benjamin Buchloh has argued, object and subject "appear as

equal actors”, a fact that simultaneously acknowledges the way in which subjects are absorbed within commodification, and creates “sudden ruptures within that system’s mesmerising totality and numbing continuity” (Buchloh 1999: 22). What is specific to Brecht’s work is that this rupture is not achieved through the shock of the heterogeneous assemblage, but rather through what Ina Blom has termed the “muteness of continuity” (1999: 62). As the banal object or event disappears into its background, it highlights what the culture industry has attempted to exclude – experience – and affirms the close relation between subject and object, experience and society.

On the cover of his *Chance Imagery* (Brecht 1966), Brecht quoted Tzara’s 1922 statement that: “Art is not the most precious manifestation of life [...] Life is far more interesting”. As Kaprow has pointed out, long before Dada, poets and thinkers such as William Wordsworth, Walt Whitman, Ralph Emerson (who influenced Dewey) and Henry David Thoreau, had sought to demonstrate that life is better than art (1994: 115). In this context, it is perhaps less surprising to find out that D.T. Suzuki was himself well versed in the works of Emerson and Thoreau (Leonard 1994), and was thus able to provide a version of Zen that appealed directly to this Anglo-American tradition. In particular, George Leonard has compared the ambition of the poetic demonstration that art can be found in life to the Zen parable of the Buddha telling his disciples that his teachings are like a raft: once you’ve reached the other side of the lake, you do not need to carry it on your back around with you. In a letter to Jean Johnston around 1963, Brecht strikingly cited the very same parable – “After the stream is crossed and the raft must be abandoned”, he wrote, “the work is not ‘done’ (by anyone), but simply occurs” (quoted by Hapgood 1999: 27). This corresponds to the shift, in Brecht’s work, to the conception of the “event” as something that need not be created, but simply requires to be noticed by the perceiver. According to Leonard, John Cage was the first artist to have left the raft behind. I would like to suggest, however, that if Cage, Rauschenberg, and Kaprow sought to “get hold of this fleeting life as it flees and not after it has flown”, Brecht, for a brief moment around 1960, was the one who most successfully created objects that could point directly to the flow of experience without fixing it artificially, by creating rafts to be used, and then abandoned.

Hysteria, again

Hysteria dealt a blow to unified conceptions of subjectivity and challenged the traditional methodological tools of psychiatry. It thus served to bring to light the principal discoveries of psychoanalysis, including notions of the unconscious, fantasy, and repression. Similarly, I would suggest, a study of the first neo-avant-garde will not only shed light on its more valorised successors: it should also encourage new ways of conceiving the avant-garde in a dynamic framework which can animate the static, binary categories outlined by such thinkers as Peter Bürger. Neo-dada artists introduced a performativity and temporality which allowed an exploration of the experience of the subject in capitalism as a contingent and changing process. Implicit in this approach is the belief – close to that contained in Zen – that access to some form of lived experience is possible, despite the constraints that need to be overcome. The second Neo-avant-garde would give up this possibility entirely, positing experience as irremediably mediated by language, technology and economic structures. This does not mean, however, that Neo-dada artists were naively rehearsing the tropes of a failed avant-garde in search of an authentic experience. On the contrary, artists such as Kaprow, Rauschenberg and Brecht developed tools that suggested ways of exploring the fraught place of the subject in an ever-more controlled society. Liz Kotz's (2005) demonstration that Brecht's word scores display an indexical relation to reality that would become tantamount to many later conceptual practices can be extended to Neo-dada's general concern with the framing of experience and the everyday. As early as 1962, Seitz compared the framing of reality in Daniel Spoerri's "snare pictures" and Rotella's "*affiches lacérées*" to the act of taking photographs (1962: 29). More recently, Branden Joseph (2003) discussed the importance of the televisual image in Rauschenberg's silkscreens, started in 1961. The Neo-dada emphasis on materiality – whether paint, junk or readymades – led it to be cast as a straightforward repetition of a past avant-garde, and served to eclipse the conceptual resonances of this work, in particular the interrogation of the artwork's status as a fixed object, which announced, in many ways, what Lucy Lippard and John Chandler would call in 1968 the "dematerialisation of the art object" (Chandler and Lippard 1968).

If we follow Foster's rethinking of the neo-avant-garde, the image of the first neo-avant-garde as hysterical must be taken seriously. As

Freud demonstrated, hysterical enactments weave together fact and fantasy, as the unconscious screens the primary, repressed trauma that lies at the heart of the pathology. However theatrical and excessively visual, hysterical manifestations cannot thus be taken at face value – a fact that needs to be highlighted as art historians, including Foster, fail to engage with the concerns of Neo-dada beyond issues of influence and formal preoccupations. In the study of the first, hysterical, neo-avant-garde, tools need to be developed to describe symptoms in detail, and explanatory frameworks should not be taken for granted.

Notes

¹ Susan Hapgood (1994: 61) has highlighted the fact that Kaprow's list was also inspired by a visit to Rauschenberg's studio. This not only points to the importance of Rauschenberg as a pioneer in the use of new materials: the small amount of overlap between the lists also demonstrates the wide variety of objects involved in Rauschenberg's combines.

² The reviewer is not identified by Seitz. This legal vocabulary re-emerges surprisingly in a question posed by Seitz during the symposium on "The Art of Assemblage", as he asked: "Should artists be allowed to do *anything*, or is there such a thing as delinquent art or criminal art?" (Alloway et al. 1961: 141).

³ In an interview with Rauschenberg, Barbara Rose said: "Another interesting part of your career is that it begins in 'junk' [...]". Rauschenberg interrupted her, specifying: "No, it begins in 'things'" (quoted in Jäger 1999: 64).

⁴ While Benjamin Buchloh (1999) seems to suggest that Rauschenberg influenced Brecht, Blunck (2001: 89) has argued that Rauschenberg's *Black Market* may in fact have been indebted to Brecht's earlier *Suitcase*. Robinson (2005: 36-38) also discusses the relation between both works.

⁵ The instructions, translated in ten languages, were initially attached to the canvas and stated: "Objects 1, 2, 3 or 4 may be taken if a new object is put in its place. Please stamp the new object with the correct number, and trace or draw it into the book of the same number and sign your name". After misdemeanours on the part of the audience (including the theft of Rauschenberg's drawings), Rauschenberg decided to forbid any further participation. The instructions have been removed from *Black Market* and are currently in the Ludwig Museum archive.

⁶ Both Jäger (1999) and Blunck (2001) have emphasised the fact that visitors to Rauschenberg's studio were initially allowed to sit or place objects on the chair.

⁷ *Chance Imagery* was written in 1957, and published in 1966. For more about Brecht's relation to Zen, cf. Fischer (2005) and Doris (1998). Jacobs (1999) and Lears (1999) place Brecht's interest in Zen in the context of the widespread interests in chance and experience in 1950s American culture.

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ACROSS ART FORMS

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NEO-DADA PERFORMANCE ART

GÜNTER BERGHAUS

Introduction

The first quarter of the twentieth century was a period of extraordinary cultural innovation, exemplified in the arts by various schools now classified as the “historical avant-garde”. By the mid-1920s, these movements lost their radical drive, and with the economic crisis of the late 1920s, the “classic” period of the avant-garde finally came to a halt. Although, for a while, the École de Paris could still act as a centre of attraction for modern artists of all denominations, none of the circles and associations founded there in the 1930s arrived at any genuinely new departures from what had already been achieved in the previous quarter of the century.

In the following decade, while Europe was embroiled in the most destructive war ever waged, the hub of artistic creativity shifted to the USA, where New York took on the role of international centre of artistic research.

Until then, the United States had been relatively unaffected by Modernism.¹ In 1913, some recent European art was exhibited at the Armory Show in New York, and in 1915 at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. To a few enlightened collectors the two exhibitions exposed the deeply provincial nature of North-American art; but to the vast majority of the public they confirmed that Modernist art was a foreign aberration and incompatible with the American sensibility. In the younger generation of artists they fostered a serious interest in international Modernism and triggered a brief flowering of Synchronism, Precisionism and New York Dada. Once the Great War was over, some of these artists travelled to Europe and immersed themselves in the advanced language of Modernist experimentation. But upon their return, they found little opportunity to show their works in the USA. Throughout the 1920s, there were few meeting places for people interested in the

avant-garde, and the handful of galleries that exhibited European works had little influence on public taste. It is therefore not astonishing that, in 1944, Royal Cortissoz could unambiguously state: "The bulk of American painting is untouched by modernism" (Cortissoz 1944: 592).

The same could be said about the theatre. The few attempts to introduce a European-style art theatre in the USA failed miserably. Although one can find adaptations of selected stylistic features of Expressionism or Futurism in the plays of Eugene O'Neill, Thornton Wilder or Elmer Rice, these dramatists could not establish an experimental form of theatre that was on a par with the scale and vigour of avant-garde performance art in Europe. So, until the 1950s, dramatic Modernism remained a foreign import with next to no impact on the theatrical profession.

This isolation of the United States in artistic matters began to change in the first years after WWII, when Surrealism and abstract art took roots in New York galleries. The Museum of Modern Art, which after its foundation in 1929 had focused nearly exclusively on Impressionism and post-Impressionism, suddenly began to exhibit major artists from the Modernist schools of Europe. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, opened in 1939, followed suit, and several private galleries (some of them founded by émigrés) held exhibitions of significant works of the European avant-garde. This sudden influx of European style modern art caused Clement Greenberg to fear that "we are in danger of having a new kind of official art foisted on us – official 'modern' art" (Greenberg 1945: 604; 1986: 44).

The single most important cause of this new development was the exodus of thousands of artists from totalitarian regimes and war-torn Europe to America. Slowly but steadily, the second-hand and third-hand knowledge of Modernism that had produced so many misunderstandings in the 1910s and 20s, gave way to informed, authentic voices, who through their exhibitions, writings and teaching activities introduced the American public to the great artistic achievements of the early twentieth century. Several art historians and critics amongst the émigrés found teaching positions at American universities, and leading artists of the avant-garde conveyed their rich knowledge and experience to the younger generation, thus preparing them for the major roles they were later going to play in a variety of artistic disciplines.

After an initial stage of absorbing the rich inheritance of European Modernism, an originally American brand of vanguard art came into

existence. Abstract Expressionism, Action Painting and Colour-Field Painting were the first US-American contributions to Late-Modernism. They soon occupied a prominent position not only in the USA, but also in Europe where, after years of pseudo-Realism and “heroic” idealism imposed by fascist regimes, a new wave of Modernism seemed like an act of liberation.

The commercial success of the New York School laid the ground for what Harold Rosenberg referred to as “the tradition of the new” (Rosenberg 1959), i.e. an avant-garde that had achieved bourgeois respectability and was now fêted by bankers, museum curators and conservative politicians. Around the mid 1950s, when High Abstraction and Abstract Expressionism were at the peak of their international success, a distinct countertrend could be observed, which towards the end of the decade came to be referred to as Neo-Dada.²

The reception of Dada in the 1950s

The term “Neo-Dada” was first used in 1958 in *Art News* in order to characterise “a movement among young American artists to turn to a sort of neo-Dada – pyrotechnic or lyric, earnest but sly, unaggressive ideologically but covered with esthetic spikes”.³ It was quickly picked up by *Newsweek*, *Time*, *New Yorker*, etc. who used it to describe a variety of works that eschewed the stifling conventions of abstract art and the exuberant emotionalism of Abstract Expressionism. Neo-Dada was not – as the name might indicate – a recycling of avant-garde strategies from the pre-war period, but a response to the new socio-economic and cultural realities of a post-war urban environment – a civilisation that could not be adequately depicted, or even atmospherically captured, with the means of abstract art. For this reason, the term was actually a misnomer, merely based on the fact that the artists operated with figurative and realistic means of representation that had been shunned and practically eliminated in Late-Modernist art. Many artists, understandably, rejected the term, but, nonetheless, there is evidence that the theory and practice of pre-war Dada was known to them and that these historical models reinforced their view that abstraction was not the be-all and end-all of Modern art.

The American public gained access to a large number of Dada writings through Motherwell’s 1951 anthology, *The Dada Painters and Poets*. This was followed by a number of important exhibitions of

artists such as Duchamp and Schwitters.⁴ In Europe, of course, it was considerably easier to obtain first-hand information on Dada. Apart from the original publications of the period 1916-1922, which could be accessed both in libraries and private collections, there were new monographs and anthologies,⁵ important memoirs of leading Dadaists,⁶ and exhibitions, such as the influential travel show *Dada: Dokumente einer Bewegung* in 1958-59, which was preceded by a number of one-man shows and small-scale retrospectives in Europe (Müller 1987: 239-42).

In the years 1950-57, artists and critics, both in the USA and in Europe, acquired a fair degree of knowledge about Dada. In the second half of the 1950s, this information became absorbed, processed and used to develop valid alternatives to the dominant, Late-Modernist art of the period. The following points of contact between Dada and Neo-Dada were regularly referred to in artists' statements and press reviews in the years 1958-62:

- Both movements seek to destroy the aura of the masterpiece and the ideology of the artist-as-genius by elevating common objects to the status of High Art.
- They make use of Ready Mades, or of readily available materials taken from a quotidian environment.
- They incorporate fragments of urban detritus into artistic creations, or reconfigure everyday objects according to a junk aesthetics.
- They use collage and assemblage techniques.
- Their compositional practices are determined by chance and indeterminacy.
- They promote an ideology of anti-art.
- They advocate a conceptual rethinking of the role of art and of the artist in bourgeois society.
- They take an irreverent approach to the system of production and distribution of art, and of the role of museums and the art market.
- They focus on the context that defines art and attempt to dissolve the boundaries between art and life.

Neo-Dada performances of the 1950s

Although the term Neo-Dada was first used to characterise works of fine art, it was actually in the performing arts that the first creations appeared to which this label could be applied. The most significant of these was an untitled theatre piece organised by John Cage and Merce

Cunningham at Black Mountain College, at an uncertain date, but probably on 16 August 1952. The college had been, and still was in 1952, a major centre for the dissemination of European concepts of Modernism and of the avant-garde. Many émigrés were on the faculty there or came as visiting teachers for a series of summer schools held between 1944 and 1957. From the scraps of information available, we can deduce that Cage organised the performance at the 1952 summer school in line with his recent study of Huang Po's Doctrine of Universal Mind. Cage devised a performance event where several occurrences not causally related to each other would take place in a simultaneous or sequential manner. He outlined a number of time brackets – forty-five minutes altogether – and asked various artists to fill the slots with ideas that were entirely of their own invention. These largely improvised actions were not communicated to the others in advance of the performance and were only held together by the overall framework established by Cage and Cunningham. As such, the event employed chance procedures that had been a constituent element of Dada performances, but here they were derived from a Zen doctrine that explained Nature as a complex of non-hierarchical events where everything has equal value.

The audience of some 50 people sat in the middle of the hall, in triangular blocks facing each other, with enough room between blocks to create aisles for the actors to move in and out. Robert Rauschenberg suspended four of his White Paintings in a cruciform shape from the ceiling, prepared some hand-painted slides to be projected onto a wall, and he or someone else fitted several theatre lights with colourful gels. In the performance itself, Rauschenberg played scratchy Edith Piaf records at double-speed on a wind-up gramophone; Tim LaFarge and Nicholas Cernovitch projected movies and still photographs onto the ceiling and another wall of the hall; David Tudor played a radio and a "prepared piano", while Jay Watts performed a piece on Polynesian instruments. Mary Caroline Richards, who was dragged into the hall on a hobby-horse or a little cart, interspersed Cage's lecture with a poetry reading from the top of a ladder. Charles Olson sat amongst the spectators and distributed to them fragments of his poetry, which were then read out in random fashion. All the while, Cunningham danced up and down the aisles and around the audience, periodically chased by a little dog.⁷

A few years later, similarly non-matrixed performances, where much of the action and interaction depended on chance and spur-of-the-moment inspiration, took place in Japan, where the Gutai group,

founded in 1954 by Jiro Yoshihara, arranged a number of exhibitions, in which play and action took precedent over static objectification of works of art (Berghaus 2005: 101-108). For example, from 25 July to 6 August 1955 they held an *Experimental Outdoor Exhibition of Modern Art to Challenge the Midsummer Burning Sun* in Ashiya near Osaka, in which the artists used a pine grove for a site-specific installation that required an active role from the visitors in order to fulfil its artistic objectives. The artists altered the works during their period of presentation and, on the closing day of the exhibition, they burned them as if to emphasise in a Neo-Dada gesture the primacy of creation over commodification. The first official Gutai art exhibition was held from 19-29 October 1955 in Tokyo. It contained amongst its most innovative pieces a “sound painting” by Atsuko Ohara (a set of bells linked by an electric cable that could be set off in a chain reaction by the visitors as they moved around the hall) and an “Electric Dress” by Atsuko Tanaka, made of hundreds of electric bulbs and tubes and serving both as a theatrical costume and a piece of sculpture. However, the most important element of the show was Kazuo Shiraga’s action piece, *Challenging Mud*, a violent performance that had the half-naked artist dive into a large pile of clay and wrestle with it until a sculpture emerged. Saburo Murakami erected a set of large-scale frames covered with wrapping paper and hurled himself through them, thus creating *At One Moment Opening Six Holes*. He repeated the action in a variety of forms on subsequent occasions and commented on this early form of Body Art:

When one rejects the existing sense for beauty which yearns for certainties, and grasps evasive qualities and boldly chooses danger, will not possibilities open up for the discovery of a new facet of beauty? (Gutai 1993: 362)

At the *Second Gutai Outdoor Exhibition* of July/August 1956 Shozo Shinamoto created a painting by shooting paint at a canvas with a handmade cannon, and Shiraga erected a cone-shaped sculpture and then scarred its painted membrane with the aid of an axe. The *Second Gutai Art Exhibition* in Tokyo (11-17 October 1956) had Shimamoto throwing paint-filled bottles at a rock and creating a drip painting on a canvas stretched underneath, and Shiraga executing a painting with his feet while hanging on a rope and swinging over a canvas that was nailed to the floor. An audience-participation piece was presented by Murakami: he placed a clock that would chime at unpredictable moments in a large box and invited visitors to hold their ear against a

hole in the wood. At the *Third Gutai Art Exhibition* in Kyoto (3-10 April 1957) Akira Kanayama placed lacerated containers filled with paint on remote-controlled toy cars and created a painting by letting the paint drip on a canvas stretched out on the floor.

In 1957 and 1958, the French artist Georges Mathieu and the critic Michel Tapié travelled to Japan to see several Gutai exhibition / performances. When they returned to Europe, they circulated catalogues of the events and issues of the Gutai magazine amongst their friends, in whom they reinforced an already latent interest in an aesthetics that was later labelled "New Realism". Also in New York, reports on the Gutai group began to appear, followed by exhibitions and even a film show of the Gutai stage actions.⁸ Several leading figures of the Happening and Fluxus movement took an active interest in these novel Japanese experiments. Applying Dada principles to the stagnating artistic situation of the 1950s was still a novel procedure, and those who were interested in this practice were keen to know about parallel developments in other parts of the world. Consequently, an exchange of ideas took place by means of visiting exhibitions and performances, by reading catalogues and relevant magazine articles, and translating writings of fellow Neo-Dadaists for anthologies and art magazines. This may explain the considerable overlap in the concerns and working methods of Neo-Dada artists working in the 1950s in cities as far apart as Tokyo, Paris, Milan, Düsseldorf and New York (Berghaus 1995b: 79-131).

Concretism and New Realism

From about 1958 onwards, artists in various European countries directed their attention to the concrete realities of their immediate surrounding shaped by the post-war reconstruction of a war-torn civilization and to the force of new electronic media in an emerging information society. Their interest in mundane objects and mass-produced images from everyday life may have been partly inspired by the Gutai experiments, partly by the Dada travel exhibition opening in Düsseldorf, but, more fundamentally, it was rooted in an increasing unease with, on the one hand, the emotional verve of Abstract Expressionism, Tachism and Art Informel and, on the other, the inane formalism of High Abstractionism.

Wolf Vostell was one of the first to realise that Late-Modernist art

lacked essential categories & dimensions of our multi-material & multi-mixed technological existence [...] the totality of phenomena of our changing & pulsating life was not in the least integrated in the art of that time in any way. (Vostell 1968: 3)

This insight led him towards his first “de-coll/age happening”, *The Theatre Takes Place on the Street* (January 1958). It unfolded in accordance with the concrete directions given in a score and aimed at transforming the spectators into participants of the action (Vostell 1970: 327-28). The “performance” consisted of a group of people walking down Rue de Tour de Vanves and reading out aloud the text fragments they could find on torn posters. The intention was to attract more and more passers-by and to involve them in the reading of the texts. To create variations, Vostell instructed the performers to read the texts diagonally or to tear down more layers of the posters so that new texts could be created. Apart from reading, the actors were encouraged to interpret through their gestures the elements they could recognise on the posters. Thereby, the participants were able to go beyond the level of contemplating a work of art (e.g. a *décollage*) and to reflect critically on themselves and their relationship to reality by participating in a transformation of their environment.

More conceptual in character were the performances devised by Yves Klein in which the spectators were able to grasp and experience through direct physical contact the realms of sensory stimulation, phenomenal states of being, timelessness, boundlessness and immaterial existence. The materials he worked with were fire, air, the pigment blue, monotone music and human bodies. Early examples of this were *Monochrome Propositions*, which entailed the release of 1001 blue balloons on Place Saint-Germain-des-Près, followed by a performance of his *Monotone Symphony* in the Galerie Iris Clert on 10 May 1957; or *Blue Bengal Fire*, a ritual burning of a “one minute painting that speaks afterwards in memory” at Gallery Colette Allendy on 14 May 1957.

The *Monochrome Propositions* were also performed in Düsseldorf at the Galerie Schmela (31 May 1957), which at that time acted as the centre of the German Group Zero, who organised several exhibitions that contained no paintings at all and instead offered “an exchange of experience between artist and viewer, not possessions. The event as a work of art – as process art – is largely anti-materialistic” (Piene 1973:

73). Like Klein, the Zero artists carried hot-air balloons and kites through the streets and along the banks of the river Rhine and finally set them adrift, with searchlights following their paths up into the night sky. In 1959, Piene produced his first *Light Ballet*, which fused light projections with jazz music, later to develop into multimedia spectacles, in which several people interacted with mechanised light shows and light environments. Piene explained the concept behind these events as follows:

light is not restricted to the spatial section of the stage or the picture plane at the end of a long hall where the spectators are sitting in darkness. It can reach most parts of the space, thereby giving the viewer the impression of being the centre of the event, of 'being filled out by it' and 'being part of the light'. (Piene 1960: 2)

The Zero group entertained close contacts with the Azimut gallery in Milan, run by Piero Manzoni, who in 1957-63 sought to create an "art that abandoned representation in favour of the delirium of gesture and to the jubilation of materials" (Celant 1991: 13). In 1959, he produced *Bodies of Air*, a wooden box with a balloon that could be inflated by the purchaser and exhibited, thereby becoming a work of art. If Manzoni himself inflated the balloon (at a price of 300 Lire per litre of breath), the work was called *The Artist's Breath*. On 21 July 1960, he presented at the Azimut gallery *The Consumption of Dynamic Art by the Public Devouring Art*. Manzoni boiled a number of eggs, signed them with his thumbprint, and distributed them to an invited audience. The exhibition lasted for 70 minutes and, by the end of it, all works had been consumed. On 22 April 1961, he presented in his gallery the first of 71 *Living Sculptures*. He signed people on their arm or back and certified on a receipt that "X has been signed by my hand and is therefore, from this date on, to be considered an authentic and true work of art".

Manzoni shared Duchamp's taste for irony and agreed with him that there could not be a work of art that was not also a reflection on the myth of art and on the historical condition under which it was produced. Manzoni utilised the human figure and, in particular, his own body, as a Ready Made. In his attempt to present "primal images of our being" and to undertake a return to "his most authentic origins" (Manzoni 1957: 68), he shunned all forms of symbolic communication. Instead of using his corporeal and material existence as a vessel for subjective expression, he regarded it as a work of art in its

own right. In 1960, he wrote: "There is nothing to be said. There is only to be, there is only to live" (Manzoni 1960: n.p.).

What is left behind of Manzoni's creations is nothing but a reminder of a short life that *was* art. Manzoni did not deny the status of the artist as creative genius, and his works were not merely neo-Dadaist gestures (although his famous shit cans were, of course, a gesture of protest against the commercialisation of artistic production and its commodification on the art market). His *Breath Sculptures* underlined the Utopian and idealistic aspect contained in them: breath (*pneuma*) is the divine inspiration that connects the human and divine world and can be given form in gestural actions or performances. The resulting traces are nothing but a reminder of the act of creation.⁹

In 1960, these experiments led to the formation of a "school" of New Realism, headed by the French critic Pierre Restany. On 16 April 1960, he published a first Manifesto of New Realism and, on 27 October 1960, officially founded the group in Yves Klein's apartment (Restany 1986). A further manifesto was signed by Arman, Spoerri, Tinguely, Klein, Raysse and Hains, later to be joined by de Saint-Phalle, Christo and Deschamps. It was largely through Restany's organisational and publicising skills that New Realism began to be used as an umbrella term covering a wide field of artistic activities inspired by "modern nature", i.e. the new realities of the mass media and the world of advertising and other popular imagery. Like the Pop Artists in the USA, the New Realists in Europe formed their collages or assemblages from found and processed fragments of reality and materials not commonly associated with High Art. They elaborated a new methodology of perceiving and re-presenting the concrete, objective quality of contemporary urban life. The appropriation of elements of the everyday world and their *presentation* in objects that reveal the material poetics of reality followed a philosophy that was completely different from *representing* reality through the means of conventional realism.

In 1961, Restany organised a First Festival of New Realism in Nice which, on the evening of 13 July, included a series of action-performances in the garden of Roseland Abbey (Restany 1978). Arman presented *Anger*, in which he destroyed a chair and table and fixed the debris on a panel exactly where they had collapsed. Tinguely gave a demonstration of his revolving water fountain, Rotella recited phonetic poems, and Hains consumed a fenced-in pudding (*les entremets de la palissade*, an unusually shaped cake baked specially for this purpose). Niki de Saint-Phalle performed *Surprise Shoots*, in

which she aimed with her rifle at a panel containing glass objects, plastic bags of paint, and smoke bombs. Even more spectacular was the second festival, held in February 1963 at the Neue Galerie im Künstlerhaus in Munich. Apart from Arman's *Anger* and de Saint-Phalle's *Surprise Shoot*, Rotella demonstrated his technique of poster tearing and Christo erected a temporary monument with metal beer-kegs. Restany commented on these performances by calling the New Realism Festival a

manifesto-gesture [which] finds a place on the royal road of those individual happenings with which the pre-history of the New Realism is marked. All the New Realists, moreover, have had this innate sense of the spectacle, of communicative extroversion, of the 'event'. [...] These action-performances are demonstrations, the purpose of which is to provoke the direct, spontaneous participation of the public in the process of group communication. Action is a labour, its result is a 'work'. In direct contrast to the Happening, New Realist action does not exhaust its meaning in the course of its unfolding. At the end of the performance the tangible trace remains. (Restany 1971: 247-48)

Happenings

The Neo-Dadaists' engagement with the new realities of post-war consumer society produced in the United States for the first time a truly avant-garde performance art, for which, towards the end of the 1950s, Allan Kaprow invented the term "Happening" (Berghaus 2005b: 86). The first example was *18 Happenings in 6 Parts*, performed in 1959 at the Reuben Gallery in New York. Kaprow had divided the gallery space into three compartments, where six sequences of events occurred simultaneously. The actions had been fixed in a score and rehearsed by friends of the artist. Also the visitors of the exhibition were given precise instructions, and this enabled them to become performers carrying out actions of "a strict nature, where the freedoms were carefully limited to certain parameters of time and space" (Kaprow 1968: 109-10). Thereby, a four-dimensional work of art was created, which Kaprow described as "a more tangible reality than it was possible to suggest through painting alone" (Kaprow 1968: 107). However, after the event he came to realise that the actions had been too controlled. So, in the following years he tended to simplify the Happenings and to relinquish rehearsals,

thereby creating in the prepared rooms “a continually active field, whose outlines are very, very uncertain so that they blend in and out of daily life” (Kaprow 1968: 109). He combined planned operations with secondary, improvised actions and mixed invited guests with chance visitors. The principal aim behind these events was to provide participants with an immediate, sensual experience of reality.

Between 1958 and 1966, Kaprow carried out some 25 Happenings in a variety of indoor and open-air locations. The key features of these events can be summarised thus:

- Happenings are derived from life but are not exactly like it. The dividing line between the two spheres must be kept fluid.
- They are not a representation of life but present it in a selective and focused manner.
- They must possess a strong immediacy and physical presence.
- They do not work with a traditional dramaturgy of plot, dramatic development, predetermined climaxes and endings. The artist employs chance methods in order to arrive at a score of “root” directions, which serve as a basis for generating open-ended, life-like actions that make up the Happening.
- Their structure must be flexible and open to improvised, unpredictable interventions. Premeditated arrangements must be counterbalanced by chance elements.
- Usually there is a distinction between performer and spectator, but the dividing line is flexible and both are to some degree participants in a Happening. Spectators are often given tasks and are encouraged to join in the action. Also people unprepared for the event (passers-by or chance visitors) can be integrated and become authentic parts of it.
- Performers in a Happening are not acting (representing a fictional character, place and time) or expressing their inner feelings, but carry out allocated tasks without active engagement of the Ego.
- Happenings break up the continuum of time and space. They can be discontinuous events taking place simultaneously over days or weeks in a variety of locations.
- Happenings are organic events where the artist, the surroundings, the work and everybody who participates in it become one in a unique and novel experience of reality.
- Happenings escape the commodity status of art in a capitalist society. Their impermanence prevents them from becoming collectable works of art; their freshness and unpredictability are a countermeasure to the stale conventions of theatres, galleries and museums.

The randomness of selection procedures (Kaprow used chance elements, spontaneous ideas, arbitrary extracts from notebooks or Yellow Pages) caused the Happenings to be as indeterminate and fragmented as real-life events, but due to the artist's planning strategies they took place in an organised framework according to a predetermined structure. The structuring and the amount of attention given to the individual elements allowed the performances to develop, as he called it, "a sense of magnitude, an aura of mystery" or "a sense of spectacle" (Kaprow 1968: 118-19).

Fluxus

Kaprow's metaphysical aesthetics provoked dissent from a more radical group of artists who, in the years 1962-65, came to be organised by George Maciunas. On 9 June 1962, he gathered several of them at the Galerie Parnass in Wuppertal for an event that included a lecture on *Neo-Dada in Music, Theatre, Poetry and Art* (Berghaus 2005b: 115-16). Maciunas directed his audience's attention to "the world of concrete reality rather than artificial abstraction or illusionism" (Maciunas 1965: 192). With regard to the theatre, he demanded the replacement of artificial plots and predetermined acts on stage with "unrehearsed and undetermined events resulting from spontaneous and improvised actions of a group of people who have been given by the author only specific tasks or a general outline of actions" (Maciunas 1965: 193). In another section of his presentation he spoke of "chance procedures as a compositional method", where the artist only delivers the concept or method of production and allows the work of art to unfold undisturbed by the originator's artistic ego (Maciunas 1965: 194).

A week later, on 16 June, the same group met again in Düsseldorf, where Nam June Paik had organised a late-night concert at the Kammerspiele, entitled *Neo-Dada in Music*. Soon afterwards, the municipal museum in Wiesbaden allowed Maciunas to use its lecture hall for a series of concerts, which no longer used the label "Neo-Dada" but "Fluxus – International Festival of Newest Music" (Berghaus 2005b: 116-18). The opening concert was given by the Norwegian pianist Karl-Erik Welin, who executed his programme in the following manner:

Amongst others, we could hear the sounds of a matchbox and a beer bottle being scraped over the piano strings, a

carnavalesque piece for toy trumpet and clothes” pegs, the noise of a piano lid being slammed (although this may have been unintentional) and fists banging on the piano. The artist attired himself most solemnly in a blue toga, lit a Christmas candle and heated a piano string until it turned red hot. He then jumped up and down on the instrument. Following this, the artist brought a push-chair with a teddy bear on stage. He carefully combed the bear and gave him some beaten egg to drink. He then very quietly piled up some children’s building blocks inside the piano and let them fall onto the strings, creating some weird and wonderful sounds and a long pause. What was the purpose of it all? Was it meant to be a provocation? If so, then those to be provoked had not shown up. The audience’s unequivocal signs of hilarity left the artist unperturbed and showed no trace of aggravation.¹⁰

For the next three years, Fluxus became the organisational network of far-flung artists from the domains of music, poetry and the fine arts. Their stage events avoided all the paraphernalia of “theatre” and presented unpretentious activities in a manner that had nothing whatsoever to do with the traditional concept of “acting”. They grounded their art in a concrete, quotidian reality and shared an interest in artistic creation that shifted attention away from object to process. This was meant to foster an active, creative engagement with the flux of life without following predetermined goals. Fluxus artists explored the nature of existence by treating all experiences as having essentially the same value. They sought to destroy the elitism and exclusiveness of High Art and aimed at a democratisation of the production and reception of art. Fluxus pieces were simple, natural, unpretentious and easy to perform; they did not require training, skills or previous theatrical experience; they were not made for posterity; there was no commercial intention behind them, and they played no role in the official art market nor in the theatre industry. The main function of Fluxus was to fuse the spheres of art and life, to compel spectators and performers to question their attitude towards reality, to redirect their attention to the multifaceted aspects of everyday life, and produce new patterns of behaviour and alternative social practices.

Dada and Neo-Dada: continuities and divergences

Space constraints forbid me to compare the above-mentioned Neo-Dada performances with the original Dada events of the years 1916-1922.¹¹ Suffice it to state that the artists, who in the period 1958 to

1965 more or less willingly accepted the term Neo-Dada for their creations, were fully aware that they were operating in a social and artistic environment that was radically different from that of Zurich, Berlin, or Paris some 45 to 50 years earlier. Therefore, whatever inspiration they may have received from Dada works or writings of the pre-war period, this stimulus was immediately transformed and complemented by other influences. Consequently, the term Neo-Dada was not universally accepted and often emphatically rejected. The main reasons for repudiating the “Neo-” label in favour of terms such as Pop Art, New Realism, Factualism, Commonism, Junk Art, Happening, Fluxus, Event Art, etc. can be summarised in the following manner:

- Dada was a protest against the senseless butchery of WWI. WWII was not an issue to Neo-Dadaists.
- The Dada critique of the rationalistic-materialistic world view that had led from the Industrial Revolution to WWI was transformed into a critical appraisal of the materialistic consumer society of reconstructed Europe and late-capitalist USA.
- In the years 1916-23, mass media had only rudimentary influence on everyday life, whereas in the year 1958-65 the new means of electronic communication had become pervasive.
- The compositional principle of collage became extended into the third dimension in the form of assemblage and environment, and into the fourth dimension in the form of Happenings.
- Duchamp’s use of the Ready Made was an act of protest and a means of his shock tactics; the Neo-Dada use of ordinary artefacts often had aesthetic reasons and aimed at discovering the inherent beauty of everyday objects.
- Zen Buddhism, as interpreted by Daisetz Suzuki and his followers, provided a new ideological basis for the use of chance and the principle of non-hierarchical value.
- The Leftist engagement of many Dadaists was not replicated by Neo-Dadaists, who restricted their political agenda to a critique of consumer capitalism and the pacifying influence of the popular media.
- The Dada aim of merging life and art took on a new dimension in the Neo-Dada movement as the definitions of both art and life had changed considerably.

Peter Bürger's critique of the Neo-avant-garde

This last point brings us to a discussion of Peter Bürger's disparaging comments on the Neo-avant-garde, written at a time when Neo-Dada, Happening and Fluxus had ceased to be an innovative force in the performing and fine arts. Bürger's study was largely designed to examine the roots of the historical avant-garde and to explain the failure of its two key aspirations, namely to dismantle the institution "art" in bourgeois society and to merge creative and quotidian activities in a liberated life praxis. Bürger's achievement lies in his convincing analysis of the inherent contradictions of the life-art dichotomy, i.e. of the avant-garde's dilemma of trying to overcome the autonomous status of art when a critical distance to the social world is required in order to achieve a politically engaged creative practice. Bürger sought to demonstrate that a sublation of art in a liberated life praxis is not only impossible in bourgeois society, but also undesirable, as only the critical distance between artist and society allows a revolutionary engagement with the alienated existence in a capitalist world.

As far as the post-war avant-garde was concerned, Bürger saw in it merely an attempt to resurrect the historical avant-garde – his use of the epithet "Neo" makes this abundantly clear. He repeatedly stated that the Neo-avant-garde repeated the mistakes and failures of its predecessor and that as a movement it was ineffective, inauthentic, noncommittal, arbitrary, solipsistic, and last, but not least, accommodating to the prevailing system of alienation (Bürger 1974: 68, 71, 91, 92). Consequently, it posed no threat to the cultural institutions; rather, it participated in the capitalist circulation of intellectual capital and could be smoothly integrated into the art market.

The problem with Bürger's observations on the post-war avant-garde is that they do not distinguish between Late-Modernist art (i.e. those last offshoots of Expressionism and abstract art that became fully integrated into the art market and museum system) and the new wave of avant-garde experimentation labelled "Neo-Dada" (although, as I stated before, it was by no means a simple revival of Dada art). Bürger's views on the art of the 1950s and 60s do not add up to a systematic analysis and contain vast generalisations that do not capture the innovative developments in this second wave of avant-garde experimentation. Bürger failed to see that the post-war avant-garde emerged out of an engagement with a new historical reality,

namely late-capitalist consumer society transforming itself into a post-industrial information society. He also ignored the fact that its approach to art institutions and the art-life dichotomy contained a number of significant new departures.

The Neo-Dada approach to art institutions and the art-life dichotomy

It is true to say that many of the paintings and sculptures of the Neo-Dada movement now grace the walls of museums, galleries and private collections. In this respect they have shared the fate of the historical avant-garde and have been similarly subjected to the institutionalisation of artistic initiatives originally designed to offer alternatives to the mainstream. The same, however, cannot be said about Neo-Dada performance art.

Due to their transitory nature, performances can only be experienced in the here and now of the act of creation. Whereas conventional theatre performances are fixed and repeatable commodities that form part of an extensive, multi-billion dollar industry, performance art has a much more tangible relationship to the institutions of art. Avant-garde artists have generally shunned theatres, museums and galleries as performance venues and have instead created their works in clubs, bars, warehouses, courtyards or open-air spaces. Also the mediating industries, such as newspapers, television, radio etc. tend to ignore the events, and there is no financial dependency on production companies (the miniscule budgets usually hinge on box office takings and contributions made by the artists themselves).

Yet, despite this critical distance to established art institutions, avant-garde performances are not autonomous creations without impact on social life, as Bürger would make us believe. Rather, the relationship between art and life has complex, dialectic components that fall outside Bürger's simplistic schema, both on the level of production and reception.

In a Neo-Dada work of art, life invades art in the form of fragments of reality, torn from their usual context. Similarly, in a Neo-Dada performance, mundane tasks and everyday actions, performed by non-actors in an ordinary environment, form part of a composition, where they assume new significance and are re-experienced in a new and novel fashion.

On the reception level, these works of art impact on life in two ways: in many cases, the spectator is transformed into a co-producer or creative participant, thus leading to an integration, if not fusion, of the two processes of production and reception. And as the actions that make up the work of art are directly taken from life, art and life are merged on a higher, creative level. When the viewer is confronted with Neo-Dada objects in a museum or gallery setting, a similar process takes place: the fragments of ordinary reality incorporated into the work of art resist any smooth integration into an aesthetic whole and remain forceful reminders of their provenance, thus building conceptual bridges to the reality the viewer comes from. The satirical, subversive or humorous *gestus* of the work compels the spectator to confront that exterior reality with a heightened awareness and a re-focussed frame of mind. Furthermore, the fragmented nature of Neo-Dada works of art forces the viewer into completing the inorganic work in his or her mind by drawing on a reservoir of experiences with this exterior world. Thus, the Neo-Dada work of art reaches out from the world of art into the world of everyday existence. And it does so in a critical, engaged manner which affects the consciousness of its audience.

By means of summary, I should like to suggest that the historical avant-garde's inability to fulfil its aims and objectives should not be used for asserting its failure or even death; rather, it explains why a Utopian aim could still confer creative energy to a movement that sought to go beyond the established parameters of late-Modernist art. Much of the second-wave avant-gardists' drive and will for renewal stemmed exactly from the paradoxes, impossibilities and aporias of the avant-garde project. The revival of avant-garde creativity in the 1950s and 60s offered much more than a recycling of pre-war avant-garde ambitions and a repetition of past failures; rather, it contributed to an ongoing process that cannot reach a point of fulfilment, but must respond afresh and anew to the challenges of the times. Thus, it kept the wheel of eternal renewal turning for another decade or two.

Notes

¹ There were, of course, some exceptions to this general rule. An excellent summary of notable points of contact between US-American and Modernist European art is provided in the Chronology in Homer 1975: 162-170.

² For a good overview of these new tendencies see Hapgood (1995).

³ *Art News* 56 (9) (January 1958), 5. The anonymous note served as an explanation of the cover illustration, showing Jasper John's *Target*. Before this brief comment appeared in *Art News*, there were two attempts by former Dada members to form a Neo-Dada movement. In 1946, Schwitters and Hausmann founded the magazine *Pin* as a "Revue Neo-Dadaiste" (see Hausmann 1958: 127ff.). Also Huelsenbeck, Janco, Richter and Duchamp considered founding "a sort of neo-Dada movement, but America, which would offer the most fertile soil for this, is at the same time the least suitable land for it" (Huelsenbeck 1957: 23).

⁴ Some of Duchamp's works went on permanent display in 1950 at the Arensberg Collection in Philadelphia. The first one-man shows were held at Rose Fried's Gallery in New York in 1952 and 1953-54, and at the Sidney Janis Gallery in New York in 1952, 1953, 1956 and 1959. Other works by Duchamp went on show in the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1954 and the Guggenheim in 1957. Schwitters was first shown at Rose Fried's Pinacotheca Gallery in New York in 1948 and at the Sidney Janis Gallery in 1952, 1953, 1956 and 1959. He was also included in the exhibition, German Art of the 20th Century, at the Museum of Modern Art in 1957.

⁵ See, for example, Peter Schifferli. 1957. *Die Geburt des Dada: Dichtung und Chronik der Gründer*. Zurich: Arche; Willy Verkauf. 1957. *Dada: Monographie einer Bewegung*. Teufen: Niggli; George Hugnet. 1957. *L'Aventure dada, 1916-1922*. Paris: Galerie de l'Institut; Michel Sanouillet (ed.). 1958. *Marchand du sel: Ecrits de Marcel Duchamps*. Paris: Le Terrain vague; Patrick Waldberg. 1958. *Max Ernst*. Paris: Pauvert; Robert Lebel. 1959. *Sur Marcel Duchamp*. Paris: Trianon.

⁶ See Hugo Ball. 1927. *Flucht aus der Zeit*. Munich: Duncker and Humblot; 2nd edn. 1931. Munich: Kösel and Pustet; 3rd edn. 1946. Lucerne: Stocker; Emmy Hennings. 1953. 'Ruf und Echo': *Mein Leben mit Hugo Ball*. Einsiedeln: Benziger; Hans Arp. 1955. *Unsern täglichen Traum...: Erinnerungen, Dichtungen und Betrachtungen aus den Jahren 1914-1954*. Zurich: Arche; Georges Grosz. 1946. *A Little Yes and a Big No*. New York: Dial Press; rev. German edn: 1955. *Ein kleines Ja und ein Großes Nein: Sein Leben von Ihm selbst erzählt*. Reinbek: Rowohlt; Hugo Ball. 1957. *Briefe 1911-1927*. Einsiedeln: Benziger; Richard Huelsenbeck. 1957. *Mit Witz, Licht und Grüte: Auf den Spuren des Dadaismus*. Wiesbaden: Limes; Raoul Hausmann. 1958. *Courrier Dada*. Paris: Le Terrain Vague; Ribemont. 1958. *Déjà jadis, ou Du mouvement Dada à l'espace abstrait*. Paris: Juillard; Walter Mehring. 1959. *Berlin Dada: Eine Chronik mit Photos und Dokumenten*, Zurich: Arche.

⁷ For a list of source material describing the performance see Berghaus 2005: 280, n. 2.

⁸ In 1957, an article in the New York Times on Gutai (Ray Falk. 1957. 'Japanese Innovators'. 8 Dec., Sect. 2, p. 24ff) stimulated discussions in the circles of Kaprow, Oldenburg, Leslie, Watts, Brecht etc. In 1957, Michel Tapié and Georges Mathieu travelled to Japan for the 4th Gutai exhibition. Tapié returned to Japan in 1958 to set up a joint exhibition Gutai / Art Informel. In September 1958, a travelling exhibition of Gutai art started at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York and was shown in Minneapolis, Oakland and Houston until December 1958. As part of the show, Akira

Kanayama produced a painting by means of a remote-controlled car, and a film of Gutai stage actions in Japan was screened.

⁹ “Once a gesture has been made, the work becomes thereafter a documentation on the advent of an artistic fact”, he said (in Manzoni 1956: 73).

¹⁰ This description can be found in ‘Musik und Antimusik: Konzert der “Fluxus”-Festspiele in Wiesbaden’ in *Allgemeine Zeitung / Mainzer Anzeiger* (3 September 1962). See also ‘Musikalisches Varieté: “Internationale Festspiele neuester Musik” in Wiesbaden’ in *Wiesbadener Tagblatt* (4 September 1962), and ‘Das Stemmeisen im Resonanzkasten’ in *Wiesbadener Kurier* (4 September 1962).

¹¹ A detailed examination of a representative sample of Dada performances in Zurich, Paris and Berlin can be found in Berghaus 2005a: 135-80.

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INHERITING THE AVANT-GARDE: ON THE RECONCILIATION OF TRADITION AND INVENTION IN CONCRETE POETRY

ANNA KATHARINA SCHAFFNER

The post-war renaissance of avant-garde strategies and its critics

The notion that the artists of the neo-avant-garde have recuperated, continued and developed further techniques that had been pioneered in the first decades of the past century is widely accepted, and has been the object of numerous studies in the field of the fine arts (cf. Foster 1996 and Buchloh 2000). However, such a critical reassessment is still missing in the sphere of literature, where the precise nature of the liaison between predecessors and descendants has not yet been sufficiently explored. While the fact that concrete poets such as Eugen Gomringer, Franz Mon, and the poets of the *Wiener Gruppe* and the *Noigandres* group appropriated and built upon strategies, techniques and quests of the historical avant-garde has been acknowledged both by the protagonists themselves as well as in critical discourse, the exact nature of this relationship has yet to be theoretically assessed. How do the two phases of avant-garde language experimentation relate to each other in terms of repetition, recuperation and development? Up to now mainly general judgements circulate, ranging from dismissals of the works of the post-war literary avant-garde as epigonic repetitions to their glorification as radicalisation and improvement of the explorations of its forerunners.¹ Are the works of the concrete poets an inauthentic reprise, a re-staging and uncritical repetition of techniques and strategies of the historical avant-garde, as Peter Bürger alleges? Are they a pointless revival of an institutionalised and failed historic project that lost its legitimacy a long time ago (Bürger 1974: 71-2)? Or is there a sense of progress and development? Can the concrete poets claim to have continued, developed or even radicalised and improved the work of the modernists or the 'historical' avant-garde? As Hal Foster asks: "Are

the postwar moments passive repetitions of the prewar moments, or does the neo-avant-garde *act* on the historical avant-garde in ways that we can only now appreciate?" (Foster 1996: 4).

Bürger, arguably the most prominent critic of the neo-avant-garde, argues that, since the historical avant-garde has already failed to sublimate art into life and to restore its social significance, and since it can now be received as art, the gestures of the neo-avant-garde are insincere: they are both operating from inside the institution they are meant to attack and embark on a mission which was unrealisable in the first instance and is thus condemned to fail a second time. Moreover, Bürger posits shock as the most important device of the historical avant-garde, and argues that the lifespans of shock techniques are by their very nature limited, for they cease to be effective when repeated. Many other scholars, critics and writers embrace a similarly dismissive viewpoint as Bürger: the historical avant-garde is frequently considered as the absolute and unrepeatable endgame, as the last possible stage of a "tradition which seeks continuity through rejection", as Octavio Paz put it (1991: 102). "The avant-garde is the great breach, and with it the 'tradition against itself' comes to an end", Paz (1991: 103) declares. A notion that everything has been done already, that an aesthetic ground zero has been reached, that nothing new can possibly be discovered in that field, prevails. Another frequent accusation against the neo-avant-garde is that it lacks the socio-cultural explosive force of the historical one, that it is uncritical, affirmative and that it willingly surrenders to commodification and appropriation by the culture industry.² Former avant-garde protagonists themselves join into the chorus of condemnation, most prominently the Dadaist Raoul Hausmann: "Renaissances are usually pointless and depressing phenomena", he claims (1972: 155).³ Hausmann accuses the neo-avant-garde not only of plagiarism, but of a lack of utopianism, and vigorously denies that it has any critical intentions whatsoever: "DADA was amongst many other things a protest against bourgeois and intellectual traditions. NeoDADA definitely isn't" (1972: 155).⁴

The German poet and critic Hans Magnus Enzensberger too attacks the neo-avant-garde, and in particular the works of concrete poets such as Franz Mon, as epigonic imitation, inferior renaissance of long worn-out techniques and even as fraud and spineless scam. He argues that not one sentence has been formulated by the concrete poets of the 1960s which had not already been written by the Futurist F. T. Marinetti and his supporters. In "Die Aporien der Avantgarde" ("The

Aporias of the Avant-Garde”) from 1962, Enzensberger maintains that while the historical avant-garde failed bravely and gloriously, the neo-avant-garde refuses to take moral responsibility for its actions, hiding behind scientific jargon and the notion of experiment, and thus fails in a cowardly way.

Every contemporary avant-garde is repetition, fraud and self-deception. [...] The historical avant-garde perished as a result of its aporias. It was questionable, but not cowardly. Never did it try to cover itself by claiming what it did was only “experiment”; never has it disguised itself under the cloak of science so as to be devoid of responsibility for its results. This is what differentiates them from this company with limited responsibility, which has succeeded them; this is what makes them great. (Enzensberger 1980: 79-80)⁵

Enzensberger accuses the concrete poets of disguising the essentially arbitrary and trivial nature of their works behind a pseudo-scientific veneer in an attempt to equip them with credibility: “Arbitrariness is expressed in a callous academic jargon, which presents the delirium as seminar paper [...]” (1980: 69).⁶ However, rather than accusing the concrete poets of deploying “callous academic jargon”, one could argue that they draw upon and benefit from new concepts, theories and developments in the realm of linguistics, communication studies, semiotics and philosophy of language, which allow for a much more accurate description of intentions and a more precise comprehension of the processes involving signs, signification and communication. Indeed, it would be highly problematic were the concrete poets to ignore these developments, if they did not try to be up to date and ingest and put to work contemporary discoveries from non-artistic spheres as well. In fact it is exactly the refined notion of the sign and signifying processes which allows the concrete poets to lift the quest to a more precise, controlled and sophisticated level of experimentation.

As Dirk Goetsche (1987: 151) has pointed out, both reflection upon language as well as its creative usage have to be considered against the backdrop of a completely changed horizon ever since Saussurean linguistics and Wittgenstein impacted upon them. After World War II, structuralist and post-structuralist criticism re-instated and radicalised Ferdinand de Saussure’s and Charles Sanders Peirce’s findings, resulting in the establishment of a more sophisticated notion of the sign. C. A. Noble (1978: 21) maintains that possibilities within language are highly dependent upon the philosophical and scientific

state of research about language, and in the 50s and 60s, new theories about semiotics, linguistics and the nature of communication, as well as elements from language philosophy, information theory, cybernetics and media studies, substantially enlarged the body of theoretical knowledge about language, allowing for a more theoretically and scientifically substantiated form of poetic experimentation. Concrete poetic practice in particular reflected and engaged with these developments.

Conceptualising the presence of tradition within concrete poetry: two case studies

Continuing avant-garde practice seems a paradoxical endeavour at first, considering that the label avant-garde is commonly associated with values such as absolute originality and novelty, radical rupture and break with all previous traditions. How do the concrete poets view and assess their relationship with their forerunners, and how do they come to terms with the simultaneous presence of tradition and innovation within their work? Do they have a different concept of what avant-garde entails, one that allows for a co-existence of old and new sets of experimental values, an active engagement with a past tradition? This essay will look at critical attitudes towards tradition and the avant-garde/modernist heritage in two different concrete poetic frameworks.

Eugen Gomringer

Eugen Gomringer, the Swiss-Bolivian founding father of concrete poetry and the advocate of its most rigid branch, acknowledges his literary forerunners and delineates the modernist/avant-garde ancestry that he draws upon in various manifestos. Those most frequently mentioned are Stéphan Mallarmé, Guillaume Apollinaire, Arno Holz, e. e. cummings and William Carlos Williams, as well as Paul Éluard, Hugo Ball, Hans Arp and the Futurists (Gomringer 1998: 34). In contrast to proclamations of absolute newness, originality and rupture à la Marinetti et al., the rhetorics of Gomringer and other concrete poets seem more measured; they openly acknowledge that they are part of a development, and situate themselves in an ancestral line, a carefully chosen genealogy. However, Gomringer's attitude towards this issue is ambiguous: in "eigentlich nicht" ("actually not"), he

claims not to have been aware of Dada when he composed his first constellations, and attributes only general and latent importance to the Dadaists' influence: "to sum up: thought about dada from time to time, but never felt dada. worshiped hans arp" (Gomringer 1998: 103).⁷ In another text, in contrast, Gomringer writes:

certainly there have always been poets in every century, most recently in the context of symbolism, art nouveau, expressionism and dada, who were interested in the visual appearance of language, its linguistic body. It was our premise to continue advancing in line with these developments [...]. (Gomringer 1998: 65)⁸

Gomringer names language dissection, the act of cutting and separating words from their respective contexts in order to explore their material dimension, as one of the key techniques which concrete poetry took over from its predecessors:

in poetry the "word" was discovered as a new element. futurist poetry in marinetti's circle, some expressionist and specifically dadaist poetry recognised and explored the decontextualised word, partly with the telling explanation by hugo ball that the specific means of the times did not let a significant talent rest nor mature, but urged it to explore the means. (Gomringer 1998: 65)⁹

However, in spite of formal and aesthetic analogies, Gomringer points out that the motives and intentions for language dissection in concrete poetry differ substantially from those in the historical avant-garde: "the ideological reasons and the expressive intention which drove this kind of poetry do not apply to us and are no longer topical" (1998: 65).¹⁰ Gomringer is eager to defend himself against allegations of being a mere imitator, claiming that concrete poetry is produced in relation to the special circumstances of its own times, and involves new technological possibilities, such as stochastic, machine-determined poetry composition:

the futurists and the dadaists too were certainly amongst the forerunners of concrete poetry, but i have to say with determination that we [...] made our poetry within the spiritual and intellectual context of our own time. today we live with the possibility to choose words automatically according to programme-determined patterns and to put texts together automatically. in contrast, the poets mentioned above, our precursors, lived in an age of pre-technological art. (Gomringer 1998: 34)¹¹

New technological developments, such as TV, the proliferation of the typewriter and the tape-recorder and the slow emergence of computers, radically changed the cultural sphere in which the concrete poets were operating. Furthermore, transformations of the media landscape, and a massive increase in advertisements as a result of increasingly aggressive marketing strategies, booming post-war economies and the rapid rise of consumer culture had a substantial impact upon everyday life, altering strategies of perception and cognition and the very nature of communication. At the same time, the experience of the Holocaust and the Third Reich shook humanist beliefs in their essences, profoundly destabilising presumptions about a positive and progressive development of history and humanity. In Germany in particular, it provoked a hitherto unknown dimension of mistrust in language and triggered reflections upon the tasks, responsibilities and limitations of language and literature in general, culminating in Adorno's apodictic proclamation "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric" (Adorno 1995: 49).¹² For the German concrete poet Franz Mon for instance the withdrawal into the material realm of language (which he, in tune with Hugo Ball, considered as ideologically untainted), and the abandonment of any subjective, narrative and personal elements from his poetry, were certainly in part a reaction to a profound wariness about a language which had been put to use in the propaganda machinery of the Nazis. Objectivity and constructivist, method-based ventures are a common concern of most concrete poets, and constitute a reflection upon an increasingly rationalised and technology-driven society as well as expressing a deep mistrust of subjectivity and the values associated with it.

In spite of these differences, similar driving forces and factors seem to stimulate and trigger the emergence of avant-garde language experimentation both at the beginning of the 20th century and in the 1950s and 60s. Developments in the sphere of the fine arts for instance appear to be of major significance for the poets in both stages. The dissection and fragmentation of the material and conventions of the medium came to the fore in painting before they did in literature: the Cubists were the first to subvert the referential and mimetic function of art to explore perspective, conventions of representation, colour, shape and line instead, and vitally inspired comparable undertakings in literature with their experiments. In concrete poetry as well, structural and conceptual tenets and principles of the fine arts, in particular of Max Bill's version of concrete art, serve explicitly as models and inspirations for linguistic productions.

Gomringer, by choosing the term ‘concrete’ for his poetic productions, explicitly emphasises the conceptual convergences of concrete art and concrete poetry, which, he writes, are essential for the understanding of concrete poetry: “even though concrete poetry is a literary trend, it can not be understood [...] without reference to concrete art” (Gomringer 1998: 115).¹³ And it is via concrete art, on a less obvious and more subtle route, that the historical avant-garde tradition infiltrates and shapes Gomringer’s work most intensely. Theo van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters were both engaged with dadaist practice in the early 1920s, and infused this aesthetic heritage into their gradually more constructivist ventures, which culminated in van Doesburg’s first manifesto of concrete art in 1930, a major theoretical cornerstone for Max Bill’s aesthetics, and hence a decisive inspiration for Gomringer’s own oeuvre too. Bill, moreover, was in direct contact with many of the protagonists of the historical avant-garde, including not only Piet Mondrian and his teachers at the Bauhaus, but also Georges Vantongerloo, Arp and Schwitters himself, whom he encountered in the Paris-based group *Abstraction-Création*, with which he was involved from 1932 to 1936. And Schwitters’ own constructivist and minimalist poetic productions in the early-mid 20s are proto-concrete works in themselves, and concrete poetry in general has undeniably constructivist qualities. It is via the constructivists’ accomplishments that the avant-garde heritage finds its way into and decidedly shapes Gomringer’s oeuvre.

Noigandres

The poets of the Brazilian *Noigandres* group thematise and theorise their relationship with past poets much more explicitly than other concrete poets. “Concrete poetry: product of a critical evolution of forms”, the brothers Augusto and Haroldo de Campos and Décio Pignatari famously proclaim in 1958 in the synthesis of their theoretical writings and manifestos, the “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry” (de Campos, Pignatari and de Campos 1970: 71). The poets situate themselves firmly and explicitly in a carefully selected literary tradition and consider their work as the product of a conscious assessment, synthesis and radicalisation of the discoveries of their forerunners. They create for themselves a highly selective ancestry featuring their key influences – “inventors” in the Poundian sense. “Inventors. Men who found a new process, or whose extant work gives us the first known example of a process”, Ezra Pound (1960: 39)

maintains in *ABC of Reading*. In this text he presents his own list of writers who “make it new” – those who have contributed most substantially to the development of literary art by means of discovering new processes and methods of verbal expression. In analogy to the literary charts of Pound, the *Noigandres* group identifies its own four key writers and main influences – “those who are engaged in the pursuit of new forms” (de Campos et al. 1996: 369), the catalysts of “the principal future alternatives of poetic language” (376):

Forerunners: Mallarmé (*Un coup de dés*, 1897): the first qualitative jump: “subdivisions prismatiques de l’idée”; space (“blancs”) and typographical devices as substantive elements of composition. Pound (*The Cantos*); ideogramic method. Joyce (*Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*): word-ideogram; organic interpenetration of time and space. Cummings: atomization of words, physiognomical typography; expressionistic emphasis on space. (de Campos, Pignatari and de Campos 1970: 71-2)

Each one of the chosen writers is selected for a specific verbal invention considered to make a substantial contribution to the evolution of literary form. In addition to these four key writers, who are all from a modernist rather than an avant-garde orbit, Augusto de Campos mentions all European avant-garde movements as well as “the experimental, minimalist, and molecular prose of Gertrude Stein” as important inspirations (de Campos et al. 1996: 376). The group also acknowledges interdisciplinary impulses from progressive tendencies in other arts: Sergei Eisenstein is acclaimed for his developments in film montage, and tribute is paid to the “transformation of musical language from Webern to Cage and of the visual from Malevich/Mondrian to Duchamp” (de Campos et al. 1996: 376).

The group’s literary experiments are firmly anchored in a selective genealogy of historic and intertextual references and predecessors –. Again, as in Gomringer’s case, as Pedro Reis has pointed out, this self-confident acknowledgement of the presence of a tradition in their work seems slightly contradictory at first, for the very notion of drawing upon a tradition seems to cancel out the major premises of all innovative avant-garde movements, which are by definition bound to “make it new” and to break radically with all that has been done before (cf. Reis 1996: 288). However, the *Noigandres* group do not consider literary history as a succession of radical ruptures and breaks, but, following Pound, believe in a continuous progressive

development of verbal art, in an evolution of form. As Lello Voce writes:

Haroldo de Campos points out with great confidence the presence of tradition *inside* avant-garde. He underlines the fact that any experimentation can't do without a dimension which is both intertextual and historical, in which any new text is the further tessera of an endless dialogue with the past and the future. (Voce 1996: 120)

In his “Anthropophagite Manifesto” from 1928, Oswald de Andrade, a central protagonist of Brazilian modernism and another important influence for the *Noigandres* poets, introduces the notion of cultural cannibalism, the metaphorical consumption of aspects of foreign or past cultures, which are then worked through, analysed, assimilated, equipped with new elements and transformed into a new product (de Andrade 1997).¹⁴ Haroldo describes the cannibalism notion as “the critical ingestion of European culture and the reworking of that tradition in Brazilian terms” (de Campos 1992). Andrade’s man-eater metaphor seems indeed to encapsulate succinctly the recuperation, digestion and reworking of the avant-garde and modernist poetic tradition in the group’s own work. Augusto, like the poets of the *Wiener Gruppe*, cherishes the notion that the quest of the historical avant-garde is not yet over or sufficiently resolved. He too believes that it has been stifled and terminated prematurely by external forces, and that there are still viable and open lines of questioning to be taken up again and developed further. Concrete poetry, argues Augusto, was born out of the “recovery of the ‘language of rupture’ of the vanguards”, and a “critical reflection” upon their works, a reflection “which must be associated with the revision and recuperation of the values of experimental art after the paralysis brought on by the catastrophe of World War II” (de Campos 1992). He notes:

I see Concrete poetry as directly engaged with the practices of vanguard, experimental or – as it should probably more adequately be called – inventive poetry. I think that the task of Concrete poetry, after it appeared in the 50s, was to reestablish contact with the poetry of the vanguards of the beginning of the century (Futurism, Cubo-futurism, Dada et alia), which the intervention of two great wars and the proscription of Nazi and Stalinist dictatorships had condemned to marginalization. (de Campos et al. 1996: 369)

The poets of the *Noigandres* group subscribe to a notion of progress within literature, very much in tune with Pound. They consider their work not only as recovery and synthesis, but in fact as radicalisation and totalisation of the means of structuring a poem as first explored in the historical avant-garde. Haroldo writes: “Concrete poetry [...] attempted to carry Mallarmé’s project to its ultimate consequences by radicalizing the ‘verbi-voco-visual’ up to its limits” (de Campos et al. 1996: 386). Augusto even speaks of a “double radicalization”: “a radicalization of a radicalization starting from the radical motions of the vanguards at the beginning of the century” (de Campos 1992). He states:

[Concrete poetry], in its most consequential and sophisticated products, attempts the most radical, coherent, and constructive re-enactment of the questioning that the vanguards, from Mallarmé to the Futurists and the Dadaists, made concerning poetic language [...]. (de Campos 1992)

Augusto assesses the differences between concrete poetry and the historical avant-garde movements formally and in relation to technological and theoretical developments, arguing that concrete poetry is a recovery of “processes implicit in the Futurist, Cubist, and Dada movements (collage, montage, simultaneism)”, which he considers to be linked to a “new physicality in the relations between modern man and the world of signs” (de Campos 1992). “Modern physics prompts these new practices, as well as new technologies”, he claims, speaking of an intensification and further development of these existing techniques against the background of new media (de Campos 1992):

Technically, Concrete poets can be distinguished from their antecedents by the radicalization and condensation of the means of structuring a poem, on the horizon of the means of communication of the second half of the century. That implies, among other characteristics, the following: greater constructive rigor in relation to the graphic experiences of Futurists and Dadaists; greater concentration of vocabulary; emphasis on the nondiscursive character of poetry, suppression or relativization of syntactic links; making explicit the materiality of language in its visual and sonorous dimensions; free passage between verbal and nonverbal levels. (de Campos et al. 1996: 385)

An unabashed notion of progress within literature as well as the firm belief in being the very spearhead of poetic evolution is evident in the

Noigandres group's rhetorics of "double radicalisation" and in their claim to be more advanced than their forerunners on both aesthetic and theoretical territory. And though they do not share the idea of radical break and rupture with their predecessors, they still have the conviction of being *avant la garde* of the whole corpus of past poets in common with them.

On similarities and differences

The common themes, strategies and techniques which are dominant links between the two stages of avant-garde poetry are above all manifest in a dedication to language dissection on different levels of linguistic organisation and in the exploration of the material dimension of language across visual, acoustic and semantic parameters. The concrete poets, like to a certain degree the Futurists and the Dadaists, explore the decontextualised word or even the singular letter, freed from the yoke of syntactical constructs and the obligation to signify anything apart from itself. A concern with the deliberate transgression of genre boundaries and an emphasis upon the visual qualities of linguistic signs, as well as an exploration of the potentially semantic values of spatial arrangements count among mutual points of interest, though the latter is explored much more systematically by the concrete poets. The explicit response to and reflection of developments both in fine art and in the realms of new communication media is another shared feature.

One of the most pronounced differences between the two phases becomes apparent in the manifestos, of which there are notably fewer in the orbit of the concrete poets, and self-reflexive theoretical texts, the number of which has increased significantly. There seems to be a difference in tone: Walter Höllerer speaks of muted, more restrained gestures. Hans Christian Kosler maintains that the claim to sole representation, which he defines as characteristic for the historical avant-garde, has given way to a more rational self-assessment and more moderate aims: "Tasks and aims of experimental writing are formulated more carefully, mostly in potential forms" (Kosler 1978: 5). He argues that concrete poets assess the potential and limitations of what art and literature can achieve much more realistically, and have more sober expectations (Kosler 1978: 6).

Kosler's observation that proclamations of the neo-avant-garde poets are more tentative, rational, careful and controlled is to a certain

degree valid, but might be put down not only to less utopian objectives and more realistic expectations, which Kosler considers the principal reasons for the change in tone, but also to another cause: the poets of the neo-avant-garde have at their disposal a much more refined arsenal of concepts and theories to draw upon and with which to describe and assess their intentions, the “callous academic jargon” which Enzensberger criticised so harshly. Franz Mon is very much aware of this new repertoire, and draws attention to the significance of a “Verfeinerung des Zeichen- und Symbolbegriffs” (“refinement of the concepts of signs and symbols”) (Mon 1974: 34). He hopes that new terminology and theory will be able to shed light on certain problems, and publishes an essay about the theory and aesthetics of the sign by Pierre Guiraud in his compilation *movens* in 1960,¹⁵ in which Guiraud presents a survey of the latest developments in linguistics, semiotics, cybernetics and communication theory and argues that these new theories should be deployed to elucidate the arts. Guiraud believes that new theories and concepts have the potential to help illuminate and broaden the epistemological and terminological horizon in the debate of current artistic problems (Guiraud 1960: 97). While the aesthetic and epistemological problems addressed in the work of the concrete poets might to a certain degree still be the same as, or link up with, those in the historical avant-garde, they can be delineated and defined much more precisely, which also implies that the investigations themselves may become more specific and accurate and that the quest might be elevated to a new theory-enhanced level of enquiry. More advanced and precise linguistic concepts and a new scientifically enhanced vocabulary allow for much more accurate descriptions and outlines of intentions, poetological and philosophical objectives, conceptions of reader-responses as well as explanations of the experimental processes involved.¹⁶ As a result, concrete productions seem to be guided more rigorously by theoretical reflections, method and systematic and objective analytical considerations, especially when contrasted with works from the dadaist or the futurist orbit, which corroborates Augusto’s claim that concrete poetry is more constructivist in nature. As a result of the expansion of the conceptual range for the description of language matters, the linguistic issues under scrutiny in concrete poetry are often more finely delineated, minuscule and defined. The enhancement of the theoretical tools is reflected in the poetic works, which tend to be more objectively constructed and systematically executed.

However, one of the most important differences between the two stages is the question of tradition: since the concrete poets build upon an existing body of works, the issue of an explicit and critical analysis of, and response to, their literary ancestry gains momentum. T.S. Eliot encapsulates the matter elegantly in “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “Someone said: ‘The dead writers are remote from us because we know so much more than they did’. Precisely, and they are that which we know” (Eliot 1998: 369).

Reassessing the ‘neo’ in neo-avant-garde

The relationship between the two phases of literary experimentation has been conceptualised and judged in various diverging ways. Five different critical perspectives can be extracted as the dominant narratives in the discourse:

(i) The notion that the neo-avant-garde is an inauthentic repetition, a reprise, even fraud. Bürger, Enzensberger, Hausmann and many others propagate a copy-original dialectic, guided by a ground-zero-which-has-already-been-reached rhetoric. The legacy of the historical avant-garde is posited as the fact that the post- historical avant-garde era is characterised by the co-existence, availability and legitimacy of all imaginable styles, forms and techniques, the consequence of this absolute stylistic freedom being that no particular style can now claim to be more advanced or progressive than others. The artistic field has been widened infinitely, which results in a post-end-game situation in which nothing new and originally can possibly be done by definition.

(ii) The notion that the neo-avant-garde recuperates and continues the quest of the historical avant-garde. This position is mainly advanced by the concrete poets themselves, in particular Augusto de Campos and Gerhard Rühm, who explicitly talk about taking up, continuing, developing, building and drawing upon the historical avant-garde heritage. They consider the historical avant-garde’s project unfinished, something which needed to be recuperated and recovered, restored and developed further. De Campos regards the recuperation of avant-garde practices as a re-establishment of

contact with a project which has been prematurely terminated by historical forces. This is a notion he shares with the poets of the Austrian *Wiener Gruppe*, in particular Rühm, who feels that the group was tying up loose ends, taking up something which had been suffocated prematurely by external forces beginning with the Nazi's degenerate art crusade. They were reviving something which was not yet over but temporarily stifled. Taking up open lines of inquiry from the most radical artistic positions in European literature as intellectual and aesthetic starting points seemed to be the most natural and logical course of action to take for the group, Rühm writes:¹⁷

for us [the works of the historical avant-garde] represented the rediscovered true tradition with which our poetic works linked up with organically. where but from the so-called 'endpoints' should things be taken further? (Rühm 1997: 17-19)

(iii) The notion that the neo-avant-garde improves and radicalises the work of the historical avant-garde. This idea is mainly propagated by the *Noigandres* poets, who consider their endeavours not only as a critical synthesis and analysis of the work of their forerunners, but as an improvement, a “double radicalization”, a more consequential, constructivist and condensed version of the work of the predecessors. Michael Backes too, in his study of the *Wiener Gruppe*, argues that the *Wiener Gruppe* surpasses the historical avant-garde in radicalism and consequence:

Due to the recapitulation, processing, summing up and 'totalisation' of the techniques of the historical avant-garde [...], the developments of the Viennese post-war avant-garde obtain the character of a sum total and a résumé of last consequences. (Backes 2001: 12-13)¹⁸

(iv) The notion that the neo-avant-garde recuperates, incorporates and assimilates techniques of the forerunners and thus de-radicalises them. The opinion that the neo-avant-garde de-radicalises and tames the historical avant-garde, that it incorporates its techniques and legitimises them *as art*, but cuts and even nullifies its critical and subversive intentions, and thus in effect cancels and betrays the original project of the historical

avant-garde, is posited by Bürger, Hausmann, Günter Berghaus, Gerhard Plumpe, Enno Stahl, Enzensberger and many other critics, who deem the neo-avant-garde post-utopian, institutionalised and an uncritical participant in the machinery of the culture industry.

(v) The notion that the works of the neo-avant-garde are not necessarily ‘avant-garde’, but something rather different and valuable in their own right. The final view entails that ‘neo-avant-garde’ works are aesthetically valuable and genuine as a development, but might not in fact be ‘avant-garde’. The choice here would not so much be between celebrating these movements as genuine avant-garde or dismissing them as “repetition, fraud and self-deception”; rather, it may be that they are valuable in other ways than by being avant-garde. To an extent this seems to be implied in Gomringer’s statement that “the ideological reasons and the expressive intention which drove this kind of poetry do not apply to us and are no longer topical”. It is also entailed in the *Noigandres* group’s conception of literary history as a continuous progressive development, rather than being marked by radical breaks and ruptures. This view is also corroborated by the fact that concrete poets do not really use the term ‘avant-garde’ nor the term ‘neo-avant-garde’ when speaking about their work, but prefer more neutral descriptions, such as concrete, innovative or experimental poetry, as Friedrich W. Block has pointed out in his essay in this volume.

Whether the neo-avant-garde is a genuine ‘avant-garde’, a false avant-garde, a continuation of avant-garde practice with new emphases and theoretical approaches or something else entirely ultimately depends on one’s definition of ‘avant-garde’. If one considers qualities such as absolute newness, radical rupture, originality and the complete break with all that has been done before as defining criterion, then the neo-avant-garde might not qualify as genuine avant-garde. If one singles out the utopian, subversive and critical stance as major quality of avant-garde works, then some neo-avant-garde works would qualify, and others would not. And if one defines avant-garde mainly in terms of certain techniques and formal strategies, such as the exploration of the material, the abandonment of narrative and representation, the dissection of established linguistic and pictorial orders and

conventions, and the thematisation of aesthetic qualities and conventions of usage of the signs and symbols deployed, then most neo-avant-garde work would have to be considered as avant-garde indeed.

Ultimately, the concrete poets are far from just reprising and re-staging what their predecessors have done before them. Though they openly recuperate and build upon lines of questioning which originated in the historical avant-garde, they enhance them, develop them further and adapt them to their own sensibilities and distinctive background situations, drawing upon new theories and concepts. Both Gomringer and the poets of the *Noigandres* group emphasise that they write their poetry against the backdrop of a drastically altered cultural field, and that they, though they share formal strategies with their predecessors, are driven by different expressive motives and their own distinctive agendas. In conclusion, one could say that the historical avant-garde tradition has been sublated in the work of the concrete poets – it is both cancelled and preserved, it is negated, assimilated and continued, and ultimately raised to a different level.

This renders the ‘neo’ in neo-avant-garde problematic. Even though this term is hardly ever used by any of the protagonists in the concrete orbit, nor, presumably, by the painters, it is nevertheless firmly established terminology. Hence, could one not redefine its meaning, purge it from the stigma of repetition and instead define it both as an intellectual and aesthetic engagement with a past tradition and a continuation and development of that tradition? One could posit that the ‘neo’ in neo-avant-garde, rather than indicating a value judgement and the allegation of repetition and a blind adherence to already tested, established and worn-out formal principles, designates a historical awareness and an active engagement with the pre-war avant-garde tradition, a conscious reflection upon the dialectic interplay of tradition and invention, and an acknowledgement of and play with an intertextual dimension which enriches rather than diminishes the value of the post-war poets.

Notes

¹ Cf. Plumpe 2001: 13-14; Stahl 1997: 22 and Backes 2001: 12-13.

² Paz for instance writes: “Today we witness another mutation: modern art is beginning to lose its powers of negation. For some years now its rejections have been ritual repetitions: rebellion has turned into procedure, criticism into rhetoric, transgression into ceremony. Negation is no longer creative. I am not saying that we

are living the end of art: we are living the end of the *idea of modern art*" (Paz 1991: 162).

Günter Berghaus, referring to the fine arts, argues: "There was certainly nothing disturbing or scandalous about the 'corporate modernism' of the 1950s, which graced the walls of banks, boardrooms and bourgeois villas. The former avant-garde, which had defined itself through its opposition to society and its artistic institutions, had moved from the margins of society into the mainstream. It became an object of 'smart investment', was absorbed by academic institutions, and ended up as an integral element of the culture industry" (Berghaus 2005: 69).

³ "Renaissancen sind meist aussichtslose und traurige Erscheinungen". All translations are by myself, AKS.

⁴ "DADA war neben vielem anderen auch eine Protesthaltung gegenüber den bürgerlichen und intellektuellen Traditionen. Der NeoDADAismus ist dies entschieden nicht [...]".

Many critics share Hausmann's view that the neo-avant-garde lacks the inherently critical motives of the historical avant-garde, for instance Andreas Huyssen, who writes: "The American postmodernist avant-garde [...] is not only the end game of avant-gardism. It also represents the fragmentation and decline of the avant-garde as a genuinely critical adversary culture" (quoted in Perloff 1991: 9).

⁵ "Jede heutige Avantgarde ist Wiederholung, Betrug oder Selbstbetrug. [...] Die historische Avantgarde ist an ihren Aporien zugrundegegangen. Sie war fragwürdig, aber nicht feige. Nie hat sie sich durch die Ausrede zu sichern versucht, was sie betreibe, sei nichts weiter als ein 'Experiment'; nie hat sie sich wissenschaftlich getarnt, um für ihre Resultate nicht einstehen zu müssen. Das unterscheidet sie von jener Gesellschaft mit beschränkter Haftung, die ihre Nachfolge angetreten hat; das macht ihre Größe aus".

⁶ "Hier drückt sich Beliebigkeit in einem abgebrühten akademischen Jargon aus, der das Delirium als Seminararbeit aufuscht [...]".

⁷ "fazit: hin und wieder an dada gedacht, aber nie dada empfunden. hans arp verehrt".

⁸ "gewiss hatten sich in jedem jahrhundert, zuletzt im symbolismus, im jugendstil, im expressionismus und bei dada, immer wieder poeten für die erscheinungsbilder der sprache, für den sprachleib, interessiert. auf dieser entwicklungslinie [...] galt es nun weiterzuschreiten [...]".

⁹ "in der dichtung wurde das element 'wort' neu entdeckt. die futuristische dichtung des kreises um marinetti, zum teil auch die expressionistische, ganz besonders aber die dadaistische dichtung erkannten und ergriffen das aus dem zusammenhang gelöste wort, unter anderem mit der bezeichnenden begründung – von hugo ball –, dass die besonderen umstände jener zeit eine begabung von rang nicht ruhen und reifen liessen, sondern auf die prüfung der mittel verwiesen".

¹⁰ "die weltanschauliche begründung und der ausdrucks will e, der hinter dieser dichtung steht, sind uns nicht mehr zugehörig und sind nicht mehr zeitgemäss".

¹¹ “auch die futuristen und die dadaisten gehören zweifellos zu den vorbereitern der konkreten dichtung, wobei ich allerdings gleich mit entschiedenheit sagen muss, dass wir [...] unsere dichtung unter dem geistigen vorzeichen unserer eigenen zeit machen. [...] wir leben heute mit der möglichkeit, die wortselektion nach bestimmten programmgesteuerten mustern auf automatischem weg vorzunehmen und texte auf automatischem weg zusammzusetzen. die eben genannten dichter, unsere wegbereiter, lebten dagegen zu einer zeit der prätechnischen kunst”.

¹² “nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch”.

¹³ “die konkrete poesie ist zwar eine dichterische strömung, sie ist jedoch ohne den bezug zur konkreten kunst [...] nicht denkbar”.

¹⁴ Francis Picabia, in the wake of the prevailing fascination with primitivism, also wrote a “Manifest Cannibale Dada” in Paris at the beginning of the 1920s.

¹⁵ See Friedrich W. Block’s essay in this volume for a detailed discussion of *movens*.

¹⁶ Glyn Purselove argues that “the course of poetry has paralleled the course of contemporary linguistics”. (Purselove 1971)

¹⁷ Arno Holz, Paul Scheerbarth, Carl Einstein, August Stramm, Franz Richard Behrens, Kurt Schwitters, Otto Nebel, Hans Arp and Benjamin Perét are amongst those stated most frequently as vital inspirations by Rühm.

¹⁸ “Indem die Wiener Nachkriegsavantgarde die Verfahren der historischen Avantgarden seit dem Ästhetizismus und Dadaismus rekapitulierte, verarbeitete, summierte und ‘totalisierte’, erhält deren Entwicklung den *Charakter einer abschließenden Summe und eines letzte Konsequenzen ausformulierenden Resümees*” (Backes 2001: 12-13).

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THE STRUCTURAL FILM: RUPTURES AND CONTINUITIES IN AVANT-GARDE ART

R. BRUCE ELDER

Introduction

In 1969, P. Adams Sitney, a precocious film critic of exceptional acuity, issued the most famous and frequently quoted essay ever written on avant-garde cinema. It starts out at high speed:

Suddenly, a cinema of structure has emerged. The dominant evolution of the American (and outlands') avant-garde cinema has been the pursuit of progressively complex forms; so this change of pace is unexpected and difficult to explain. Two points demand immediate clarity. First, what is the tendency towards complex forms? And, second, how is the structural cinema different? (1970: 327)

In answer to the first question, Sitney characterised the formal film that preceded the structural film as one of “conjunction” and “metaphor”. The goal of the makers of structural films was different from that of the earlier practitioners of avant-garde cinema, whose purpose had been to construct a compact cinematic architecture that would make disparate elements cohere – to reconcile diverse elements had been the ambition of Stan Brakhage, of Gregory Markopoulos, of Peter Kubelka, and of Kenneth Anger, to cite only those whom Sitney himself named. Between 1965 and 1969, a new tendency appeared, in the films of Tony Conrad, George Landow, Michael Snow, Hollis Frampton, Joyce Wieland, Ernie Gehr and Paul Sharits. The films of these makers seem to belong to a tendency antithetical to the formal film (Sitney emphasised that the antithesis is only apparent) inasmuch as they constitute “a cinema of structure wherein the *shape* of the whole film is predetermined and simplified, and it is that shape that is the primal impression of the film” (Sitney 1970: 327). To the characterisation of a structural film as a film that insists upon its

shape, Sitney appended a list of features any or all of which structural films often possess: fixed camera position (or, from the viewer's perspective, a fixed frame); the flicker effect; loop printing (the reappearance of contents, exactly and without variation); and rephotography off a screen.¹

When he proposed that the films accord primacy to their shape, Sitney also suggested that films possess "minimal content".

The structural film insists on its shape, and what content it has is minimal and subsidiary to the outline. This is the clearest in *The Flicker* (1965) of Tony Conrad and *Ray Gun Virus* (1966) of Paul Sharits, where the flickering of single-frame solids – in the former black and white, in the latter colors – is the total field. (1970: 327)

The assertion that structural films possess minimal content seems baffling at first, for it is difficult to see what more he might intend by that description than that the films are not, as Brakhage's often were, replete with visual incidents (both represented and constructed). Sitney likely drew the term "minimal content" from a piece that the philosopher Richard Wollheim had written just four years before, a piece that was still a topic of discussion among people concerned with contemporary art.

If we survey the art situation of recent times, as it has come to take shape over, let us say, the last fifty years, we find that increasingly acceptance has been afforded to a class of objects which, though disparate in many ways – in looks, in intention, in moral impact – have also an identifiable feature or aspect in common. And this might be expressed by saying that they have a minimal art-content: in that either they are to an extreme degree undifferentiated in themselves and therefore possess a low content of any kind, or else that the differentiation that they do exhibit, which may in some cases be very considerable, comes not from the artist but from a nonartistic source, like nature or the factory. Examples of the kind of thing I have in mind would be canvases by Reinhardt or (from the other end of the scale) certain combines by Rauschenberg or, better, the non-"assisted" ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp. (Wollheim 1965: 26)

By "minimal content" Sitney likely meant much the same as what Richard Wollheim meant: that the films, since they do not strive to reconcile diversity, are "to an extreme degree undifferentiated in themselves" and that, since the films do not present themselves as an

“outering” of the filmmaker’s consciousness or soul, “the differentiation which they do contain” comes not from the artist but from a non-artistic source. We might understand *Wavelength* as having “minimal content” if we construe that phrase to mean what Wollheim intended: after all the film is basically (not exclusively) a record of a zoom across a room: the camera set-up doesn’t change and the film does not represent a large number of spaces. Its content is, in that sense, pretty much “undifferentiated”.

Today, the appearance of “Structural Film” is commonly regarded as one of the cardinal moments in the discussion of films made outside the context of the sponsored cinema. When it appeared, however, it was subjected to an inordinate number of attacks. The phenomenological description of structural film’s defining feature, its insistence on its shape, was the ground of some of the fiercest rejoinders. However, Sitney’s next point, an effort to distinguish between form and structure was, if anything, even more controversial. Sitney proposed that a formal film’s form arises out of content – formal film strived to evolve “a tight nexus of content” out of the diverse material the artist has collected (Sitney 1970: 327). In characterising the formal (poetic) film in this way, Sitney probably had in mind the point that Robert Creeley had taught Charles Olson: that “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT” (Olson 1997: 240).² At heart, the formal film embodies a myth, and the film’s recurrences, antitheses, and overall rhythm develop out of this “mythic” content. The forms that lyrical films assumed generally evolved during the film’s making, as a response to the varying content; the form developed as the filmmaker learnt how to reconcile the diversity of all the elements of the film’s content.³ As Sitney pointed out, the content of the images suggests the form that the film will assume:

Kubelka, Markopolous, Brakhage, and to a lesser extent, Anger, have discussed working processes, which share in common a scrutiny of the photographed raw material so that the eventual form will be revealed; their faith has been in editing. (1970: 327)

The films of the early phases of avant-garde film, both in Europe and in America, though especially in America, were poetic works in which formal devices were used symbolically; they were essentially complex interrelations of these poetic images. The total form of such films was generally hard to define, for formal films usually possessed no clear,

readily describable architectonic. By contrast, the structural film has a predetermined shape. This shape does not reconcile diversity; and because it does not, the structural film has not favoured complex forms – the overall form of the film has no need to adjust moment-by-moment to the film’s changing content, as Olson described the projective poem as doing.

Much – too much, to my view – has been made of the vagueness of the terms “shape” and “structure” that Sitney employed. Sitney’s use of the term “shape” was, after all, not so different from Michael Fried’s, who said of similar paintings and sculptures being done at the time: “The shape *is* the object: at any rate, what secures the wholeness of the object is the singleness of shape” (Fried 1998a: 151). Despite the authority of that provenance, George Maciunas lambasted Sitney’s use of the term “structure”, alleging he had utterly misused the term “structure”. He declared that “structure” means, simply, an arrangement of parts, and so a structure may be either simple or complex; thus, he implicitly criticised Sitney’s use of the term to suggest the notion of a simplified shape (and the inappropriateness of coining the term “structural film” to refer to films that possess a simplified shape). He remarked scathingly that Sitney’s error in coining the term “structural film” could only be traced back to a “misplaced dictionary and ignorance of recent art-philosophy” (Maciunas 1970: 349). A decade later, Paul Arthur again rebuked Sitney for imprecision, protesting that “[t]he interchangeable – and often ambiguous – use of ‘shape,’ ‘structure,’ and ‘form’ is a problem, each term requiring considerably more precision than is given” (1979: 123).

Bruce Jenkins offered a stronger critique yet. He claimed to have begun studying Frampton’s films with a structural model in mind, but when he came to analyse *Autumnal Equinox* (1974), a film within a large serial work that Frampton called “*Magellan*”, he could not engage with the film using that model’s analytical tools. “Quite simply, the film appeared to have no discernible structure, no set pattern of repetition or development, no strong sense of shape – all the traits necessary for a work to qualify as ‘structural’” (Jenkins 1984: 3). Jenkins thus claimed to have found himself in the position either of having to reject the claim that it was useful to approach Frampton’s films as Sitney’s model recommends, or of having to reject the claim that there are clear continuities among the different phases of Frampton’s career (for some of Frampton’s films, he understood, could be described in Sitney’s terms).

Because he felt strongly that there are such continuities and that a key task of a commentator on Frampton's films was to elucidate those continuities, Jenkins found himself having to reject the applicability of the model of the structural film to Frampton's complete *oeuvre*. Frampton was universally acknowledged as one of the principal structural filmmakers; yet, Jenkins asserted, Frampton's *oeuvre* doesn't always give the feature that Sitney described as structural film's defining characteristic (and its principal aesthetic virtue) a central role. That realisation brought Jenkins to question the usefulness of the model altogether – he reasoned that if the model of a structural film didn't apply to Frampton's films, then it likely doesn't apply to any broad group of films, if to any at all.

System and wholeness

Despite such protests, it is reasonably clear that the tendency that Sitney was describing was that of using a form whose outline is established before the shooting or the editing has taken place, or which responds, in a systematic and predetermined fashion, to events that arise during the shooting or editing. Addressing his first film production class at Antioch College, Paul Sharits, one of the filmmakers whose work Sitney treated in his article, expounded some fundamental ideas about form that were prevalent among the makers whose names are associated with the structural film.

The idea of "wholeness" is obviously not new, but recently it has taken on a meaning different than the accepted "organic unity" principle which Eisenstein stated so lucidly: "... in an organic work of art, elements that nourish the work as a whole pervade all the features composing this work." A unified canon pierces not only the whole and each of its parts, but also each element that is called to participate in the work of composition. One and the same principle will feed any element, appearing in each in a qualitatively different form. Only in this case are we justified in considering a work of art organic. [...] Kandinsky's, Mondrian's and Malevich's ideas of "dynamic" asymmetrical balance are quite different from Pollock's influential nonrelational unity of the entire visual field; Pollock's "overallness," directness, flatness gives his works the "presence" of autonomous objects. (Sharits 1972: 27-28)⁴

In this talk, Sharits expounded his belief that recent art had seen the emergence of a new conception of form, a conception that rejected the values that the theory of organic form had proclaimed. He characterised this new conception of form as “non-relational” (compare Sharits’ view on this matter with Sitney’s idea of the repudiation of the ideal of bringing seemingly heterogeneous elements into a unified, organic whole). Sharits traced this idea of non-relational form back to Pollock’s all-over forms. The connection is apposite: Pollock’s all-over, decentralised, and polyphonic forms achieve their unity by being a composition of similar elements that repeat themselves from frame edge to frame edge, and that sort of all-over unity was a predecessor of the unvariegated wholes that Minimalist artists and structural filmmakers favoured. Sharits also stressed the use of constructions that have a similar effect to those of the four devices Sitney identified as devices structural filmmakers commonly use.

Duration, apperception and the structural film

Sharits’ comments also highlight a key distinction between, on the one hand, Minimalist art and Post-Painterly Abstractionist work that relied on reduction and simplification and, on the other hand, all preceding modernist forms that relied on reduction: Minimalist art and Post-Painterly Abstraction demanded to be seen in what Michael Fried called “visual time”, i.e., across a more or less extended duration, while modernist painting could only be grasped instantaneously, i.e., taken in “all at once” (Fried 1998c: 247). The analogous difference in film is between the films of Brakhage, which, like most modernist works, demand to be experienced in the immediate present, and the extended-time pieces that filmmakers (including Andy Warhol and Michael Snow) began to make in the later 1960s. When we watch a Brakhage film, we do not engage in processes of anticipation or recollection – the perceptual demands of the fluxing imagery require such total concentration that we cannot engage in memory or conjecture; in the end, the work nudges us towards apprehending it in an “ek-static”, all-at-once temporality. In the later 1960s, several movements, including task-based dance, process music (or the music of gradual changes, exemplified by the work of Steve Reich) the enormously influential aleatory works of John Cage, and structural film made the duration of the work – its temporal extension –

palpable. The durative qualities of time-based Minimalist works and those of allied movements (including process music, aleatory music, task-based dance and Conceptual performance art) encourage the viewers/listeners to engage in apperceptive processes. Thus, with process music, we apprehend the process that generates the work, and that insight allows us to recall how the work assumed the qualities that, at any given moment, it actually has; and, on that basis, we make conjectures about the outcome of the process. The spatial/processual shapes of Michael Snow's *Wavelength* (1967) and Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity* (1970) embody memory and prophesy in a similar way.

More than that, *Wavelength* (and other works like it) embody the essential properties of the experience of duration – and, however much modernist devices may try to conceal the fact, the experience of a film really is the experience of duration.

The apperceptive activities that reductive forms encourage open a distance between the viewer and the work. This distance makes viewers or listeners aware of their relation to the work – makes them aware that the work confronts them as an object and that they are subject to the experience the work engenders. Snow remarked on this:

In relation to events one can only be a participant or a spectator or both. Of course one can also be uninformed (events of which one is unaware take place constantly, to say the least). But is that a relationship? Yes.

Experience of an event can only be anticipatory, actual or post facto. Or prophetic, intentional, guessed, planned or total or historic, reminiscent, analytical. And in this (lower) case it should be pointed out that I am using *your* words....

Named, scheduled events: bus ride, concert, Christmas, eclipse, etc. This is not what I'm interested in. Sub-events: not "what is," not "what is not" but what happens in between. In this case: "not."

"Passages" then, wherein or post-facto or in anticipation I may note revelatory unities and disparities. What's interesting is not codifying but experiencing and understanding the nature of passages from one state to another without acknowledging "beginning" as having any more importance in the incident as "importance" has in this sentence.

Or as "ending" in this. (Snow 1994b: 67)

Recall Sharits' remarks about forms "which have the kind of cohesiveness wherein shape and edge are indistinguishable, one cannot speak of 'beginning' and 'end'".

The unusually high ratio of expenditure of mental energies on apperceptive activity to expenditure on perceptual activities elicited by works with simplified outlines heightens the viewers/listeners' self-awareness, and that self-awareness makes them aware that duration is a condition of cognition. Donald Judd testified to being interested in "one thing after another" (1968: 78) while Michael Snow acknowledged he has given his attention to "how one thing leads to another" (1994b: 66) – the concern with process and development so characteristic of Minimalist art is an aspect of this more general interest in duration and its role in cognition.

Sharits' ideas about wholeness were among the most radical among the structural filmmakers proposed. Among Sharits' most probing assertions was the claim that the new wholeness (pioneered by Pollock) demands homogeneity throughout the space (or duration-space) of the work and that homogeneity across a duration-space required that the beginning, middle and end of the work be undifferentiated. Sharits recognised, however, that not all structural films have beginnings, middles and ends that are undifferentiated one from another. That realisation brought him to deliberate further about the idea that structural films often seemed to be fragments – the idea of a fragment was useful to his aesthetic theory because a fragment lacks the sense of closure, of having an ending that most works of art possess. He made explicit the implications of his assertion that structural films often seem to be fragments of a larger system, often the cinema itself:

Warhol's "actual scale," in works like *Sleep* and *Empire*, because it documents cyclic ideas such as sleep/wakefulness/sleep and night/day/night obviously implies larger cyclic systems: another homogeneous work, Snow's [actually Wieland and Snow's] *Dripping Water* [1969], does not imply a cycle of any kind because there is no predictable measure of where the dripping began or ended or whether it even began or will end – so, since there is no definable boundary such as "end," this noncyclic work implies that it is a segment of larger non-cyclic system. One can conceive of many forms of homogeneous and nonhomogeneous overall time-shapes. In what senses can these shapes be regarded as cinematic? Snow understood the vectorial implications of the projector light beam and this seems to account at least in part for *Wavelength's* directional structure. Physically, the conic

shape is directive towards the projector lens; yet we sense the internal projectiveness of the beam directing itself toward the screen, as if magnitude was its target. [...] One could say that because time itself is “an arrow,” it is impossible to avoid vectorial directionality in articulating temporal media and that one inevitably ends up with a sort of story form. But this “story,” if it is such a form, is a physical or procedural one and what it tells us is analogous to what we are perceiving while it is being projected. Besides, approaching film form from these new frames of reference, we are free to conceive of not only forward-oriented vectors but any vectorial direction; negative vectors come to mind easily [...]. (Sharits 1972: 34-39)

The phases of experiencing a structural film

A structural film is a film whose outline form either is established before the shooting or the editing has taken place, or which responds, in a systematic and predetermined fashion, to events that arise during the shooting or editing. The pleasure we take in watching a structural film depends in part on discovering the preconceived schema that determines the variations in the film. Characteristically, the viewing experience evolves through a series of stages: at first, the nature and order of the variations seems inscrutable – the images seem to have no thematic relation to one another, the sequence of variations to expound no theme, and the film’s rhythmic character (if it has one) not to imitate the rhythms of affect. The response is subject to evolution, however. In fact, the phases of a viewer’s characteristic response to a structural film has similarities with the typical phases of a spectator’s response to a narrative’s drama: the first phase in watching a structural film, during which we cannot discern the order of the piece, is analogous to the initial phase of a narrative that presents an image of a world disorganised by strife. The next phase is analogous to the phase in which a drama resolves strife: failing to discover a motivation for the images (for their character or order) in a sensibility or an outlook, or in an expressive or formal problem, we look elsewhere for the film’s determining principle, and, with persistence, we discover it in a preconceived, systematically applied procedure. The remaining phase resembles the phase of denouement in the traditional drama. For, just as during the denouement phase in the traditional drama one watches the conflict work itself out, during this phase of a structural film, one experiences the film’s system working itself – usually with a delight, resulting from the viewer’s being restored to a position of cognitive mastery, that approaches

jubilation. Generally, the “denouement” of a structural film is massively extended, in comparison with denouement in a traditional drama, and the question why this phase, which in traditional drama is usually brief, is so massively extended in the structural film is instructive to ponder. The pleasure of watching a system unfolding seemingly impersonally is central to the aesthetics of the structural film.

Structure, material and predetermined shape in the structural film

Though the proposition that the forms of structural films are grounded in the film materials has been offered often enough – the militantly Althusserian Marxist Anglo-American film critic, Peter Gidal, even proposed renaming this filmmaking practice the “structural-materialist film” – it has not been particularly well developed. The connection between the monomorphic form of many structural films and the materialist basis of structural film practice is this: the structural filmmaker generally sees that some feature – or, what makes the result even richer, a set of interrelated features – that films inevitably possess can be brought under the control of a system.⁵ For example, Michael Snow must have noted that the perspectival attributes of a photograph change when the field covered by the image varies – that, given a set of images all taken from a single vantage-point (using a single camera set-up), objects in the images that represent a larger area (images taken with lenses of shorter focal lengths) will seem to be placed deeper into the illusory space behind the picture plane, while the objects in the images that represent a more restricted area will seem to occupy a shallower space. Snow must have recognised, that is to say, that the depth of the illusory space of the image and the area that the image represents each changes with alterations in the other. Furthermore, the wider the area of coverage and the deeper the illusory space behind the image, the farther away from the image one seems to be – so the deeper space behind the image reflects a greater distance of the viewer from the objects the image represents. These different attributes – apparent distance from the image, image depth, and field of view – are all interdependent, and the interdependencies of the attributes are of a fascinating complexity. Snow must have recognised as well that the field of view one takes in from a single vantage point can be varied continuously by adjusting

the focal length of the zoom lens. Thus, he struck upon a means for bringing these variables under the control of a simple system. To bring the determining system into evidence and to highlight the interrelation of all features the work subjects to systematic variation, Snow contrived a unifilar form, for that unifilar development made evident that a single force generates the work. The intricacy of these interrelations contributed to making *Wavelength* one of the great achievements of cinematic art.

Seen in this way, structural filmmaking has much in common with the approach to art-making that Robert Morris described in his influential essay in *artforum*. In that article, Morris outlined two modes of artistic production that had attracted the allegiance of his contemporaries: the “materials/process approach” and “the use of ‘a priori’ systems”. Robert Morris pointed out that the first approach is based on principles that arise from the material of the medium – they are the result of the artist’s intuitive response to the particular materials at hand, of what Morris described as a “receptivity” to the actual materials the artist uses. The other practice involves using a system or formula established before the production of work (Morris 1970: 62-6).

The latter approach is the approach that structural filmmakers generally took. Consider the differences between the structural film and the lyrical film: the lyrical form had been predicated on a delicate balancing of shot against shot, with different shots having different relative weights. The principal means of balancing shots having different weights was to vary their lengths (ending a shot before it accumulated too much weight, or before its weight began to wane); determining when to begin and when to end a shot was largely subjective, intuitive and arbitrary (or so it must have seemed to filmmakers to whom the “a priori” approach appealed). In a structural film, on the contrary, key attributes of shots are decided in advance, by an impersonal system – a system as impersonal as fate.

Considering structural films as films that are produced by using a predetermined schema helps counter the objection that Sitney faced, that not all structural films make their primary impression through their shape. It is usually true that when a systematic procedure is used to make a film, the resulting film has a simple, evident shape – this shape is usually highlighted, and this highlighting is what Sitney focused on. However, it is not always true that when a system generates a work that the piece that results has a simple shape: sometimes the process results in a recondite structure (as the

analogous example of musical compositions based on an absolutely systematic approach to producing variations from a tone row make quite clear).⁶ What is more, that approach makes clear that “a set pattern of repetition or development” – or, at least, an *evident* pattern of repetition and development (the features that Bruce Jenkins looked for in a structural film) – is not an essential attribute, or one of the requisites of, the form.

Shifting the mode of apprehension

Another dimension of George Maciunas’ critique of Sitney’s “Structural Film” article demands comment. Maciunas was a leader of the New York neo-dada group, Fluxus. His critique accused Sitney, *inter alia*, of “cliquishness and ignorance of the film-makers outside the *Coop* or the *Cinematheque* circle” (Maciunas 1970: 349).⁷ The social grudge the remark betrayed notwithstanding, his most forceful rebuke to Sitney accused him of having failed to recognise important precursors to the structural filmmaker’s use of monomorphic forms. A key omission, he asserted, was Marcel Duchamp.⁸ One reason Maciunas might have claimed Duchamp was a precursor of the structural filmmakers was that Duchamp had devalued the immediate and sensuous pleasures that the formalist orthodoxy so esteemed and laid emphasis instead on the use of complex conceptual structures. Furthermore, his works highlight the change in apprehension that is required to appreciate a work of art as a work of art – the change required “to get” a work of art (as one “gets” a joke); they also show that a shift of cognitive set (or frame of apprehension) is the characteristic mode of responding to a work of art and the condition for having an “aesthetic experience”.

Exploring the change in experience (and mode of apprehension) that occurs as one comes to understand a representation aesthetically is what Duchamp’s work (in a thousand sly ways) is all about. His ready-mades focus on that shift: just as getting the joke about the chicken crossing the street requires that you see the simple explanation of the chicken’s motivation differently – that you come to understand it within the context of that practice we call “telling jokes” – so seeing R. Mutt’s *Fountain* or Marcel Duchamp’s *In Advance of a Broken Arm* as a work of art also requires a transformation in our ordinary mode of response, from a utilitarian to an aesthetic mode.⁹ Stated more generally, appreciating a work of art requires that you

come to comprehend it through a shift from an ordinary (utilitarian) mode of apprehending objects to an aesthetic mode of understanding.¹⁰ The transformation that occurs when we “get” a joke is similar in certain respects to that which takes place when we look at, for example, a painting of Saint Sebastian shot full of arrows and come to see the representation not simply as an actual rendering of a scene of suffering but as the articulation of a view about Sebastian’s suffering (the *meaning* of the representation): we suddenly “get” the fact that this image does not simply represent a scene of a man shot with arrows but presents a view of life, including notions about the redemptive value of suffering – we see it from another perspective, framed by the aesthetic mode of understanding, just as we come to understand the answer “to get to the other side” from within a form of life that included telling jokes and irony.¹¹ Understanding the representational status of the image of St. Sebastian’s pierced body requires that we cease seeing it as simply an object just like other objects in the world and come to understand it as articulation of a human being’s attitudes, beliefs and feelings about suffering and redemption. This transformation is similar to the transformation between seeing *In Advance of a Broken Arm* (1915), first, as simply another mass-produced snow shovel and then seeing it as a representation that says, perhaps, something about the similarity of shovelling snow and masturbating to ejaculation (and about the similarity between breaking one’s arm and the post-coital tumescence). The transformation depends upon recognising the ironic nature of the object, just as seeing the joke in the hopelessly straightforward explanation of the chicken’s behaviour requires that we apprehend the punch line as irony. Duchamp thus found in his *objet trouvé* a means to highlight this transformation in our mode of apprehension and to encourage us to reflect on its aesthetic importance.

It requires mental alertness to “get” a work of art, just as it demands mental alertness to “get” a joke; thus, “stupidity” (*la bêtise*) becomes an issue.¹² As John Rajchman pointed out, the problem of “stupidity” (*la bêtise*) – stupidity “as distinct from error or knowledge” – was a key issue in the arts of the twentieth-century, a factor artists identified as something that they must struggle against and so served as a factor that stimulated them to produce their art (Rajchman 1998: 5).¹³ Several artists, Duchamp among them, addressed that issue directly. They developed forms that appeared to have none of the elegance, harmony, proportion, and unity of

traditional artworks. The works these artists produced often seem causal, inelegant, inharmonious – indeed, sometimes, even slapdash or downright ugly. It takes effort and the very opposite of stupidity (*la bêtise*) to discern the principles that hold the elements of the work in a unity. If we can discern them, we are elated. A factor in that elation is the feeling that we have confronted a challenge and triumphed. But a more important factor is that it encourages us to think and to feel differently about the elements that constitute the work of art – and even, the world: to feel their harmoniousness, which so often escapes us.

The idea of shape in minimalist art and structural film

Donald Judd made this remark about the painting of his contemporaries.

The elements inside the rectangle are broad and simple and correspond closely to the rectangle. The shapes and surface are only those which can occur plausibly within and on a rectangular plane. The parts are few and so subordinate to the unity as not to be parts in an ordinary sense. A painting is nearly an entity, one thing, and not the indefinable sum of a group of entities and references. The one thing overpowers the earlier painting. It also establishes the rectangle as a definite form; it is no longer a fairly neutral limit. A form can be used only in so many ways. The rectangular plane is given a life span. The simplicity required to emphasize the rectangle limits the arrangements possible inside. (Judd 1968: 11)

One might well say of *Wavelength* that the simplicity required to emphasise its conical shape “limits the arrangements possible inside it”.

Lyrical filmmakers had demonstrated the power of the imagination to reconcile evident disharmony by constructing forms that could bring highly disparate elements into a satisfying unity (so that the imaginative power of the artist, in reconciling the evident disharmonies among them, might be underlined). Consequently, their work frequently seemed highly disjunctive. Minimal art, on the other hand, stressed the value of wholeness and indivisibility. So, in “Notes on Sculpture”, Robert Morris highlighted the use of unitary forms that create a strong gestalt, and so avoid divisiveness (a practice the structural filmmakers also adopted); so, too, Donald Judd, in “Specific Objects” emphasised the value of repeating identical units (and the

repetition of identical, or nearly identical, units is a feature of several of Hollis Frampton's films, including *Zorns Lemma*). Such gestalt forms avoid part-to-part relations, as emphasis on part-to-part relations highlights the role of the human maker. Part-to-part relations also make the overall unity of the work so much less palpable. Thus Judd:

[...] when you start relating parts, in the first place, you're assuming you have a vague whole – the rectangle of the canvas – and definite parts, which is all screwed up, because you should have a definite *whole* and maybe no parts, or very few. (Glaser 1968: 151-54)

Robert Morris contrasted art works that have “clearly divisible parts which set up relationships” with

certain forms [...] [that] do not present clearly separated parts for these kinds of relationships to be established in terms of shapes. Such are the simpler forms that create strong gestalt sensations. Their parts are bound together in such a way that they offer a maximum of resistance to perceptual separation. (Morris 1968: 225-26)

Paintings or sculpture made of definite parts were said, in the jargon of the time, to be “composed”. Minimal art thus represented a reaction to the compositional ideal, an ideal that had been articulated most clearly by Immanuel Kant, who understood the free play of imagination (according to Kant the source of aesthetic pleasure) to involve the relating of part to part, of part to complexes of parts, of complexes of parts to larger complexes of parts, etc., to determine whether the parts are mutually adapted to one another. This conception of the nature of aesthetic pleasure had dominated aesthetics, art criticism and (implicitly) much artmaking from Kant's time right up to the 1960s. It was Minimalism that first thought to challenge it.¹⁴ The challenge to the idea of composition was more radical even than that which Dadaist collage activities had offered in their time.

The idea of shape plays a key role in this radical challenge. Much as Sitney did regarding structural film, the art critic Michael Fried pointed out that for the Minimal artist, the crucial thing is shape.

Morris's “unitary forms” are polyhedrons that resist being grasped other than as a single shape: the gestalt simply *is* the “constant, known shape.” And shape itself is, in his system,

“the most important sculptural value.” Similarly, speaking of his own work, Judd has remarked that

the big problem is anything that is not absolutely plain begins to have parts in some way. The thing should be able to work and do different things and yet not break up the wholeness that a piece has. To me the piece with the brass and the five verticals is above all *that shape*.

The shape *is* the object: at any rate, what secures the wholeness of the object is the singleness of the shape. (Fried 1998: 150-51)¹⁵

Michael Fried traced the role that shape played in the modernist painting of Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski and Frank Stella; what he produced as a result of that investigation was a historiography of mid-twentieth century art that explains the drive that led to the idea of shape. Fried’s notion of “literal shape” depended on his taxonomy of different types of shape in painting: “literal shape”, which he described as the silhouette of the support; “depicted shape”, which he described as the outlines of the elements in the picture; and “shape as such”, shape as a medium in which choices can be made about literal and depicted shapes. The artist’s choices about “shape as such” determine the shape of the support (Frank Stella’s shaped canvases of the 1960s were a major inspiration for Fried’s ideas on the importance of “shape as such”) and the depicted shapes represented on the canvas (for the shape of the canvas is echoed in the shape of the elements within it, as the vertical edges of the painting’s boundaries are echoed in the narrow nearly central vertical bands – the “zips” – in Barnett Newman’s paintings).¹⁶ By the 1960s the history of painting brought literal shape to the fore – thus, in “Shape as Form: Frank Stella’s Irregular Polygons”, Fried pointed out that in the years 1960 to 1966 (when the article was written), literal shape assumed increasingly greater importance (Fried 1998b: 81).

The passage could just as well describe the change that occurred with the transition from the lyrical to structural film: the lyrical film places more emphasis on depicted shape, while the structural film places much more weight on literal shape (and this interest in literal shape arises from a concern with shape as such); and in structural film, depicted shapes are dependent on literal shape.

Fried’s writing of the mid-1960s tried to show that the desire to make depicted shape dependent on literal shape led artists to develop what he called “deductive structures”. Fried’s conception of deductive

structure focused on the relation of depicted shapes to the framing edge. In *Three American Painters: Noland, Olitski, Stella*, Fried discussed one of the earliest examples of deductive structure:

[...] [T]he “zips” provide a crucial element of pictorial structure, by means of what I want to term their “deductive” relation to the framing edge. That is, the bands amount to echoes within the painting of the two side framing edges; they relate primarily to those edges, and in so doing make explicit acknowledgment of the shape of the canvas. They demand to be seen as deriving from the framing edge – as having been “deduced” from it. (Fried 1998c: 233)¹⁷

The remark is apposite to the structural film: Ernie Gehr’s *Serene Velocity* uses a deductive structure that arises from the edges of the frame being reflected again and again in an architectural form that includes the perspectival repetition of that form through depth. The rapid alternation of the brief shots taken with the lens set at different focal lengths produces an effect related to superimposition that echoes the repeating architectural form while, at the same time, suggesting the effect of recession through depth.¹⁸ Thus, the shape of the film is “implied” in the corridor’s structure: there is a deductive relation between the depicted form in the image and the literal shape of the film. Paul Sharits’ remarks about the edge of a film being generated by the internal structure of the film articulates the idea that there is an implicative relation between the contents of the film (the boundaries of the “depicted” shapes) and its overall literal shape.

The range of films to which Fried’s remark seems apposite expands if we take into account the temporal forms of structural films that might be considered to be analogous to the spatial forms favoured by Minimalist painters of the mid-1960s. Consider Michael Snow’s *Wavelength*: the literal shape of that work is not, before anything else, the space that image claims for itself – it is the time the film carves out as its limits. *Wavelength*’s deductive structure arises from the implications that a temporal form might have for the image – from the phenomenological effects of an image’s closing in on a region of space and from various phenomenological, photographic and cinematic analogues of that process. It offered a simple form, based on a remarkably pure process – simple to the point of being essentially an eidetic reduction – a pure process that implies the progress from a ‘before’ to an ‘after’. In doing so, it offers a very pure description of time’s essential features.

Fried expanded on his idea of deductive structures by discussing Frank Stella's stripe paintings.

Like Newman and Noland, Stella is concerned with deriving or deducing pictorial structure from the literal character of the picture support; but his work differs from theirs in its exaltation of deductive structure as sufficient in itself to provide the substance, and not just scaffolding or syntax, of major art. As early as 1958-59 [...] Stella began to make paintings in which parallel stripes of black paint, each roughly 2 1/2 inches wide, echo and reecho the rectangular shape of the picture support until the entire canvas is filled. [...] [Over time] Stella's grasp of deductive structure grew more and more tough minded, until the paintings came to be generated in toto, as it were, by the different shapes of the framing edge, and variation occurred only within the series as a whole rather than within a particular shape of canvas. (Fried 1998c: 251-52)

Stella's use of boundary echoing devices created an evenness across the picture surface that countered the tendency of Cubist paintings to make the central area of the picture the most important and to fade out towards the edges. The Cubists, Fried suggests, built their paintings out from the centre towards the edge, while Stella generated the structure of his paintings from the edge towards the centre.¹⁹

Stella often used irregularly shaped canvases; when he did not, his method of "deducing" shape from the boundaries of the canvas (or whatever he used for the painting's support) resulted in symmetrical compositions.²⁰ Painters traditionally had avoided formal symmetry, since it arrests the eye in the centre of canvas – generally, painters strived for asymmetrical balance, to produce a more dynamic effect. In defiance of this tradition, Minimalist painting made formal symmetry common. The effect of stasis that formal symmetry produces served the Minimalists' interest in heightening the effect of presence. Structural films, too, often gravitated towards formal symmetry, and for much the same reason.

Notes

¹ Sitney granted that these are not necessary features of structural films, as there are structural films – films that insist upon their shape and possess only a secondary and minimal content – that have none of these features.

In 'Thoughts on Recent Underground Film' (originally published in *Afterimage* No. 4 [Autumn 1972], pp. 78-95, and anthologised in Le Grice 2001: 13-26), an article

written in response to Sitney's seminal piece, Le Grice's article offers a thorough and precise taxonomy of concerns of the structural film (especially structural film in Britain) that expands on Sitney's list of common features of structural films:

1. Concerns which derive from the camera: its limitations and extensive capacities as a time-based photographic recording apparatus.

Limitations: frame limits, lens limits (focus, field, aperture, zoom), shutter

Extensions: time lapse, ultra high speed, camera movements (panning, tracking etc.)

[...]

2. Concerns which derive from the editing process and its abstraction into conceptual, concrete relationships of elements.

[...]

3. Concerns which derive from the mechanism of the eye and particularities of perception.

[...]

4. Concerns which derive from printing, processing, refilming and recopying procedures; exploration of the transformations possible in selective copying and modifications of material.

[...]

5. Concerns which derive from the physical nature of film; awareness of the reality of the material itself and its possible transformations into experience and language; celluloid, scratches, sprockets, frame lines, dirt, grain.

[...]

6. Concerns which derive from the properties of the projection apparatus and the fundamental components of sequential image projection; lamp, lens, gate (frame), shutter, claw and the screen.

[...]

7. Concern with duration as a concrete dimension.

[...]

8. Concern with the semantics of image and with the construction of meaning through language systems.

[...]

Note that Le Grice turns Sitney's devices into the film's subjects: this accords with the British theorist's assumption that material and form are the subjects of structural films – and, even more, that modernism in the arts is defined by self-reflexivity. According to this conception, which Paul Sharits shared (see "Words Per Page") self-reflexive devices serve the same end as the use of abstract forms: twentieth-century artists often used quotidian subject matter in tandem with self-reflexive devices to shift attention from the object-matter of the work to its construction. In this way, they emphasised artworks' autotelic character.

² Capitalisation in original. Olson immediately adds the “corollary” that captures Sitney’s point exquisitely: “that right form, in any given poem, is the only and exclusively possible extension of content under hand”.

³ In suggesting that the process of the film’s being made evolves the form, Sitney pointed out the relation “the lyrical” and “the mythopoieic” film have to the Open Form poetry of Robert Duncan and Charles Olson. (*Visionary Film* propounds the thesis that the American avant-garde cinema is a Romantic practice. Open Form poetry was really a development of the Romantic tradition of American poetry: to point out the relationship between Open Form poetry and the formal cinema was a way of highlighting the Romanticism of the American avant-garde cinema.) Sitney’s reference to the mythic character of the content of the formal film must be understood in this context – as must be the close proximity of that assertion to his statement that the formal cinema works by recurrences, antithesis and overall rhythm: Sitney’s assertion that the content of formal films is mythic in character stakes the claim that the formal film activates a primitive mode of consciousness. Northrop Frye, too, pointed out that the oracular, meditative, irregular, and essentially unpredictable rhythm of the lyrical evoked a dreamlike, or mythic way of thinking (see Frye 1957).

⁴ Note that Sharits’ repudiation of representation in favour of objecthood are apposite to his films, but not to the work of all structural filmmakers. I point out in *Image and Identity* that Michael Snow has insisted on creating forms that reconcile representation and “objecthood”.

⁵ These features can often be thought of as being under the control of parameters that range over a set of discrete values. This is how Ernie Gehr treats the zoom’s focal length in *Serene Velocity*.

⁶ I do not mean to say by this that serial music is analogous to the structural film. Usually in serial music, when a systematic approach is taken, the system is not evident. The hallmark of the structural filmmakers approach is to make evident that some systematic process has been used (though discerning the features of the system can be quite difficult sometimes). In this regard, structural film has much more in common with the “process music” of the early Steve Reich than with serial composition. Reich and Snow recognised the affinities of their work, and Reich wrote a piece about *Wavelength* shortly after it appeared (it is reprinted in Shedden 1995) while Snow occasionally appeared in ensembles playing Steve Reich’s music (e.g. *Pendulum Music*).

⁷ Maciunas’ reference to the “Coop” and the “Cinematheque” are to the New York Film-makers Co-operative and the Film-makers Cinematheque, avant-garde cinema institutions that had close relations to *Film Culture* magazine, largely through the magazine’s owner and editor-in-chief, Jonas Mekas. I point out that Maciunas’ “article” is in the form of a table, setting out the various “errors” Sitney committed, the “category” to which the error belonged, the “cause of the error”, and the “proposed correction of the error”.

⁸ Michael Snow's aesthetic ideals, for example, were massively influenced by Marcel Duchamp. I have written at length on the influence that Marcel Duchamp had on Michael Snow (see Elder 1995).

⁹ A shift authorised by understanding the works' relation to those practices and institutions we call the art world. Duchamp analysed those relations keenly.

¹⁰ Duchamp referred to the transformation, in rather poetic, occult (alchemical) language, at a Convention of the American Federation of the Arts, held in Houston, Texas in 1957, at a panel at which he appeared along with Rudolf Arnheim and Gregory Bateson. Duchamp said:

The creative act takes on another aspect when the spectator experiences the phenomenon of transmutation: through the change from inert matter into a work of art, an actual transubstantiation has taken place, and the role of the spectator is to determine the weight of the work on the aesthetic scale. (Tomkins 1996: 510)

¹¹ That is one reason that irony is a central topic of aesthetics. Irony, too, highlights the change in mode of apprehension that takes place when something comes to be apprehended in the mode of aesthetic understanding.

¹² That is not to say that this issue alone gave the matter of "stupidity" (*la bêtise*) the importance it had to twentieth-century artists – not at all! But that issue did raise the matter of "stupidity" in a specific, and especially important, manner.

¹³ Rajchman, to be exact, offers a more restricted statement of his thesis than I have used, confining his remarks to Warhol, Deleuze and Foucault. But I do believe his insight can be generalised. The Futurists explicitly condemned modern society in exactly these terms. The Dadaists, and later, the Surrealists, and then the Abstract Expressionists, pushed for an expansion of experience because, they contended, a constricting rationalism had engendered a true "stupidity" about the life force. The Cubists sought to present the active, hard-edged truth about the process of perception, which the Impressionists had reduced to a passive "stupidity" about our means for apprehending moments of flux. And the Minimalists and Conceptual artists used dense, and generatively potent, ideas to formulate their art.

¹⁴ Actually, John Cage had anticipated the Minimalists' challenge to the compositional ideal; but the Minimalists represented the first broad movement that challenged that ideal.

¹⁵ The Morris citation is from "Notes on Sculpture" and the Judd citation is from "Specific Objects".

¹⁶ Fried uses the example from Kenneth Noland to illustrate the interrelation between depicted shape, literal shape and shape as such :

In those paintings – the asymmetrical chevrons of 1964 – the exact dimensions of the support become important in this sense: that if the edge of the bottommost chevron did not *exactly* intersect the upper corners of the canvas, the relation of *all* the chevrons – that is, of the depicted shapes – to the shape of the support became acutely problematic and the ability of the painting as a whole to compel conviction was called into question. (Fried 1998b: 80)

¹⁷ Fried later dismissed the term “deductive structure” – in *Jules Olitski: Paintings* (1967) – and in its place offered the concept of “acknowledgement”. Fried came to recognise that his earlier formulation could be taken as implying that whenever the elements of a structure are aligned with the frame edge, that structure could be taken as deductive. The advantage of the term “acknowledgement”, Fried suggested, was that the structure must call attention to the shape of the support.

¹⁸ This emphasis on virtual depth relates to Hans Hofmann’s ideas about volume.

¹⁹ Not everyone agreed with Fried that Stella constructed his paintings from the edge towards the centre; and in fact some critics maintained exactly the opposite: that Stella’s paintings assume the centre as the focal point and (as far as the phenomenological effects of the paintings are concerned) the forms move outward from that centre towards the edges. William Rubin (1970) argued this in *Frank Stella* (see specifically p. 65); John Coplans did as well in his ‘Serial Imagery’ (1968) (see specifically p. 37).

²⁰ His striped paintings also avoided according priority to the centre.

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MINIMAL REQUIREMENTS OF THE POST-WAR AVANT-GARDE OF THE 1960S

TANIA ØRUM

Preliminary note about the term ‘neo-avant-garde’

Viewed from the twenty-first century, all of the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century are history. It scarcely makes sense to distinguish between a ‘historical’ avant-garde before the Second World War and a ‘neo-avant-garde’ after the Second World War in the way that Peter Bürger did in 1974. After thirty years of discussion it must be clear that Bürger’s terminology was an ideological manoeuvre intended to introduce a distinction between an assumed “original” or “authentic” avant-garde and a mere copy or fake repetition. The validity of such a conception is, of course, highly questionable.

For one thing, it would be difficult to establish from which point to date an “original avant-garde”, since historians have differed widely on this question.¹ And as we know from recent decades of historiographical discussion, historical traditions can neither be adequately described in terms of origins and copies (as Bürger does), nor in terms of progress and radicalisation – as implicit in Hal Foster’s redefinition of the term in *The Return of the Real*, where he claims that the neo-avant-garde “rather than cancel the project of the historical avant-garde” is in fact able to “comprehend it for the first time” (Foster 1996: 15). Instead of such linear Hegelian conceptions of history a more dynamic and multiple view of historical processes is called for in avant-garde studies.

As more recent research has uncovered, both the movements of the “historical avant-garde” and the post-war avant-garde are far more heterogeneous than assumed by Bürger or his terminological inheritance (see below).

For the sake of precision and in order to accommodate the actual multilinearity of the avant-garde tradition, it would thus be better for

the historian to specify which movements or currents and which periods are under discussion. I agree that there are marked historical differences between pre-war and post-war avant-garde movements, but I prefer the less ideological and more neutral historical terms of pre- and post-war. In this essay I shall thus avoid the term 'neo-avant-garde' and instead speak of the post-war avant-garde movements and more specifically of the avant-garde movements of the 1960s. At a closer look, even this more specific historical terminology is insufficient to take note of the geographical differences within the avant-garde movements of a certain period, which should be viewed not only from the perspective of the international centres, but as an ongoing multi-part dialogue among artists and groups from both centres and peripheries. In the post-war period this multi-part dialogue has participants from not only Europe and North America, but increasingly also from South America, Asia and Africa, whereas the Russian and Eastern European groups, which played a decisive part in the pre-war avant-gardes, have difficulties getting through the Iron Curtain until the end of the twentieth century.

To acquire a more comprehensive picture, the history of the avant-garde tradition in the twentieth century should include the multilinearity and multidimensionality of a global perspective. In this essay, however, I can only give a limited contribution by pointing to the example of the Danish avant-garde of the 1960s.

A comprehensive definition of minimalism?

In the Phaidon Press volume *Minimalism* (Meyer 2000), which brags of being "the most comprehensive and definitive sourcebook on Minimalism", the editor James Meyer defines minimalism or minimal art as an American avant-garde style which emerged in New York and Los Angeles in the 1960s and is represented by artists like Carl Andre, Dan Flavin, Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and Robert Morris. Minimal art, Meyer states, is mainly sculpture, typically consisting of single or repeated geometrical forms. Since these sculptures are built by craftsmen from instructions by the artists, every trace of feeling or intuitive choice is removed, in contrast to the expressive and gestural traces in the paintings and sculptures by the preceding Abstract Expressionists dominant in the 1940s and 1950s. Minimal works refer to nothing beyond their literal presence or existence in the physical world. Their materials appear as materials; colour (if used at all) is

non-referential. Often placed on walls, in corners or directly on the floor, it is an installation art which reveals the gallery as an actual place and makes the observer conscious of moving through this space (Meyer 2000: 15).

I have several comments on this definition: For one thing, it is an example of American parochialism, for it is quite evident that corresponding minimalisms evolve in Europe, even in outskirts like for instance Denmark, during the same period and based on local preconditions. It is, moreover, a mistake to represent minimalism as an exclusively sculptural phenomenon, or even as limited to the visual arts, since similar reductive tendencies make themselves felt in the other arts – as pointed out already by Barbara Rose, one of the earliest American art critics to analyse the phenomenon who invented the term “ABC Art”. In her essay Rose points out minimalist tendencies in dance, music, performance and film and also refers to the French *nouveau roman*. And as predecessors of the minimalist current of the 1960s she indicates artists from several art forms: Malevich and Duchamp, Gertrude Stein and Erik Satie (Rose 1965).

Minimal music has occasionally been related to minimalist visual art (Strickland 1993; Schmidt 2004),² whereas literature has rarely been labelled minimalist, but is instead called “concrete poetry” (rarely concrete prose), neo-realism, or “nyenkelhed” (i.e. new simplicity) in Scandinavia. Minimalist prose is frequently seen as an extension of the French *nouveau roman* from the 1950s and the early 1960s, although only some of the *nouveaux romans* share the minimalist programme of the 1960s.

I would agree with Barbara Rose that there is a common sensibility which unites minimalist works in different art forms and sets them apart from other currents in their own art form, so that for instance a minimalist text will have more in common with a minimalist sculpture or musical composition than with non-minimalist literature from the same period. The development into minimalism obviously takes specific paths in each art form, depending on their respective traditions. But there can be no doubt that music and the visual arts play a significant role as inspiration for the other arts. The minimalist movements in the visual arts, music and literature, in film and hybrid art forms of this period thus should all be seen as belonging to a common minimalist current in the 1960s.

The phases of minimalism

James Meyer distinguishes between an initial phase evolving towards minimalism from 1959-1963, a period of “High Minimalism” from 1964-67, and a period of canonisation and critique from 1967-1979.

As Meyer notes, the initial phase of reduction in the structure and technique of the art work is not completely new (2000: 18), but had already been explored by the historical avant-gardes, especially by the Russian avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s, notably by Malevich, Rodchenko and Tatlin. However, American artists, Meyer maintains, were not very well informed concerning their predecessors due to the suppression which affected Russian constructivism in both the USA and the USSR during the Cold War (2000: 18-20).³

In this respect the Danish Experimental School of Art⁴ had an advantage, since the school was founded not only by a visual artist connected to the constructivist tradition, which continued in Denmark in the 1940s and 1950s, but also by the art historian Troels Andersen, who was one of the first, if not *the* first Western art historian allowed to look at the works of the Russian avant-garde during his studies (of more acceptable Russian artists) in the Soviet Union in the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁵

So while the American minimalists draw on predecessors like Robert Rauschenberg (especially his white paintings from 1951 onwards), Jasper Johns (flag and stripe paintings from 1954, target paintings from 1955 and paintings of numbers from 1958-59) and especially Frank Stella (particularly the black paintings and stripe paintings from the late 1950s and early 1960s), the Danish minimalists are inspired by the Russian avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s and tend to view the work of their American contemporaries partly in the light of Russian art works and aesthetic/political discussions, while also continuing the tradition of European and Danish constructivism combined with Nouveau Réalisme and neo-dadaism or Fluxus. Parallel to the development of for instance Dan Flavin from assemblages and relief paintings in 1961 (an American parallel to European Nouveau Réalisme) to sculptures of neon tubes from 1963, the Ex-School artists develop from assemblage, collage, op-art and relief painting at the start of the School in 1961 to minimalist painting in 1962-63 and on to minimalist sculpture from around 1965-66.

The Experimental School of Art thus reaches the phase characterised by Meyer as “High Minimalism 1964-1967” roughly at

the same time as the American artists. And like the American minimalists they mostly produce both painting and sculpture.⁶

The multilinearity of the avant-garde

The Danish artists of course have the opportunity to study the work of the Americans during this period when American minimal art begins to appear in art magazines and the major exhibitions take place, which are noticed in both international and Danish art journals (whereas the Americans do not have similar access to for instance Danish art – hence the parochialism of some American artists and art critics like James Meyer). It should, however, be borne in mind that neither travelling opportunities nor the printing quality or size of photographs are comparable to the situation today. The first expedition to New York by three visual artists from the Experimental School of Art thus takes place in January 1967, at which point the Danes are mostly interested in happenings. It is clear from the writings of the Danish minimalists that they enter into dialogue with American artists in many ways. Examples of American minimalist painting and sculpture are discussed in the journals and meetings associated with the Experimental School of Art. And the poet and critic Hans-Jørgen Nielsen uses a wall sculpture by Donald Judd as a model in his demonstration of how to read minimalist poetry and prose.⁷ But on the whole, Danish minimalism can hardly be seen as an echo of American minimalism. It is a parallel phenomenon with its own preconditions and specific development.

This multilinear development and the corresponding trans-national contacts are indeed important characteristics of both the pre-war and the post-war avant-garde movements. Hubert van den Berg has described the pre-war avant-garde movements as made up of innumerable small groups and individuals who often disagree on vital points and can hardly be subsumed under any single common denominator, but who are nevertheless constantly in touch and see each other as parts of a common cause. These avant-garde groups together form what has been called “the historical avant-garde”, a rather loose and borderless entity which has been characterised differently by different historians, depending on which groups have been foregrounded. It may be a more fruitful approach, as van den Berg suggests, to see these groups as a network or rhizome rather than to view them as forming a single line of development (van den Berg

2005). And a similar multilinearity applies to the post-war avant-gardes that have easier access to international exchange of information, although this information tends to flow from the centres to the periphery and not the other way, so that generally artists in peripheral countries will be less parochial than artists from the international art centres. The Nordic countries, Japan and South America thus have lively avant-garde movements whose members travel to the international centres to participate in art activities there but also take part in local activities when possible.

Before World War II the Nordic avant-garde circles are small and are often received with considerable hostility at home, so that they have to modify the radical avant-garde features cultivated in the Nordic colonies abroad when they return to their native countries. During the Second World War the European CoBrA group nevertheless manages to keep going and its Danish branch profits from its seclusion and develops its own experimental style. After the war international contacts gradually become much easier. Foreign artists like Piero Manzoni or Arthur Köpcke come to stay in Denmark for a shorter or longer period, while Dieter Roth lives in Iceland, and members of the Vienna group of poets in Malmö in Southern Sweden. The Swedish poet and artist Öyvind Fahlström migrates to New York, while the Moderna Museet in Stockholm attracts many Nordic and international artists, and the Fluxus crowd goes everywhere. Some of these artists leave a strong mark: the Danish avant-garde of the 1960s would hardly be the same without the gallery and art activities of Arthur Köpcke for instance. And the communication networks enable faster exposure to international trends. But even so, local avant-garde movements still retain a strong local flavour and can rarely be seen as mere copies of international origins.

This multilinearity should be taken into account when writing the history of the avant-gardes. A purely national approach hardly makes sense, whether in terms of the historical centres of art or of the marginal countries and outskirts. Another example is the birth of literary minimalism or concrete poetry in Brazil, Switzerland and Sweden around the same time (1954-1955) and the very active worldwide network of contacts and publications connecting concrete poets until this day.

The common elements of these overlapping networks, however, still make it possible to apply critical concepts developed in one national context to other parts of the network as well. Because of the shared historical horizon of the 1960s, American and Danish

minimalists have common characteristics which separate them from their precursors in the pre-war avant-garde, notably a wish to be “literal”, “specific” and “objective”, in opposition to the metaphysical and spiritual tendencies so prominent in the pre-war avant-gardes.⁸

Minimalism as a continuation of and a break with modernism

As Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster have pointed out, minimalism is a continuation of modernist art and of the reductive tendencies active throughout the twentieth century, as well as of the phenomenological approach inherent in most modernism (Foster 1996: 42). Danish artists were no doubt influenced by this modernist development and by American modernist critics like Clement Greenberg. Their experiments aimed at finding out how little was really necessary to make a poem, a sculpture or a concert. But as Foster has argued, minimalism is no less a break with modernism, since it takes the aesthetic reduction to the media-specific minimum of each art form quite literally and thus “confuses the transcendental ‘presentness’ of art (which modernist theorists like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried insist on) with the mundane ‘presence’ of things” (Foster 1996: 50). This, as Foster suggests, is why minimalist literalism is in Michael Fried’s famous terms in “Art and Objecthood” “antithetical to art” and “incurably theatrical” (Fried 1967 quoted in Foster 1996: 51). By taking things literally, minimalism introduces the body of the spectator, actual space and time into the experience of art, and thus reduces artworks to mere objects as well as including in the art sphere a whole context deemed irrelevant by Greenberg and Fried. This spatial, temporal, phenomenological and potentially social context draws on what Fried diagnoses as “theatricality”— the performative and material dimensions which are central to all of the arts of this period.

Concrete poetry thus emphasises the materiality and the performative acts of language: the ways in which the sound of words, the visual shape of letters and their distribution on the page perform elementary effects often overlooked in the conventional literary focus on the content and the communicative functions of language. And these performative dimensions of language are often stressed by the actual performances of texts as sound compositions or visual choreographies.

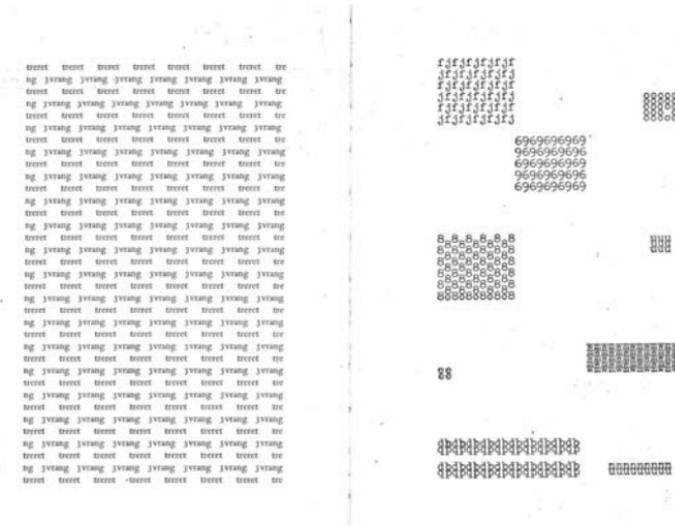


Fig. 1 and 2: Vagn Steen, “Knitted Poem” and “letter poem” from Vagn Steen’s book of concrete poetry *Digte? (Poems?)*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1964.

Happenings concentrate on the actual physical movements of the performers and the material qualities of their tools, objects and actions – thus drawing attention to the material elements and physical conditions underlying the narrative and the characters of conventional plays. Many happenings by the Ex-School circle can be seen as performative versions of visual art, poetry or music or cross-aesthetic versions of all of these, while also feeding into the performative dimensions of the individual arts or new cross-aesthetic experiments.

Minimal music aims at simplifying the structure of the music so that listeners can actually hear the score and follow the gradual unfolding of the composition (as in the Danish composer Henning Christiansen’s ultra-simplified compositions of the mid 1960s), or it explores the mental and physical effects of repetition, single notes kept for a long time or sounds played out of phase (as in Terry Riley’s early compositions) – thus testing the minimal requirements of a musical composition. Minimal music also investigates the performative capacities of everyday sounds, found phrases or snatches of spoken language which are substituted for musical instruments (as does Steve Reich), or it tries out the effect of combining a cello and an ordinary car horn (like the Danish composer Pelle Gudmundsen-Holmgreen), thus testing or crossing the borders between music and other art forms.



Fig. 3: Paul Gernes, *Striped Wall*, 1966. Charlottenborg, Copenhagen. Synthetic paint on masonite. Height: 9, 75 metres.

Painting reduces the complexity of the visual composition on the canvas to anonymous stripes of industrial colour on huge walls to be experienced as you climb the stairs (as in Paul Gernes' *Striped wall*, 1966), thus turning interest away from the feelings of the artist towards the movements of the spectator's body. Sculpture turns into single, non-symbolic objects or repeated forms, often big enough to make the passage through the room the performative point, or bland enough to require an effort from the spectators to make sense of the work.

The minimalist current in the arts thus shifts the emphasis from interior meaning to external movement, from depth to surface, and from the individual artist to the social space inhabited by the art work and the spectators. All the arts share the seeming "artlessness" of anonymous or everyday objects, "found" elements, readymades and clichés; they share the emphasis on materiality and the appeal to the audience to make sense of these non-expressive works by performing their own passage through the work – whether by turning the leaves of the book to make the letters come alive, by walking around boxes or through "anti-tank formations" (as the sculptural work of the Danish artist Peter Louis-Jensen "Structure 16 elements" was dubbed when first exhibited in 1966) or by generally forming their own interpretation of what the point of such reduced forms could be.⁹



Fig. 4: Peter Louis-Jensen walking through his “Passage”. Wood and masonite. Copenhagen, 1968.

Minimalism as a sensibility

Within his American perspective, James Meyer notes that minimalism is not a proper movement with a common programme, not one minimalism, but a number of partly overlapping minimalisms (2000: 18). This is true in Denmark as well. From a Danish perspective, I would suggest that minimalism is less a “new style” or a self-contained ism than a general impulse to strip away what are seen as superfluous institutional characteristics and unnecessary/metaphysical assumptions about art, the artist and the creative act, in order to arrive at a more impersonal kind of art, open to the performative activities of the audience and in step with contemporary cultural reality. This reductive effort is highly characteristic of the post-war avant-gardes, and in Denmark and other European countries develops gradually from an aesthetic critique with existential and political implications into an ideology critique leading to political activities.

In the Danish context, minimalism in the arts (especially in the visual arts and in music) is the result of a constructive attempt following the (self-declared) “destructive” phases of neo-realist and Fluxus experiments in the early 1960s.

The Danish composer Henning Christiansen (known internationally for his close collaboration with another ex-Fluxus

artist, Joseph Beuys) thus leaves Fluxus in 1964 to engage in more “constructive” collaborations with the poet Hans-Jørgen Nielsen and the visual artists from the Experimental School of Art – simultaneously crossing into other art forms such as visual poetry, performance, installation art and film.¹⁰ And for some of the visual artists in the Experimental School of Art, minimal art is an attempt to build new kinds of art “after zero”, i.e. after stripping away the metaphysical assumptions about art; open works that will have a more democratic role to play.

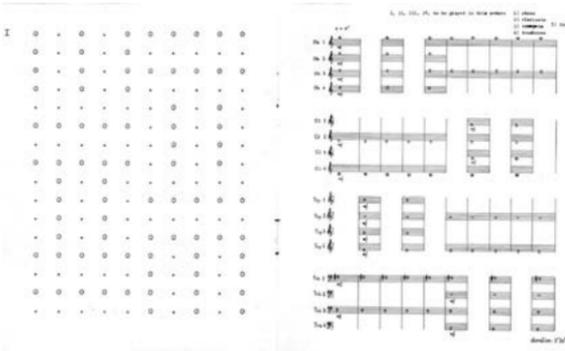


Fig. 5: The first page from the joint composition by Hans-Jørgen Nielsen and Henning Christiansen called *information/textures*. Copenhagen: Panel 13, 1965. The patterns of o's or zeros are by Nielsen, the notes by Christiansen.

Barbara Rose suggests that what keeps the overlapping minimalist currents together is a common sensibility, which is not just a continuation of what Clement Greenberg had defined as the “modernist reduction” with its constant formal self-reflection (Rose 1965: 278-81). The artists of the 1960s that Rose considers are, she says, “more related in terms of a common sensibility than in terms of a common style” (1965: 280-81). This collective new sensibility, belonging, Rose suggests (1965: 282), to a particular *Zeitgeist*, tends to prefer the factual to the symbolic, and ordinary objects to art objects, and to value “non-expressive”, “neutral”, “anonymous” and “impersonal” forms which must hence, she thinks, be read as statements of a philosophical, existential, social – or even mystical content. (I would want to add that the “mystical” content of the 1960s tends to be not the anthroposophical current of the pre-war period, but rather the Zen Buddhist or Wittgensteinian cult of emptiness and language games leaving the metaphysical questions unspoken.)

In his adoption of Judd's wall sculpture as a key to interpreting minimalist texts, Hans-Jørgen Nielsen suggests a similar reading to that of Barbara Rose: when looking at something as spare, reduced, anonymous and empty as Judd's boxes, you must ask: What can it mean to prefer the empty and the indifferent? Even to find it attractive or beautiful? The reading strategy he proposes is to first look at the surfaces of such visual art or texts and see how they have been made to be as lacklustre as they are, and next to perceive these lacklustre qualities as a positive statement – that is, to read them in the spirit of McLuhan: to read the medium as the message. I shall not go into the specific readings of single texts, but will just note that Nielsen sees this minimalist aesthetics as art signifying a certain “sense of life” or sensibility, as Rose calls it – art which is neither “pure formalism” (what he calls “the wrong kind of emptiness and anonymity”), nor what he calls “literary”, that is without formal relevance. But a kind of art which is “both formal and existential”, signalling a sense of “the break-down of the old human order” – that is, responding to the great technological, economic and cultural changes taking place in the Western societies of the 1960s, and trying to revise traditional modes of perception and interpretation.

Viewed from Rose's and Nielsen's contemporary perspective, the minimalist currents – which in retrospect are often seen as purely formalist experiments within the white cube of the art institution – are quite compatible with Peter Bürger's notion of the avant-garde as non-formalist movements intent on changing the world (or at least the conceptions of art, communication and artistic creation) rather than on developing a new style. This “common sensibility” is also one of the reasons why minimalism tends to encourage cross-aesthetic experimentation, which I would see as another defining characteristic of both the pre-war and the post-war avant-gardes.

Rosalind Krauss has noted that “minimal art [...] shares with pop art a common source”: the Duchampian readymade (another bridge from the post-war to the pre-war avant-garde). Both exploit cultural readymades, but whereas pop art uses pictorial elements which are already heavily culturally marked, minimalists use elements with a less specific content functioning as abstract components (Krauss 1993: 249). Both currents also tend to reduce the craft element of art, thus facilitating aesthetic cross-over into other art forms.

Within the Danish Experimental School of Art both pop and minimal art exist alongside each other – some artists work predominantly with pop elements, while others mainly use anonymous

industrial components, but there are also many instances of cross-over between the two tendencies. Indeed, the main exponent of the pop art line, the painter, sculptor and writer Per Kirkeby, has described minimalism as a “very broad basic assumption”, a common attitude or approach which he compares to “a great train which departed in the early sixties” and which had a “fluxus-coach, a box-coach, a pop-coach, a party-coach with music and dancing” as well as “an entire coach full of those of us who came from remote areas” (Kirkeby 1991: 84-5).

Kirkeby describes how this minimalist approach helps him tone down personal ambitions as an artist in favour of collective work, minimise the hand-made quality of his drawings and paintings and reduce the pretensions of a closed self-contained work of art by arranging his work in series, thus turning the individual drawings, paintings or sculptures into “points in a constant flow” or parts of a larger conceptual whole, with no separate, absolute value of their own (1978: 115-16).

Seen in this light, minimalism could be described as a general starting point or common denominator for the post-war avant-garde experiments in the 1960s.

Notes

¹ While Renato Poggioli for instance dates the avant-garde back to the 19th century, but with roots stretching back to romanticism, William Gass takes the term avant-garde to apply as far back historically as to the literary movement surrounding the poet Ronsard in 16th-century France.

² Edward Strickland (1993) treats music and visual art in the same book, but separately. The Danish gold medal dissertation, *Minimalismens æstetik* (The Aesthetics of Minimalism) by Ulrik Schmidt (2004) is the first work that I know of to treat minimalist music and visual art together.

³ The writings of the American minimalists from 1964 onwards do, however, contain several references to Rodchenko and other artists of the Russian avant-garde, and suprematist and constructivist art was shown at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

⁴ For an introduction to this group of experimental artists see my paper ‘Means and Metaphors of Change’ in Scheunemann (2005): 311-24.

⁵ Troels Andersen thus wrote catalogue texts for the exhibition of Russian avant-garde artist at Moderna Museet, Stockholm, 1968, organised and edited the catalogue for the

Malevich exhibition at Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1970, as well as publishing English and Danish translations of Malevich's writings from 1915 to 1922.

⁶ After the exhibition "Primary Structures" in 1966 which launches minimalism to a broader public, American critics tend to focus on sculpture, but important critics like Alloway and Lippard continue to see painting as relevant to minimalism. Lawrence Alloway thus publishes his book on *Systemic Painting* in 1966, while Lucy Lippard writes about monochromes and "shaped canvases".

⁷ See Hans-Jørgen Nielsen's essay 'Fortolkning i entropiens tidsalder' ('Interpretation in the age of entropy') (1969). Nielsen speaks of Judd's work as a sculpture, whereas Judd himself only refers to his works as "untitled" and generally tends to avoid the term sculpture, which is freely used by the Danish minimalists.

⁸ See Benedikt Hjartarson (2005).

⁹ As Rosalind Krauss has shown, minimalism implies a refusal of interiority and illusionism which amounts to a "rejection of an ideal space that exists prior to experience [...] and of a psychological model in which a self exists replete with its meanings prior to contact with its world" (Krauss 1993: 259). Instead, meaning is "seen as arising from a public, rather than a private space" (262), in which the bodies and minds of the spectators engage in communication with the art object.

¹⁰ Fluxus cannot be defined as a destructive movement. When the first Fluxus concerts in Copenhagen take place in 1962, arranged by Arthur Köpcke and the Association of Young Composers (DUT), they are announced as playful cross-aesthetic performances. The open, playful and experimental approach is stressed by both early and later adherents. However, some early Fluxus practitioners leave the movement around 1964 for various, often personal, reasons: in the USA Dick Higgins and others choose to define themselves as intermedia artists rather than as part of Fluxus because they disagree with Maciunas' attempt to regulate the movement. In Denmark the Fluxus label is appropriated by Eric Andersen who quarrels with everyone else. Some of the Danish artists who leave Fluxus at this point declare that they now want to turn to more constructive activities, trying to build new kinds of art rather than questioning the concept of art. Several of these artists in Europe as well as in America later rejoin Fluxus. The Experimental School of Art define their early experimental work in 1961 and 1962 as "destructive", i.e. as an attack on standard conceptions of the artwork, the creative process and the art institution.

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THE “RUPTURA” PROCLAIMED BY BRAZIL’S SELF- STYLED “VANGUARDAS” OF THE FIFTIES

CLAUS CLÜVER

The voluminous discussion about what has come to be called the “historical” avant-gardes and about the by now no less historical movements of the fifties and sixties, precariously labelled “neo-avant-gardes”, has been characterised by a concentration on developments in Western Europe, minus the Iberian peninsula. In the case of the earlier avant-gardes, it has increasingly also included Russia, and in considering developments that began around mid-century, much attention has inevitably been paid to the USA. But the Latin-American avant-gardes have been largely ignored in the international discourse.¹ The numerous publications devoted to them over the past three decades, including collections of manifestos and extensive bibliographies, most of them published in Europe or the US, several in English, testify to the lively interest in these matters among Hispanists and Luso-Brazilianists,² but also to the limiting consequences of the compartmentalisation of academic discourse, most severely in literary scholarship. This restrictive perspective, which has kept Iberian and Latin-American developments beyond the scope of most international investigations of the avant-gardes, is in a different sense also evident in many publications concerning Central and South America. Besides being almost exclusively concerned with the “historical” avant-gardes, they deal – with few exceptions (e.g., Ávila 1975; Jackson 1998) – only with literary movements, even though, to cite one example, the crucial event designed to declare Brazil’s cultural emancipation a hundred years after it gained political independence, the “Semana de Arte Moderna” (Week of Modern Art) held in São Paulo in 1922,³ had among its participants more visual artists than literary figures as well as the composer Heitor Villa-Lobos and other musicians. Similarly, the only detailed study to approach developments in the fifties and sixties in Brazil within the framework of the avant-garde discourse, Gonzalo Aguilar’s *Poesia concreta brasileira: las vanguardias en la encrucijada modernista* (2003), focuses on only one of the significant

facets, the literary (but see note 31 below). These approaches, limited to traditional disciplinary boundaries, reflect the overall tendency of the avant-garde discourse to restrict the focus to movements and individual contributions in the visual and literary arts while paying only minor attention to architecture, music, dance and other performance arts, usually treating these separately from the main body under investigation.

The neglect of the Latin-American vanguards in the predominant discourse has led to a myopic view not only of the varieties of manifestations in different socio-cultural contexts but also of the criteria by which the earlier avant-gardes and those of the decades after the mid-century point have been theorised. The Eurocentric perspective has disregarded aspects of reception, transformation and refunctionalisation in conditions most easily understood as post-colonial, still strongly prevalent in the earlier decades (in a more mitigated form even in the US) and not much abated when new avant-gardes arose in the fifties and sixties in countries that still like to think of themselves as part of the Third World.

While some publications with a continental scope have limited themselves to the Hispanic-American avant-gardes (e.g., Verani 1986), thus excluding Brazil,⁴ there has been a general insistence on treating the vanguards of the 1920s and 30s as an integral Latin-American phenomenon⁵ and on establishing criteria for viewing them as such. Merlin Forster and David Jackson (1990: 5–10) see two “interrelated tensions” against which to examine a whole “series of oppositions” or “polarities”: a “search for independence” and a “search for modernity”. The cultural dependence was much harder to overcome than the consequences of political dependence, especially

in literary expression [where] the hegemony of the standard European languages made clear, well into the twentieth century, the dominating relationship of center to periphery, of mother country to colonized area. (1990: 6)

The search for modernity still evidenced the traditional dependence on European models, but besides a much more rapid absorption made possible by accelerated communication, that process involved transformation:

Latin American literature and culture once more displayed their fundamental acquisitive process, or “cannibalism” as Oswald de Andrade would insist: the models of Europe were

ingested, digested, and used as energy source for an ultimately different expression. (1990: 6)

Alfredo Bosi, who could see these vanguards collectively as a “cultural system” only in terms of a “mosaic of paradoxes” (1995: 19), discovered at its base a “dialectic of the *reproduction of the other* and the *self-exploration* that moves every colonial and dependent culture” (20). Juxtaposing some of the most prominent writers, he inquired:

What did they receive from their intimate knowledge of Italian and Russian Futurism, German Expressionism, French Surrealism? The desire for a new intellectual and expressive experience that would set them immediately apart from the half Naturalist, half Parnassian clichés of the *belle époque* and send them in search of the Brazilian, Peruvian, or Argentine “character” or “non-character”: an adventure pregnant with both aesthetic and profoundly social and political implications. (1995: 24)⁶

There have as yet been no comprehensive studies of the Latin-American avant-garde movements of the fifties and sixties. It remains to be seen, therefore, whether critics and historians will insist on the possibility of constructing a similarly integrative perspective – especially if this construction will finally include avant-garde phenomena in all the arts. I shall restrict my investigation here to Brazil.

Brazilian *modernismo*

In order to trace the relations of the Brazilian avant-gardes of the fifties and sixties to the earlier movement, internally known as *modernismo*, it is necessary to highlight those of its features that are of particular relevance for this study. Individuals associated with the movement apparently did not use the label “vanguardia”; but in Latin-American contexts it has come to be referred to as the Brazilian avant-garde so as to avoid confusion of that specific *modernismo* with Western “Modernism” and because scholars have as yet paid little attention to the later avant-gardes as such, although the participants in the later movements actually did apply the term to themselves.

The collective presentations of the Week of Modern Art, “a watershed in the culture and the arts of Brazil” (Schwartz 1995: 32), were the culmination of hotly discussed exhibitions and publications

during a few preceding years, and most of the decisive events, publications, proclamations and polemics that mark Brazilian *modernismo* occurred during the 1920s. A documentary study places the “1st Modernist Period” from 1917 to 1929; Gilda de Mello e Souza delimits “the heroic period of the installation of modern art in Brasil” by exhibitions held in 1917 and 1931,⁷ and a similar time-span is frequently accepted for the literary arts, whereas it does not apply to developments in architecture and music.⁸

The later generation had to deal primarily with the legacy of two minds that shaped and dominated the movement (and happened to have the same last name): Mário de Andrade (1893–1945) and Oswald de Andrade (1890–1954) – poets and novelists both, theorists and polemicists, collaborators and also antagonists. In 1942, Mário de Andrade offered a much cited retrospective analysis of the “movimento modernista”, which he called “a rupture, an abandonment of principles and attendant techniques, a revolt against what was the national intelligence” and “the creator of a revolutionary state of mind and of a sense of demolition” that prepared the way for the subsequent socio-political changes. Synthesising its achievements, he stated:

What characterizes this reality imposed by the modernist movement is the fusion of three fundamental principles: the right to permanent aesthetic research; the effort to bring the Brazilian artistic intelligence up-to-date; and the establishment of a national critical conscience. (qtd. in Iglésias 1975: 16–17)

The participants in the movement rebelled in works and words against the governing rules and aesthetic conventions, the established modes and genres of representation and the dominant expectations about the nature and function of art – all of which had been based on models imported from abroad, on the traditions and nineteenth-century movements of Europe’s cultural capitals (and hardly those of the former mother country which was itself following the lead of Paris, mostly), traditions that were being ruptured there by revolts in all of the arts. Many of the *modernistas* were members of the upper class with direct experience of the immediate avant-garde manifestations abroad (Mário was an exception), a few artists were European immigrants, and there were important visitors from Europe: Darius Milhaud, Blaise Cendrars, Marinetti, Le Corbusier. The new works exhibited, published or performed were still deeply indebted to European models, but to those representing the modern, the art of the future⁹ – and they came to be motivated increasingly by a conscious

tendency of artists, writers and also composers to transform these new ways into something of their own, not only in terms of individual self-expression, but as an expression of their cultural identity and their Brazilian experience.

These ideas were also voiced in programs and manifestos, many of them in (often short-lived) little magazines. The “most revolutionary” of these (A. de Campos) was the *Revista de Antropofagia* (1928–29), which carried in its first number Oswald de Andrade’s “Manifesto Antropófago” and a sketch by Tarsila do Amaral (1886–1973) for her painting *Abaporú* (Cannibal), one of the key icons of the movement’s “primitivism”. The manifesto’s ironic, aggressive, epigrammatic style did not permit any coherent elaboration of the metaphor of “cannibalism”. In 1975, Augusto de Campos made this comment on the concept and its relation to Oswald’s own work:

An important connotation derived from the concept of “anthropophagy” is the idea of a “cultural devouring” of the techniques and information of the overdeveloped countries in order to elaborate these autonomously, converting them into “export products” [. . .]. A critical attitude, put into practice by Oswald, who nourished himself on European culture in order to produce his own disconcerting creations that contested that very same culture. (A. de Campos 1978: 124)¹⁰

While Oswald used their native ancestors’ cannibalistic encounters with the colonisers as a metaphor for his ultimately utopian vision, Mário de Andrade pioneered a discovery of the roots of Brazilian culture, which resulted in a new “nationalist” tendency. It led to an appreciation of the kindred absorption and transformation of European models by eighteenth-century Baroque architects, sculptors and painters in the state of Minas Gerais (to which the later generation of avant-gardists would add the discovery of Baroque writers and composers; cf. Ávila 1980) and to a study of folklore and popular culture for themes, artistic modes and techniques, instruments and physical materials. Even the imitation of European artists’ “primitivism” turned into literary and visual images celebrating their own multi-cultural roots – part of the colonial legacy. Indians and Blacks as well as immigrants from all parts appear in modernist depictions and descriptions based on observation and personal memory.

It is this programmatic inclusion of Brazil’s ethnic variety and of provincial settings (besides a new view of the urban environment) as well as of folkloric motifs that characterises much of the modernist

production. It is stylistically diverse, usually showing traces of the idioms adopted from abroad but with a marked tendency for developing their own characteristic style and also a penchant for experimentation, for “aesthetic research”. Mario’s and Oswald’s poems and narratives strove for a new and distinctly Brazilian language, and especially Oswald experimented with literary form and language as such (cf. Jackson 1978). Emiliano Di Cavalcanti (1897–1976) was the most prominent artist to create striking images in the nativist vein; he and Tarsila also illustrated Oswald’s and Mário’s publications. Mario had been set on his new course by encountering the work of Victor Brecheret (1894–1955; Amaral 1972: 288) who, born and trained in Italy, was to become the movement’s outstanding sculptor. But no artist showed any consistent and programmatic interest in non-representational art; a few individual pieces showed experiments with abstract-geometric ideas, a few otherwise definitely representational works had geometric background patterns, and similar patterns were used in interior decorations or designs for carpets, sidewalks and for the stage (Amaral 1998: 31–45).

The outstanding composer was Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887–1959). Gilberto Mendes, a representative of the musical avant-garde of the later generation, considered him to be the only true “inventor”; in his view, the Week of 22 led to

an erroneous and disastrous interpretation of what “Brazilian music” should be. The nativist sentiment inspired by the Week resulted in great creativity in other fields. But in terms of music it ended up in redundancy, simply making use of the folkloric agenda within the schemes of classic-romantic forms. (Mendes 1975: 131)

Villa-Lobos, on the other hand, whose work Mendes likened to that of another typically American composer, Charles Ives, was intent on creating “sound events”, exploring “the combinatory possibilities of the new sound he was inventing” – where the folkloric element was one among others (132). And in his best compositions he explored effects, especially in timbre and instrumentation, that were to become dear to the *neue Musik* of later decades.

But Webern’s *Klangfarbenmelodie* and Schoenberg’s serialism were not taken up in Brazil until the end of the 1940s, after the War.

Modernismo was essentially a metropolitan phenomenon, centred in São Paulo, a city whose wealth was largely based on coffee exports and a rising industrialisation, but which was not the political or the intellectual centre of the country. It was in many ways still provincial,

with no professional critics and lacking any space where only artworks could be exhibited; had the Week occurred in Rio de Janeiro, it might not have evoked half the scandal. But in 1929 the New York stock exchange crashed, and the coffee market collapsed. In 1930 there was a (modest) revolution in Brazil, and Getúlio Vargas came to power, a populist dictator who ruled for fifteen years. Along with him there triumphed an “authoritarian modernism with a positivist view” which, from 1937 on, “sought to place artistic creation at the service of a grandiloquent, nationalistic, Fascist-inspired policy, under the auspices of the New State” (Araujo 1997: s.p.).

Developments in Russia, Germany and Italy had disastrous effects on the arts, and so did the War. In assessing the new post-War avant-gardes in Europe and South America, these profound disruptions as well as the decelerated flow of communications during that time must be taken into account. Both in Europe and in Brazil, many of the young artists had only vague and incomplete information about what had happened in Europe in the earlier decades.

Brazil’s post-war avant-gardes

The “I Exposição Nacional de Arte Concreta” held in São Paulo from 4 to 18 December 1956 and transferred to Rio de Janeiro in January 1957 turns out to have been an extraordinary event. For the first time, artists belonging to two groups, one from São Paulo, “Ruptura”, the other from Rio, “Frente”, all of them engaged in developing a constructivist, abstract-geometric art which they now decided to call “Concrete”, exhibited their work together. But what was truly a “first” was the inclusion of poster-poems by six poets, also from the two cultural centres, who had likewise recently decided to use the label “Concrete” for the texts they were creating. An issue of the magazine *Arquitetura e Decoração* (No. 20, Dec. 1956) served as exhibition catalogue and carried programmatic statements as well as reproductions of artwork and poems. The exhibition attracted some attention in São Paulo and created a very polemical debate in the newspapers and feuilletons of Rio de Janeiro that was to last for months.

1. “Rupture” in the visual arts

Valéria Piccoli’s detailed chronology from 1945 to 1964, included in the large, bi-lingual volume on Brazilian constructivist art compiled

by Aracy Amaral (1998), carries valuable information about related events both in Brazil and abroad. It makes clear that the end of World War II and the fall of Getúlio Vargas in 1945 marked the beginning of a series of exhibitions that brought information about major artists of the earlier European vanguards whose work had been inaccessible. It pays attention to developments in Europe and other Latin-American countries, especially Argentina, that were related to constructivism and became known in Brazil, and lists the immigration or visitation dates of influential individuals. It indicates 1948 as the year when Brazilian artists who were later connected with the constructivist movement, almost all of them born in the 1920s, began work in that vein, a date confirmed by Amaral's essay on "The Advent of Geometric Abstraction in Brazil" (1998: 29–63), which points to a number of precursors. A major event was the inauguration in 1951 of São Paulo's biennial international exhibitions. The 1st Biennial consecrated abstract art by awarding the First International Prize to a sculpture by Max Bill and giving other awards to young abstract-geometric Brazilian artists:¹¹ "From then on", wrote Ferreira Gullar, "abstract art would replace [...] the figurative art of Portinari, Segall, Di Cavalcanti, Bruno Giorgi, Guignard and Pancetti", major representatives of the modernist heritage (Gullar 1998b: 144). The first exhibit of the "Ruptura" group took place in 1952;¹² the "Grupo Frente" had its first collective show in 1954, followed by a second in 1955, with even more participants.¹³ The use of the label "Concrete Art" for their joint exhibition in 1956 indicated, among other things, the importance they attached to the principles formulated and practiced by Max Bill.¹⁴

The names chosen by both groups declare their self-perceived avant-garde status, working in the "front"lines to achieve the necessary "rupture" with "the old" – "there is no more continuity!" – but also rejecting "the hedonistic non-figurative art spawned by gratuitous taste" in favour of "all the experiments directed at the renovation of the essential values of visual art (space-time, movement, material)", according to the 1952 "Manifesto Ruptura" (rpt. 1998; trans. CC). Waldemar Cordeiro, the group's polemical theorist, opened his programmatic statement in the 1956 catalogue by asserting: "Sensibility and the object encounter, at the hands of the avant-garde, a new correlation". He continued:

Art represents the qualitative moments of sensibility raised to thought, a "thought in images". [...] The universality of art is the universality of the object. [...] Art is different from pure

thought because it is material, and from ordinary things because it is thought. [...] Art is not expression but product. [...] Spatial two-dimensional painting reached its peak with Malevich and Mondrian. Now there appears a new dimension: time. Time as movement. Representation transcends the plane, but it is not perspective, it is movement. (Cordeiro 1956: s.p.)

Cordeiro (1925–1973) entitled many of his paintings of that time “Visible Idea”;¹⁵ Luis Sacilotto (1924–2003) called all of his works “Concretions”, which he numbered and dated; other titles referred to the temporal dimension emphasised by the programmatic statement, such as *Spiral Triangle* (Maurício Nogueira Lima, 1930–1999) or *Circles with Alternating Movement* (Hermelindo Fiaminghi, 1920–2004). The impersonality of their work made it at times difficult to recognise authorship, but differences existed, and these artists would all eventually follow different directions; however, for a number of years the “Ruptura” group would quite faithfully adhere to their program. The materials of their paintings (straight or curved lines, geometric shapes, a few carefully balanced colours used for structural effect) were reduced to a minimum, every work followed a clear plan which, like much of Bill’s pictorial and graphic work, could be formulated as verbal instructions to be executed by someone else; and a realisation of the rules governing each “visible idea” was a necessary part of the viewer’s experience and understanding. The effect of all of their work, much of which was undertaken as a kind of “research”, was indeed a sense of movement, differently induced in each case and mentally executed by the viewer. “The painters, designers and sculptors from São Paulo not only believe in their theories but also follow them, at their own risk”, wrote the influential critic Mário Pedrosa in response to the exhibition, contrasting them with the artists from Rio, whom he considered “almost romantics” by comparison (1977: 136). Indeed, Gullar, who was to become their major spokesman, confirmed:

The Grupo Frente did not have at least two of the characteristics that are common to avant-garde movements: the defense of a single stylistic orientation and a theoretical underpinning. [...] Nevertheless, it played a role in the renovation of Brazilian art. (Gullar 1998b: 143)

While much of the short characterisation above also applies to the work exhibited by the ten artists from Rio in 1956, their paintings tended to be less rule-governed and, above all, more given to

exploring the sensual effects of colour, as Pedrosa emphasised. In the extended debate following the exhibit, Cordeiro attacked the work of the Rio artists for being “without structural rigor and – principally – without chromatic rigor”, and he assumed doctrinaire positions in polemic exchanges with Gullar, which led ultimately to a break between the two groups. In March 1959, Gullar launched “Neoconcretism” with an exhibition of work by visual artists and poets primarily from Rio and a lengthy manifesto in which he (with his fellow signatories) rejected the primacy of theory and the “mechanistic” and “rationalistic” turn allegedly taken by the Concrete artists and poets of the rival city (see Gullar 1998a).¹⁶ This is not the place to investigate their differences and the reasons behind the split. What matters is that some of the artists, while continuing their basically Concrete orientation, were beginning to take their work in a number of new directions. Paintings were turned into constructions (e.g., the seemingly bent pieces or “reliefs” created by Hélio Oiticica, 1937–1980, and displayed as hanging objects), new materials were introduced and old techniques, such as the woodcut, were explored to emphasise the materiality of the physical media employed (Lygia Pape, 1929–2004). Interestingly, movement was to play an ever greater part – but movement physically involving the viewer who had to manipulate the pieces. Gullar, Lygia Clark (1920–1988) and three others presented “livros-poemas” (book poems) in 1959, and Pape created wordless mobile “books”; Clark’s hinged metal “bichos” (beasties) could be folded and refolded. The Austrian immigrant Franz Weissmann (1914–2005), whose sculptures continued to follow the constructivist-geometric aesthetic, would create “modules” that could be rearranged. Amílcar de Castro’s (1920–2002) minimalist sculptures, formed by cutting and bending large thick circular or rectangular iron sheets, defied physical manipulation but demanded a mental tracing of their construction.

In 1960, perhaps to counterbalance its previous show of Neoconcrete art, the Museum of Modern Art (MAM) in Rio showed the work of six São Paulo artists in an exhibit called “Arte Concreta: Retrospectiva 1951–1959”; it basically signalled the end of their work as a group. A year later, after São Paulo’s Museum of Modern Art held the “III Exposição de Arte Neoconcreta” with work by twelve artists, mostly from Rio, that group dissolved (Piccoli 1998: 298 and 300). The “historic period of the Concrete movement” (Belluzo 1998: 95) was over. The participation of nineteen Brazilians, members of both groups, in the international exhibition “Konkrete Kunst” that

Max Bill organised in Zurich in 1960 (Piccoli 1998: 299), was the most massive representation of Brazilian Concrete art ever achieved outside the country.¹⁷

In 1977, Aracy Amaral organised a large retrospective shown in both cities, “Projeto Construtivo Brasileiro na Arte (1950–1962)” which included, besides paintings and sculptures, work produced by the São Paulo artists in their professional careers as visual designers, graphic artists and lay-outers, creators of posters, advertisements and logos, as architects and landscape designers (cf. Amaral 1977: 312) – work in which the “Neoconcretos” from Rio did not engage.¹⁸ This is to a large extent the effect of the industrial and commercial environment of Brazil’s economic capital (while the political capital was being moved from Rio to a newly designed and constructed place, Brasília), and it constitutes the most tangible legacy of the movement. In the mid-seventies I found the visual environment of the city saturated with its traces, from billboards and the logos of banks, commercial enterprises and the large construction companies to sidewalk designs, external and internal wall decorations and, most importantly, the visual programming of the new subway system. Even the buses were decorated in patterns I had not seen in Europe or the US, and for a number of years Brazilian postage stamps bore the imprint of the Concrete aesthetic.

Presenting itself as the new avant-garde, the Concrete movement of the fifties was the most prominent among the new non-figurative tendencies in post-WWII Brazil, and true to the nature of such movements it also developed a programmatic and theoretical basis in often polemical statements made by the artists themselves and by prominent critics such as Mário Pedrosa. Not only did it break with the figurative art of the modernist tradition, it also renounced the ambition to create a characteristically Brazilian art – although these artists may in the end have achieved just that in the new idiom they adopted and adapted from their encounter with works they came to know after 1945. Opting for an international orientation in a rupture with the nationalist heritage of *modernismo*, Brazilian artists embraced (once again) models imported from abroad but developed and transformed what they received, in what might be considered a “cannibalistic” attitude. But with a difference: while struggling to gain recognition internally they saw themselves as participants in the contemporary constructivist (and minimalist) activities pursued by artists in many parts of the Western world.

In a Brazilian perspective and in Brazil's cultural context Concrete art did produce a profound rupture, in spite of the new availability of the established international models in exhibitions and the collections of the new art museums.¹⁹ These Brazilian artists were making their own discoveries and conducting their own research into unfamiliar territory, and they changed the arts discourse and practice in the country.

2. Concrete poetry and the new international vanguard

Three of the six poets whose poster-poems were displayed side by side with the paintings and sculptures in the "National Exhibition of Concrete Art" of 1956 were from São Paulo, three from Rio. The *paulistas* were Décio Pignatari (b. 1927) and the brothers Haroldo de Campos (1929–2003) and Augusto de Campos (b. 1931), the *cariocas* Ferreira Gullar (b. 1930), Wladimir Dias-Pino (b. 1927) and Ronaldo Azeredo (b. 1937). The *paulistas* had (privately) published a slim magazine, *Noigandres*, with their own poems in 1952, the same year the Grupo Ruptura held its first exhibition. They had also made contact with Waldemar Cordeiro, and the interaction between the poets and the visual artists increased over the years. *Noigandres 2*, much delayed, was published in 1955, with work by only the two brothers; *Noigandres 3*, more substantial than the previous issues and with work by the three founders and the young *carioca* Azeredo, was launched at the opening of the exhibition in 1956. The next issue, published in 1958, was a portfolio edition with poems by the four printed on loose cardboard sheets, ready to be framed and hung. That year, another *carioca*, José Lino Grünewald (1931–2000), joined the group. In 1962, all five gathered their published and unpublished work in *antologia noigandres 5: do verso B poesia concreta* – which signalled the end of what they would later call "the heroic phase" of Concrete poetry in Brazil.²⁰

The first Concrete poems, in the group's retrospective account, were the six multicoloured texts of Augusto's "poetamenos" series, composed in 1953, but published only in *Noigandres 2*. Disregarding conventional grammar and syntax, they displayed their elements – phrases, words, syllables, single letters – inscribed in a rectangular field and, while still maintaining a linear progression, induced vertical and diagonal semantic connections by the affinity of the various colours in which these elements were printed. Each of the up to five colours was meant to be sonorised by a different voice, with the

intention of creating an effect analogous to Anton von Webern’s *Klangfarbenmelodie*,²¹ as an introductory note explained (rpt. in Campos, Pignatari and Campos 1987: 21). By 1957, the production of the Noigandres poets had reached the most characteristic form of the Concrete “ideogram”, as they called their texts. To a considerable degree, its characteristics can be described by the terms I used to indicate basic aspects of the paintings and sculptures of the Ruptura members – which is obviously the reason why they decided to exhibit their work together, under the Concrete label.²² Reducing their verbal material to a minimum, the poets were engaged in exploring its inherent possibilities by structurally exhibiting the interplay of its visual, aural and semantic properties. Because of the importance of semantics, they never worked with less than a word, although the word could be subjected to processes of fragmentation and permutation. The structure achieved by arranging the verbal elements in the space of the page according to a text-specific strategy can be considered as analogous to Cordeiro’s “visible idea”. No structural procedure is ever repeated; while construction is rule-bound, it is always tied to the semantics of the material in order to achieve what the poets would call an “isomorphism”, an iconic relationship between the verbal sign and its signified (see Clüver 2006). Arranged according to a spatial syntax, these seemingly simple texts would frequently allow for multidirectional readings and return the reader to the beginning; with the abolition of traditional linear progression the poems would establish spatio-temporal relations that linked them to the Ruptura paintings also in this respect. Eliminating any notion of a “persona” or self-expressive lyrical “I”, the Concrete poem was designed to be an “objeto útil”, a useful textual object to be contemplated and explored, “open”²³ enough to allow readers to “use” it according to their own ingenuity, but with the expectation that they would respect the rules of the game inherent in the structure.

The public reaction to the poems exhibited in 1956 was more polemical than that elicited by the visual art; it put Concrete poetry on the critical map. But the young poets had accompanied their production from the start with manifesto-like depositions and theoretical statements, first in interviews and since 1955 in contributions to the literary feuilletons of major newspapers, where much of the critical discourse about the arts was conducted in Brazil, as it still is. In *Noigandres* 4 of 1958 they included a “plano-piloto para poesia concreta”, their most widely translated programmatic text²⁴ that distilled many of their earlier pronouncements. In their

Teoria da Poesia Concreta of 1965 they assembled their most important critical texts and manifestos published between 1950 and 1960; it saw a third edition in 1987 but has never been published abroad, even though, in the judgment of Caroline Bayard, “[t]he historian of concrete poetry would look upon the Brazilian theoretical texts as the richest and most articulate contribution” (Bayard 1989: 22; qtd. in Perrone 1996: 60).

The “Pilot Plan” not only concisely laid out their poetic program, it also listed a range of “forerunners” with brief indications of what had particularly interested the poets in these individuals’ work as they searched for indications of the way the “critical evolution of forms” would have to take. On the literary side they referred to Mallarmé, Pound, Joyce, Cummings and Apollinaire (whose *calligrammes* were only partially known at the time), and generally to Futurism and Dadaism; to this they added the Brazilians Oswald de Andrade and João Cabral de Melo Neto. They mentioned “Eisenstein: ideogram and montage”. And they continued:

concrete poetry: tension of word-things in space-time.
dynamic structure: multiplicity of concomitant movements.
likewise in music – by definition a time art – space intervenes
(webern and his followers: boulez and stockhausen; concrete
and electronic music); in the visual arts – spatial, by definition
– time intervenes (mondrian and the *boogie-woogie* series;
max bill; albers and the ambivalence of perception; concrete
art in general). (Campos, Pignatari, and Campos 1987: 156;
trans. CC)

Always looking both for inspiration from and confirmation by innovative practices of the past, and cultivating the affinity of their work with contemporary trends in the other arts, the Brazilians developed a kind of poetry that was indeed “new” (cf. Pignatari 1987: 47–49). They broke with the poetic traditions that the preceding “Generation of 45” had tried to restore. They even declared the entire Western tradition of linear verse exhausted. But they consciously “evoked the heroic phase of the movement of 22, reaffirming its vanguardist and experimentalist spirit” (A. de Campos 1969: 74). At first they thought that this poetry was entirely their own – until in 1955, on a visit to Europe, Pignatari met Eugen Gomringer, Max Bill’s Swiss-Bolivian secretary at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm that Bill was directing, who had begun to compose “constellations” quite similar to the Brazilians’ “ideograms”. The label “Concrete poetry”, already used by the Noigandres poets, was

sanctioned in a trans-Atlantic baptismal act in 1956. Other individuals and groups doing similar work in different countries and languages discovered each other over the next few years. If we can speak of an international Concrete poetry movement, it was not founded but found.

Haroldo de Campos, who was later to discuss Concrete poetry as an example of the several “generic ruptures in Latin-American literature” (1977), wrote in 1960 in “Contexto de uma Vanguarda”:

[...] in our country, which has just given the world the highly significant example of the construction, in the middle of the West, of a new capital that is a landmark of both avant-garde architecture and urban planning, more than perhaps in any other, there exist the conditions for the production and consumption of an art that is truly contemporary, because commensurate, in terms of aesthetic information, with the people of today. [...]

For the first time – and this is said as an objective observation, without implying any value judgment – Brazilian poetry is completely contemporary, participating in the very formulation of an avant-garde poetry movement in both national and international terms, and not only feeling its consequences one or several decades later, as was the case even with the movement of 22. (H. de Campos 1987b: 152–53)

He added that “Our poetry has thus entered a phase of exportation” (154) – which by the time he made this statement had reached even Japan (cf. H. de Campos 1958), bolstered by a dynamic activity of contacts and exchanges and facilitated by the international transportability of the texts, which needed only a gloss, rather than translation, to be intelligible.

Looking back at the fifties, Augusto de Campos claimed on the back cover of the third edition of the *Teoria* that:

During the past 30 years, Concretism has profoundly changed the context of Brazilian poetry. It resumed the dialogue with the Modernismo of 22; it revised the country’s literary past from the perspective of the experimental and the inventive; it reevaluated marginalized writers like Sousândrade and Oswald de Andrade; and, by means of daring translations, it implanted a new tradition of creative translation.²⁵ (Campos, Pignatari and Campos 1987: back cover)

It was also the starting point of further developments towards what Philadelpho Menezes described as Brazilian “visual poetry”, which

took off in the sixties and to which the Noigandres poets contributed in their later work.²⁶ Three movements arose in reaction against the turn to the “constructive rationality” of a “mathematics of composition” proclaimed by Haroldo in 1957 (H. de Campos 1987c: 96–97) – in a theoretical position soon abandoned. In a 1972 textbook collection of the “principal avant-garde manifestos” of Europe and Brazil, Gilberto Mendonça Teles offered in the final section on Brazilian “Experimentalism”, besides the “plano-piloto”, the “Manifesto neoconcreto”, the “Manifesto-didático da poesia praxis” and a statement about the “Poema de processo”. The Neoconcrete poetic production was negligible, in contrast to the work of the visual artists connected with the movement. “Poesia Praxis” established itself as a derivative rival project to that of the Concrete poets and was, according to Teles, “more provincial than metropolitan” (248). On the other hand, he found the “Process Poem” movement

really revolutionary in our literature, or better, outside of our literature, because its principal objective is to overcome linguistic expression in order to get to other languages, that of painting, of sculpture and, occasionally, also of the word. (249)

While it presented itself as truly Brazilian and therefore avoided citing foreign authors (248), it seems to have shared some basic attitudes with the Fluxus movement, especially in its participatory aspects. It also integrated texts and procedures of products of popular culture, such as the comic book. Its leading spokesmen produced several theoretico-programmatic books with “vanguarda” in their titles (see Cirne 1975; Sá 1977; and Mendonça and Sá 1983), presenting Concrete poetry as the “fecho do modernismo”, the conclusion of *modernismo* (Mendonça and Sá 1983: 99–179), with their own movement as the truly new. But its theoretical positions appear not very clearly defined. A collection of statements and manifestos with many illustrations was published in 1971 (enlarged in 1973) by Wladimir Dias-Pino, who had participated in the 1956/57 exhibition with a “book poem” that contained more graphic signs than words (cf. Menezes 1994: 46–54); his extensive collection of Brazilian logos (1974) contained a kind of manifesto charging the poets of “Poema-Processo” and the artists working in advertising with “invent[ing] new registers” for “rewriting the inventory of the memory of a new civilization” (qtd. in Clüver 2005: 277). “The collective vanguard spirit of innovation instituted with concrete poetry lasted only through

the cycle of *poema processo*”, concluded Charles Perrone in 1996; but he went on to state: “Concretism, with its broader scope, continued to exercise greater influence on younger players throughout the following decades” (66).

3. New music, new cinema, new architecture

In his assessment of the legacy of the Week of 22, Gilberto Mendes used the Pound/Noigandres yardstick of “invention”, of providing new information, to measure the contributions of contemporary composers. He counted Villa-Lobos among those who,

each in his own way, helped to destroy the tonal system and consequently the predominance of melody, giving rise to the music of this second half of the century, made on the basis of noise, electronic sound, microtonal, non-discursive, made up of moments. (1975: 133)

In Brazil, “the chance for Brazilian music to recover lost time and find a place among the international avant-garde” (133) came with the arrival, right after the War, of Hans-Joachim Koellreutter and the information he brought about twelve-tone music and serial composition. In 1946 he formed a “Grupo Música Viva” that began to work according to these principles. But in 1950 the manifesto published by the group was violently attacked by the most influential composer at the time, Camargo Guarnieri (1907–1993), who condemned twelve-tone music along with pictorial abstraction, literary hermeticism, philosophical existentialism and scientific charlatanism as “cultural degeneracy” (qtd. by Mendes 1975: 133). The majority of the group’s members abandoned this course – information confirmed by Paulo de Tarso Salles, who further relates that the fifties were dominated by two kinds of musical nationalism, an aesthetic kind (Guarnieri, following in the footsteps of Mário de Andrade) and a political kind guided by Shdanov’s 1948 proclamation about “Socialist Realism” – even though musically one could not detect a difference (Salles 2005: 148–49).

But the lessons taught by Koellreutter and the information about new tendencies arriving from abroad (Pierre Boulez visited São Paulo in 1954, scores by Stockhausen were circulating) inspired a group of young composers who also found “support, and even aesthetic orientation, not in their own medium, but from [...] the Concrete poets of São Paulo [...] [who] contributed much to formulating the problems

of the new music” for young composers like Rogério Duprat (b. 1932), Damiano Cozzella (b. 1928), Willy Corrêa de Oliveira (b. 1938) and Mendes (b. 1922) himself (Mendes 1975: 134). They formed the “Grupo Música Nova”; associated with them was Luís Carlos Vinholes (b. 1933), who moved to Japan and became Brazilian cultural attaché in Tokyo. In 1963, they published their own manifesto in the new magazine created by the Noigandres poets, *Invenção*. Mendes gave an overview of their production from 1958 until the early seventies in his 1975 essay and a much fuller personal account in 1994, on which Salles based his brief discussion of the group (Salles 2005: 150–52). Mendes emphasised that originally they strictly adhered to the conventions of serialism, but eventually followed their own inspiration within the conditions available to them. Attending one of Stockhausen’s Darmstadt conventions on New Music they realised that material and performance conditions in Brazil were still too precarious to produce the kind of music advocated and practiced there.

The two-page manifesto “música nova”, signed by eight individuals, placed musical production in a much larger context and followed closely the model of the Concrete “pilot plan” of 1958. It sketched the “internal development of musical language” by listing styles and processes as well as names, ending with “schaeffer, cage, boulez, stockhausen”, and then subsumed the “actual state of the arts” under the label “concretismo”. It even aimed at an equivalent to the impersonal objectivity in Concrete art and poetry, announcing a “new concept of collective execution-creation, result of a program (the project, the written plan)” (“música nova” 1963: 5). Musically, it declared the “definitive defeat of frequency (the height of a note) as the only important element of the sound” and with it all the rules and conventions of functional tonality on the level of both micro- and macrostructures, setting as the new goal

the search for a direct language utilizing the various aspects of reality[. . .], in which the machine is included. extension of the creative process to the objective world (indetermination, inclusion of ‘aleatoric’ elements, controlled chance).

And it concludes:

brazilian culture: tradition of keeping internationally up-to-date (e.g., the actual state of the visual arts, of architecture, of poetry), in spite of economic underdevelopment, a backward agricultural structure and the condition of semi-colonial subordination. to participate means to liberate culture from

these (infrastructural) fetters and from the ideological-cultural superstructures that have congealed the immediate cultural past which was remote from global reality (and thus, provincial) and insensitive to the dominion of nature achieved by man.

mayakovsky: without revolutionary form there can be no revolutionary art. (“música nova” 1963: 6)

This last phrase had also been added in 1961 to the “plano-piloto para poesia concreta”.

The collectivity of musical production was never realised. While they shared a good many similar procedures, the work of Oliveira, Mendes and Linholes, the only ones to continue for years to work in the spirit of the “new music”, remained clearly distinguishable. They did not produce anything quite close to the compositions of their European and US-American contemporaries, even though they used chance procedures and graphic scores, visual projections and audience participation (and a soccer ball in Mendes’s *Santos Football Music*). The score for *Cidade/Cité/City* (1964) calls for soloists, a piano, one or more typewriters, 1 TV set, 1 slide projector, ventilators, a vacuum cleaner, among many other items; the “partitura-roteiro” (score-directions) published in *Invenção 5* (Mendes 1966/67) contains mostly written instructions, a common feature of these scores.

This composition is based on a poem by Augusto de Campos, another sign of the close contact between poets and composers. It started with staged multivocal “oralizations” of Augusto’s colourful “poetamenos” poems in 1954 (with Cozzella, before they had been published) and again in 1955. Beginning in 1958, Duprat, Oliveira, Mendes and Vinholes all set Concrete poems by the Campos brothers, Pignatari and Grünwald to music (Mendes 1975: 134–35), including a few that would seem to defy sonorisation.²⁷ Several of these, mostly purely choral compositions, were performed and recorded by the choral group Madrigal Ars Viva under Klaus-Dieter Wolff, whose involvement was as important as that of the Chamber Orchestra of São Paulo under Olivier Toni, which began performing the new music in 1958 (Mendes 1975: 134).

The group apparently disbanded mostly because Duprat and Cozzella decided to dedicate themselves fully to commercial music. But, as Mendes emphasised (1975: 135), Duprat gave valuable assistance in the revitalisation of Brazilian popular music by writing arrangements for the composers and performers Caetano Veloso (b. 1942) and Gilberto Gil (b. 1942) from the state of Bahia. This is another development demanding attention in the context of our

inquiry. One of the keenest observers and critics of Música Popular Brasileira (MPB) has been Augusto de Campos, whose *Balanço da Bossa*, a collection of reviews and discussions, was first published in 1968.²⁸ In his view Caetano's *Tropicalia* record, which he greeted enthusiastically in 1968, not only linked up with the contemporary musical avant-garde (even physically, because the arrangements were by Cozzella, Júlio Medaglia and Sandino Hohagen, all signers of the "música nova" manifesto) but also with the more rebellious legacy of *modernismo*: he called the record "oswaldiano, antropofágico, demistificador" (1993: 161) and gave plausible reasons for it. Consequently, Caetano, "who strikes out radically in the direction of invention" (the key word), assumed for him, "with Gil and the group from Bahia, the vanguard of our popular music" (159). It has frequently been observed that some of the lyrics are unthinkable without their acquaintance with Concrete poetic procedures.²⁹

But the increasing censorship and persecution under the military government that had come to power in 1964 forced Caetano and Gil, like many others, into temporary exile shortly thereafter.

It has been my goal to demonstrate the interaction of the visual arts, poetry and music – both "erudite" and popular – in what is generally considered the Brazilian avant-garde of the fifties – and in the case of music, also the sixties. I have not said anything about the spread of avant-garde activities beyond São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, except in the final glance at the musicians from Bahia. In fact, through the lens of Antonio Risério, the avant-garde in Bahia from the end of the fifties into the sixties offers a rather different picture, including other artists and also considerations of architecture, dance, and film. The best-known film-maker of Brazil's *cinema novo*, Glauber Rocha (1939–1981), was from Salvador, Bahia. But the first film to break with the dominant trends in Brazilian film-making and to set the stage for the "new cinema" was Nelson Pereira dos Santos's *Rio 40 graus* (1955), and it was in the style of Italian neo-realism. The course the new line was to take does not seem to have much in common with the avant-garde I have presented here, except that it originally oriented itself by a contemporary model from abroad, before it assumed very Brazilian features both in subject matter and style. But one can draw an interesting connection between *tropicalismo* and a film Pereira dos Santos (b. 1928) made in 1970, *Como era gostoso o meu francês* (*How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*), which literally takes up the theme of cannibalism and shows us a quasi-anthropological image of life among the Tupi in the sixteenth century – but on closer inspection

turns out to be a montage of highly ironical effects, offering a critical rewriting of the tale on which it is based and of all the European accounts of the Indians they were “colonizing”.³⁰

The most prominent and internationally best-known Brazilian phenomenon of the fifties, to which Haroldo de Campos applied the “avant-garde” label, has only been alluded to in my overview: the design and construction of a new capital. But it was in the minds of all the artists I have been dealing with. The plan of a city shaped like a bird with open wings, and the principal buildings that broke so emphatically with the International Style, playfully even offering iconic shapes that suggested a crown of thorns for the cathedral and the scales of justice for the two houses of congress, asserted a new language that was both contemporary and specifically Brazilian, especially in invoking the traditions of an earlier creative period in the country’s history, the Baroque, which had nowhere survived more abundantly in plastic documents than in the state of Minas Gerais (and which gained new appreciation because of the affinity the avant-garde discovered with the creative thinking that had shaped it). It was the state where Oscar Niemeyer first attracted attention with his sculpturesque designs. It was also the state most responsive to the Concrete project: for example, in 1963 its capital, Belo Horizonte, hosted the “National Week of Avant-Garde Poetry” with participation of all the Noigandres poets, Wladimir Dias-Pino, a number of local poets, and others.³¹ But space does not allow me to follow the spread of avant-garde ideas and activities to that and any other state – nor is there room to trace the rise of the new thinking in architecture.

Brazilian avant-gardes

I have constructed this survey with a view to drawing conclusions about the particular nature of Brazil’s avant-gardes both as they presented themselves and as they appear to the critical observer in the light of theories developed decades later. Those theories, as I stated at the outset, have never included considerations of the form and function of avant-gardes in the post-colonial conditions of Latin America. And yet, the consciousness of operating exactly in such conditions is the factor that appears to have dominated the projects and objectives of the Brazilian post-War avant-gardes just as much as those of the creators of *modernismo*, even though the country’s material situation had substantially changed, as had its sense of

cultural identity, in part because of the impact of the earlier avant-garde.

Two metaphors have emerged as the guiding themes of programs, procedures and pronouncements in the survey: “rupture” and “anthropophagy”. Intending and effecting rupture, I would argue, is the defining characteristic of every avant-garde. For those associated with the Week of 22, it meant breaking with the cultural hegemony of European traditions – by imitating Europe once again, but this time those European movements that were themselves breaking with traditions. And with a difference: the goal of adapting and transforming the new artistic languages and their presuppositions into something of their own, on a personal level and also, in the case of the most influential artists, into something with a peculiarly Brazilian voice, helping to shape a sense of cultural identity. Anthropophagy. The intended audience was essentially Brazilian – a metropolitan audience also addressed in *feuilletons* and little magazines.

The young artists, poets and composers who formed the avant-garde movements in the decade after the hiatus caused by World War II and after the collapse of the “New State” and similar repressive regimes in Western Europe (but not on the Iberian peninsula) once again felt the need to break with the established modes and norms; but this time it was in order to participate in what were perceived to be the major new tendencies of international artmaking. Their work, inspired by information and models eagerly sought from abroad and through contacts with contemporaries elsewhere on the continent and in Europe, constituted a profound rupture with the conventions and expectations of artistic production in Brazil. From an international vantage-point, the argument can be made that it held its own when measured against the work done in the culturally dominant centres. The Concrete poets were the only ones to “export” their products – to avant-garde circles abroad that only gradually gained broader recognition. With very few exceptions, the visual artists and composers were prevented from achieving the same, mostly because of Brazil’s peripheral position, which in turn resulted in critical neglect internationally.³² The debates took place internally, the audience remained largely Brazilian.

In 1980, Haroldo de Campos wrote a long essay, “Da Razão Antropofágica: Diálogo e Diferença na Cultura Brasileira”,³³ which in our context interests primarily because of its insistence on the specifically Brazilian character of the country’s cultural production of the fifties. In discussing Concrete poetry, he claimed that “a new

process had taken place: authors of a supposedly peripheral literature suddenly appropriated the entire code [...] it was all about recannibalizing a poetics”. And this was part of an “intersemiotic” phenomenon, where Brazilian creations with a character of their own corresponded to ongoing European and US-American developments, whether in architecture, painting or music (1992a: 246–47). Haroldo even insisted on a difference between the “incurably baroque” Brazilian Concrete poetry and the “austere orthogonality of Gomringer’s *konstellationen*, clean and pure like a painting by Max Bill” (248). And he elaborated that fruitful difference into the metaphor of a dialogue with Europe that included all avant-garde Latin-American writers: “The European discovered that he could no longer write his prose of the world without the contribution, ever more captivating, of the difference brought about by the voracious alexandrine barbarians” (253–54; see also Perrone 1996: 52–53).

In the view of Fernando Cocchiarale, director of Rio’s Museum of Modern Art, the work of the Concrete artists of the fifties made it possible for Brazilians to participate on an equal footing with the work produced in the “culturally dominant countries” ever since the “moment of the transition, in the United States and Europe, from the Modernist tradition to contemporary art” in the early sixties (2005: 1). He speaks of the “vanguards” of the fifties but does not apply that label to any of the new directions taken by the arts during the past forty-five years. Indeed, the basic assumptions of the various avant-garde manifestos and the self-conception of those who wrote them as working at the forefront of developments that will inevitably come to pass, are tied to an aesthetic and an evolutionary mode of thinking that would be challenged by what has come to be constructed as post-Modernism, where the concept of an “avant-garde” may no longer apply. But from the vantage-point of the critical historian and theorist it makes certainly sense to speak of two distinct avant-gardes in Brazil’s cultural history, that of the twenties and that of the fifties. This would be in keeping with Hubert van den Berg’s proposal to “describe the temporal aspect in temporal terms” (2005: 73). Both of them are by now “historical”, and that of the fifties would be badly served by the pejorative “neo-avant-garde” label, because – with all the continuities with certain aspects of the indigenous *modernismo* (and of the Brazilian Baroque) that were subsequently emphasised by the *concretistas* – the movements of the fifties were a new, vibrant and different enterprise under changed conditions, even though still coloured by the post-colonial experience.

Notes

¹ This statement is based on inspection of the following selection of books that feature the avant-garde label in their titles, except for those that are programmatically restricted to a particular country: Poggioli 1968; Bürger 1974; Lüdke 1976; Calinescu 1987; Mann 1991; Herwitz 1993; Foster 1996; Hobsbawm 1998; Wood 1999; Buchloh 2000; Scheunemann 2000; Kircher, Kłańska and Kleinschmidt 2002; and Scheunemann 2005. Notable exceptions are found in Weisgerber 1984 (Yurkievich, “Avantgarde in Hispanoamerika”) and in Asholt and Fähnders 2000 (Rincón, “Avantgarden in Lateinamerika”). González Alcantud’s *El exotismo en las vanguardias artístico-literarias* (1989) has a concluding chapter on “La vanguardia en Latino-América”. Kostelanetz’s 1982 collection of statements and manifestos includes two Brazilian texts (on Concrete poetry).

² Among the close to 800 holdings of the Indiana University libraries listed under the subject heading “avant-garde”, almost 200 books deal with Latin-American vanguards collectively, or only with Hispanic-American vanguards, or with avant-garde movements in individual Latin-American countries. It is in this discourse, conducted largely among Hispanists and Luso-Brazilianists, that the European contexts of the Latin-American vanguards are also considered (e.g. Wentzlaff-Eggebert 1991; Reverte Bernal 1998) and that international attention is paid to developments in Spain and Portugal. The critical collection of manifestos and statements by Teles (1972) and the study by White (1972) link Brazilian “Modernismo” with the European avant-garde in their titles. The most extensive one-volume collection of manifestos, polemical statements and critical texts of the earlier Latin-American avant-gardes has been compiled by Schwartz (1995).

³ Inaugurated in the Municipal Theatre of São Paulo on 13 February 1922, it was unofficially part of the festivities commemorating the declaration of independence from Portugal (and the beginning of the Brazilian Empire) in 1822.

⁴ In the introduction to his anthology, Schwartz (1995: 29–30) also cites, disapprovingly, a number of individual essays that exclude Brazil in spite of claiming to deal with “Latin-American” avant-garde topics. There are, of course, numerous studies that concentrate on one country or a particular region.

⁵ The most ambitious examples are two on-going multi-volume projects, the *Bibliografia e Antologia Crítica das Vanguardas Literárias no Mundo Ibérico e Luso-Brasileiro* under the editorship of Forster, Jackson and Wentzlaff-Eggebert (1998–), and the five-volume *Vanguardia latinoamericana: Historia, crítica y documentos* edited and authored by Teles and Müller-Bergh (2000–); in both, Brazil is given a separate volume. See also the book-length study by Unruh (1994) – like the others restricted to literature and drama (and performance) and to the “interwar vanguard movements” (1994: 2). The projected nine volumes of the first series include volumes on Catalonia, Spain and Portugal (as the title would suggest).

⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

⁷ The “documentation”, prepared for an exhibit in Paris in 1972, covered architecture, the visual arts, literature and music; it designates 1929 as the “Maturidade do Modernismo” (Batista, Lopez and Lima 1972).—1917: the exhibition in São Paulo of paintings by Anita Malfatti marked by her study with German Expressionists; 1931: the 38.^o Salão da Escola Nacional de Belas Artes in Rio de Janeiro, which under its new director, Lúcio Costa, had been opened to artists of all tendencies and consequently boycotted by the establishment. Costa, with Oscar Niemeyer the designer of Brasília twenty-five years later, lost his job, but official commissions for public works were henceforth also given to “new” artists (Souza 1998: 151).—Martins (1969: 164) distinguishes three “literary decades” in the history of *modernismo*: 1922–28, “the only one eminently revolutionary” period, 1928–39, dominated by fiction, and a third, ending in 1945, witnessing the rise of modern literary criticism. The poetic production of the 1940s has also been labelled “neomodernismo” (see Paes and Moisés 1969: 173–75).

⁸ The “initiator of modern architecture in Brazil”, Gregori Warchavchik, built “the first house entirely without exterior decoration” in São Paulo in 1927–28 (*Semana de 22* sp). The latest architectural examples illustrated in the 1972 exhibition commemorating the Week’s anniversary date from 1939.—In Mendes’s overview (1975) as well as in Wisnik’s study of music surrounding the *Semana* (1977), Heitor Villa-Lobos emerges as the central figure of musical *modernismo*, and Mário de Andrade as the most influential and inspiring music critic.

⁹ Oswald, who had brought news about Italian Futurism from Europe as early as 1912, proposed “futurismo” as the name of the movement but then agreed to Mário’s suggestion to call it “modernismo” (Schwartz 1995: 118).

¹⁰ For a fuller exploration of the concept, see Nunes 1970; also Ávila 1975.

¹¹ Le Corbusier and his disciples Lúcio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer received the first prize in architecture (Aguilar 2005: 358).

¹² In 2002, a retrospective in the Centro Universitário Maria Antônia da Universidade de São Paulo, “Arte Concreta Paulista”, commemorated the inaugural exhibit in 1952 by the seven original members of the Grupo Ruptura (five of them immigrants) as well as the publication that year of *Noigandres* 1. It was accompanied by five slim volumes with valuable and rare documents concerning (1) the topic of the exhibit, (2) the Grupo Ruptura, (3) the Grupo Noigandres, and the work of (4) Waldemar Cordeiro and (5) Antonio Maluf (see *Arte Concreta Paulista* 2002).

¹³ Abstract-geometric photographs were produced in the early fifties by José Oiticica Filho (1906–1964), the father of Hélio Oiticica, and by Ruptura member Geraldo de Barros (1923–1998).

¹⁴ The Swiss artist, a major proponent of “Concrete art”, had been given a retrospective of his paintings, sculptures, and architectural projects in São Paulo in 1950, had received the first prize at the 1951 Biennial and had returned in 1953 to give lectures in both cities. But they had also been familiar with the work of the “Asociación Arte-Concreto-Invencción” founded by Tomás Maldonado in Buenos

Aires in 1946, had been impressed by a 1953 exhibition in Rio of (mostly Concrete) work by Argentine artists and had seen the 1953 exhibit in São Paulo of work by the “Movimento de Arte Concreta” of Milano, among other events.

¹⁵ The verso of the invitation to the 1952 exhibit of Grupo Ruptura had the line “the work of art does not contain an idea, it is itself an idea” (reproduced in Amaral, org., 1998: 287).

¹⁶ Published in the *Jornal do Brasil*, March 21–22, 1959, it was accompanied by illustrations of works by Pevsner, Bill, Albers, and Malevich as well as by Weissmann, Amílcar de Castro, Clark, and Pape. “The Neoconcrete, born of a necessity to express the complex reality of modern man in the structural language of the new plasticism, negates the value of scientificist and positivist attitudes in art and restores the problem of expression, incorporating the new ‘verbal’ dimensions created by the non-figurative constructivist art” (Gullar 1998a: 272, trans. CC).

¹⁷ Typically, even the revised edition (1995) of George Rickeys’ influential *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution* contains images and biographical sketches of only three Brazilians: Almir Mavignier (b. 1926, in Germany since 1951), Mary Vieira (b. 1927, in Switzerland since 1951), and Lygia Clark.

¹⁸ Alexandre Wollner (b. 1928), with Maurício Nogueira Lima one of the first fully trained visual designers in Brazil, credits the Concrete movement (of which they both were members) with creating “a conscious wave rupturing the cultural and marketing parameters” and with participating “in all public categories” of design: “From [the fifties] on a new reality presents itself and keeps on developing, industrially and technologically. The artists (here already defined as designers) are involved in all means of visual communication: corporate identity programs, magazines, newspapers, packaging, books, leaflets and signage” (Wollner 1998: 236; trans. CC).

¹⁹ Piccoli’s chronology lists the founding of the new museums in the two major cities as well as the later construction of buildings to house them (which, like the Museu de Arte de São Paulo, designed by Lina Bo Bardi, are major examples of the new architecture), as well as the creation of the Brazilian Association of Art Critics and the launching of new magazines and periodicals; it also lists the important exhibitions.

²⁰ The Noigandres group was later to adopt two members of the older generation, Edgard Braga (1897–1985) and Pedro Xisto (1901–1987), whose work they published in their new magazine *Invenção* (five numbers, from 1962 to 1967). Xisto’s poems appeared subsequently in major international anthologies, along with work by the other Noigandres poets.

²¹ One of these texts can be read as an intersemiotic transposition of Webern’s use of *Klangfarbenmelodie* in a specific composition (see Clüver 1981b).

²² For a fuller comparison of their production at the time see Clüver 1981a.

²³ H. de Campos had introduced the concept of the "open work of art" with regard to structure and use of materials and the activity of the reader in 1955 (1987a: 36–39), long before Umberto Eco.

²⁴ Reprinted in Campos, Pignatari, and Campos 1987: 156–58; English in Solt 1970 and in Kostelanetz 1982. The Kostelanetz collection also contains A. de Campos's "Points – Periphery – Concrete Poetry" (orig. 1955/56), the first article to announce the new label for their poetry.

²⁵ In order to introduce Brazilian readers to their models, they had by 1961 published translations of poems by Cummings, some of Pound's *Cantos* and selections from Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, besides many texts by other poets of interest as they discovered them, including Schwitters, August Stramm, Morgenstern, Gertrude Stein, Mayakovsky, Kitasono Katsue. Haroldo's theories of translation or "transcreation", first presented in 1962/63 (see H. de Campos 1992b), have become very influential in Brazil.

²⁶ Augusto and Cordeiro combined their efforts in the creation of "popcretos" in 1964; and Pignatari, who had included a "cinipoema" (kinetic poem) in *Noigandres 4*, produced with Luiz Ângelo Pinto a theory of "semiotic poetry", with examples, that offered wordless texts composed of graphic signs accompanied by a lexical key (see Pinto and Pignatari 1987). Examples of the work of the Noigandres poets with typographic and other visual effects, including semiotic poetry, are reproduced and commented in Aguilar 2005; see also Menezes, *passim*, including samples of the later wordless works (poems?) of Ronaldo Azeredo, which Aguilar does not feature.

²⁷ For a detailed analysis of one of these see Clüver 1982.

²⁸ Enlarged for the second edition (1974), it had its fifth edition in 1993.

²⁹ Caetano's autobiographical account of 1997, *Verdade Tropical* (also published in English), details many of these relations; it contains chapters on Tropicália, A poesia concreta, Vanguarda, Antropofagia.—Caetano also set and performed a multi-channel version of the last of Augusto's "poetamenos" texts (Veloso and Campos 1975).

³⁰ For a detailed analysis see Clüver 2001.

³¹ Organised by Affonso Ávila at the Universidade de Minas Gerais, the "Semana Nacional de Poesia de Vanguarda" consisted of a series of events and an exhibition of poster-poems. In 1993, it was commemorated at the same place with another exhibit, lectures, musical presentations and video shows (see Santa Rosa 1993). On the 1963 event, see also Ribeiro 1997: 107–12. Marília Andrés Ribeiro's *Neovanguardas* surveys the 1960s in Belo Horizonte. It is to my knowledge the only Brazilian study using that label, and besides Antonio Risério's book on Bahia (1995) the only one taking an interdisciplinary approach.

³² An exception is Max Bense's *Brasilianische Intelligenz* (1965), result of four trips, which registers among other topics his impressions of Brasília and his interpretation of Brazilian Concrete art and poetry.

³³ Quotations trans. by CC. Published in English as "The Rule of Anthropophagy: Europe under the Sign of Devoration", trans. Maria Tai Wolff (see H. de Campos 1986).

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TOWARDS AN AESTHETICS OF POVERTY: ARCHITECTURE AND THE NEO-AVANT-GARDE IN 1960S BRAZIL

RICHARD J. WILLIAMS

Introduction

The pretext of this essay is a comparison between the neo-avant-garde, as it appears in Peter Bürger's writing, and Brazilian architecture between the years 1960 and 1970. I should start by saying that such a comparison is mostly academic. The architects I cite – Vilanova Artigas, Sérgio Ferro, Flávio Império, and Rodrigo Lefèvre, all connected with the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of São Paulo (FAU-USP) – had no interest in whether or not they constituted a neo-avant-garde, even if they had heard of the term, which I doubt. At the time, they cared little for Europe and European architecture, while their hostility to the United States knew no limits. Outside of Brazil their work had little purchase, not aided by their own xenophobic Marxism, and their country's profound insularity after a military coup in 1964.¹ These were the *anos de chumbo* or 'lead years', during which a large part of Brazil's cultural elite decamped, en masse, to Paris. The discussion does not therefore have a promising basis.

That it is worth having at all depends on the comparison I make between this architecture, and certain practices in the European neo-avant-garde, namely Arte Povera. In each case, what I will term an 'aesthetics of poverty' is in operation. There was no exchange between the two sides, but they employed remarkably similar ideas (albeit in different contexts) and shared similar prejudices. However, they enjoyed quite different fates. Put crudely, Arte Povera was quickly recuperated by the category of 'art' and illustrates Bürger's thesis about the ineffectiveness of the neo-avant-garde (Bürger 1984: 58). The architects, by contrast, increasingly eschewed art in favour of social action, and paid the price. The comparison is worth making in

the context of this volume, because it shows that ostensibly similar neo-avant-garde practices can have quite different outcomes or effects. Once the concept of the neo-avant-garde moves beyond New York, or Paris, or Cologne, it arguably ceases to make much sense. But equally, it might be said that away from these centres, neo-avant-garde type *activity* can have real political effect.

On the aesthetics of poverty

Let me say something first about an ‘aesthetics of poverty’. By this I mean the acceptance of the impact that limited availability of materials might have on form, or to put it another way, the futility of trying to approximate the finish of the cultural products of the developed world when the materials to make them may be absent. This idea underpins numerous concepts of art of the 1960s; I will discuss two of the better-known cases here, first Arte Povera, and then the Brazilian film director Glauber Rocha’s ‘Aesthetics of Hunger’, a concept which had much appeal in Brazil beyond cinema (Rocha 1965).

‘Arte Povera’ first came to (limited) public attention in Genoa in September 1967 as the title of one of two simultaneous exhibitions of sculpture curated by an ambitious young critic, Germano Celant. Celant explained what he meant in more detail in the November 1967 edition of a new Roman magazine of contemporary art, *Flash Art* (Celant 1967). Arte Povera was not so much art, he claimed, but a form of “guerrilla warfare” against the “system” (Celant 1967: 3). The problem with capital, he complained, was that it forced individuals (particularly artists) to assume identities which they then wore like straightjackets. To use a different metaphor, they were doomed to perform a set role until they expired. Rather than accept this, he argued, artists should resist by refusing set identities, and become more like guerrilla fighters. The guerrilla was, he wrote, “capable of choosing his places of battle”, he could “surprise” and “strike”, he had distinct advantages “conferred by mobility” (Celant 1967: 3). The key tactic in this battle was the conscious adoption of poor artistic materials, contingent on their surroundings. This was a self-conscious identification with poverty, but it was also a geographical identification in that Celant’s Italy had yet to achieve the level of development reached by other parts of Europe, let alone the United

States. The guerrilla war, he argued, had already begun (Celant 1967: 3).

What Celant meant by *Arte Povera* in 1967 was firstly a set of cultural tactics that might be used against the dominant culture. What he meant in terms of art was a heterogeneous collection of sculptural practices using whatever came to hand: the more inconsistent, temporary and unlikely, the better. The artists in the first show included Alighiero Boetti, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Giulio Paolini, Pino Pascali and Emilio Prini. An emblematic work, much commented upon, was Fabro's *Pavimento Tautologia*, or 'Tautologous Pavement', which consisted of a few sheets of newspaper spread on the gallery floor, and over which visitors were invited to walk. It quickly disintegrated and had to be replaced at regular intervals. It was a poor work in the most obvious sense, making use of the cheapest, most worthless materials, and calculatedly eschewing any value associated with permanence (Williams 2000: 142).

Now, in Italy at the end of 1967, to advocate an aesthetics of poverty might have been fleetingly radical, a stand against the tide of development. But with Celant's ambition, and increasing knowledge of the rest of the world, *Arte Povera* became a marketing strategy for an eccentric but appealing brand of Italian minimalism. By 1969, Celant had abandoned the idea of *Arte Povera* as guerrilla war altogether and now referred to it, in a significant half-Anglicisation, as *Art Povera*. Not only that, but his 1969 book of the same title contextualised his Italian peer group with a large number of contemporary Americans including Walter de Maria (who was illustrated on the book's cover, lying on the ground in an American desert), Robert Smithson and Richard Serra (Celant 1969). If by this volte-face Celant attempted to claim these Americans for his own project, he also made clear that he was more interested in working within what he had previously termed the "system" than against it. Indeed, little if any of Celant's earlier rhetoric survives the transition from 'Arte' to 'Art' *Povera* (Williams 2000: 147-8).

The speed of Celant's move away from revolutionary rhetoric is striking but not surprising given the trajectory of his own career. To invoke an aesthetics of poverty in the developed world was in some ways little more than an aesthetic game. The situation in Brazil was different. To invoke poverty in Brazil has always been legible as a challenge to authority. It draws attention to the things that the official discourses about Brazil would rather suppress, namely the country's relatively underdeveloped economy and infrastructure, and it also

draws attention to those people (namely the poor) that the middle classes most fear. The fear of the poor has traditionally been highly developed and neurotic, yet it is the poor who are required to do the manual and domestic labour that maintains the Brazilian middle class (Owensby 1999, Caldeira 2000). So the Brazilian film director Glauber Rocha's concept of 'an aesthetics of hunger' ('Uma Estética da Fome') exists in a rather different context to Arte Povera, whatever its superficial similarities. Through Cinema Novo ('new cinema') Rocha sought to construct an anti-aspirational mode of movie-making, contingent on local circumstances; it stood in critical relation to Hollywood.

Rocha described how Latin America existed in a colonial relation with the developed world, and how it was perceived by that world as poor, "miserable", a fact which related to its economic condition – but which had also been cultivated by outsiders as part of a general taste for the primitive. This taste was not a result of any sympathy or understanding of actual conditions. If hunger produced for the European a "strange tropical surrealism", which was highly attractive, for the Brazilian it was a "national embarrassment". He "doesn't eat, but is embarrassed to admit it", wrote Rocha. "Above all, he doesn't know where this hunger comes from" (Rocha 1965: 2). The purpose of art in this context should be not to hide hunger, or to distract the audience from it by technical or other means (colour, narrative). Rather, the purpose of art should be to draw the audience's attention to its actual situation, to make it conscious of its poverty in order that it should be capable of revolutionary action. The art produced would be both "miserable" and "violent" (Rocha 1965: 2).

What Rocha argues for is, in summary, an aesthetic formed by the participants' poverty, in which poverty is not displayed for the observer as exotic (for consumption by the privileged outsider) but is a challenge to the official order of things. Such an aesthetic must eschew signs of luxury; it must resist aspiration; it will of necessity be rather miserable in tone; it demands that the participant becomes conscious of his own poverty, and does not attempt to transcend it. The idea of consciousness-raising (*conscientização*) and the idea that a culture should be formed out of poverty, not in opposition to it, become well established after Rocha on the Brazilian left. Among the best known expositions of *conscientização* outside Brazil is Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which applies the concept to the education of the poor (Freire 1976: 17). Augusto Boal's *Theatre of the Oppressed*, a blueprint for a revolutionary theatre practice, should also

be cited here (Boal 1979). In each of these cases, the reader/audience is forced to identify with poverty, with the 'oppressed'. Art and leftist politics are closely identified here. Art must develop new methods for new (oppressed) audiences if it is not just to remain a tool of oppression in the hands of the privileged classes.

All these texts are underwritten by a binary concept of society, divided into haves and have-nots, with the former relentlessly oppressing the latter. By European standards, such a division was by the late 1960s crude and unconvincing. Increasing material wealth since the end of the Second World War had produced much more complex social arrangements, such as the fragmentation of the relationship between social class and wealth. In Brazil, however, one could – and without doubt, still can – speak of a society divided such that a wealthy middle-class lives a first world existence comparable to that found in western Europe, serviced by a largely black underclass whose living conditions resemble those commonly found in sub-Saharan Africa (*Economist* 2003). The former is a formal society defined by the rule of law, property ownership and other institutions of western civic life, the latter is informal and mostly illegal. An ongoing class war between the two claims many lives each year.² Each depends on the other, the former for the latter's labour, and the latter for the former's financial support. In such an explicitly and self-consciously fragmented society, Marxist notions of oppression have much clearer purchase than they would otherwise in Europe.³

On architecture

Social relations in Brazil, as elsewhere, are powerfully inscribed in architectural terms. As the anthropologist James Holston has described, one of the clearest examples of this in Brazil is the spatial organisation of middle-class apartments: even the smallest retain distinct spaces and circulation systems for servants, with elaborate conventions to prevent transgression. There are typically distinct entrances and exits, even in an apartment for a single person, separate daytime and night-time accommodation for a maid, and a distinctive transitional area between the maid's quarters and the formal part of the apartment called a *copa* where fraternisation may occur (Holston 1989: 177-82). Holston wrote that it was one of the failings of the model housing in Brasília to attempt to abolish these conventions at a stroke, an egalitarian impulse on the part of the architects that led to

unintentionally impoverished working conditions for domestic staff in the city, at least at the beginning.⁴

At the scale of the city, social fragmentation is even more clearly described by the universal division between informal and formal cities. Brazilian cities of any size have an illegal periphery housing anywhere between twenty and fifty percent of their total populations. The term for such illegal housing is the *favela*. Extensive and visually prominent, *favelas* have often reached high levels of material and social organisation – but they remain for the most part illegal, and frequently lack sanitation, mains water or educational facilities (Perlman 1976: 13, 29). Their peripheral relation to the state means that they lack rights too: the relation with the police or other institutions of civil society is uncertain; residents are more likely to make their own security arrangements rather than trust the police who, they feel, represent formal Brazil. And the *favela* has been subject to periodic clearance for largely political purposes. In Janice Perlman's classic account of Rio in 1968-9, the author describes the demolition of Catacumba, a *favela* in the southern part of the city, to make way for high-income housing (Perlman 1976: 23ff). A contemporary confrontation between capital and the poor in São Paulo is the subject of Mariana Fix's *Parceiros da Exclusão* (Fix 2001).

If poverty was, and remains, in some respects the defining characteristic of the Brazilian city, how did Brazilian architects deal with it? Let me identify three broad approaches.

The first approach is to ignore it altogether. This might be said to be the normal or default position of architects who need patronage to work, and hence work for clients who can pay. Architecture in this scenario is simply a means of housing the well off, of providing them with visual identity and agreeable diversions or entertainments. In the Brazilian context, the early work of Oscar Niemeyer fits into this category. His Pampulha development (1940), in the inland city of Belo Horizonte, was a ring of private clubs and entertainment buildings around an artificial lake. This, one of the first major works of Brazilian modernism, was functionally no more than the decorative flourish for a high-income suburb. The flamboyant sculptural forms he developed there, and which achieved such international acclaim, appeared with no reference to the surrounding poverty. They simply serviced a private housing development in its requirements of security, taste, and the pleasurable occupation of leisure time (Cavalcanti 2001: 384-405).

The second approach is to, in effect, design out poverty. This humanistic approach is exemplified by the activities of left-leaning architects and governments in Europe, including in the UK after the Second World War. In this scenario, the architects and developers address poverty by imagining a world in which it does not, or cannot, exist. Quality housing and public services are provided, so poverty, in theory at least, cannot exist. This is the impulse behind the architecture of the welfare state in the Britain of the 1950s. Much the same impulse produces the new Brazilian capital Brasília, designed by Lúcio Costa and Niemeyer in 1957, inaugurated with much fanfare in April 1960 (Evenson 1973: 103-16; Holston 1989: 31-58). Brasília was designed as a city without poverty – as Niemeyer put it in 1960, it was meant to be a “city of free, fortunate men, free of social and racial discrimination” (Niemeyer 1960: 9). The principal means of engineering such a transformation from a highly unequal to an egalitarian state was the modernist apartment housing block. In Brasília, as elsewhere, it was meant to provide housing for all, regardless of existing social status. Modernist architecture here is seen as an agent of social transformation, not a reflection of society as it already exists (Heynen 1999: 8-25).

The third approach is to make poverty an integral part of the architecture. The first two approaches are in different ways forms of denial: they wish poverty not to exist, and they either ignore it or attempt to abolish it. Both are also representative of broadly utopian world views, which is to say that they imagine a world in advance of the one that already exists. The third approach is not utopian, or transformative in attitude; it does not imagine architecture as embodying transformative possibilities; its understanding of the world includes its problems and limitations. It understands poverty as an essential part of existing conditions, which are dependent on factors that are much larger than any one person can control. Architecture in this scenario is not an agent of social change, of the provider of aesthetic experience, but something humbler. It is fundamentally realistic, rather than idealistic. This is not an unambitious aesthetic, but its means acknowledge, rather than occlude, Brazil’s condition of underdevelopment.

This third approach to the problem of poverty is manifest in Brazil in the local variant of brutalism, especially the work of Vilanova Artigas and Lina Bo Bardi, and more powerfully in the so-called *Arquitetura Nova* (New Architecture), the group of Artigas’s former pupils from the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the

University of São Paulo, Sérgio Ferro, Flávio Império and Rodrigo Lefèvre. The term *Arquitetura Nova* referred explicitly to Rocha: the group admired his films and the concept of an ‘aesthetics of hunger’, already discussed (Rocha 1965; Arantes 2002: 50-1). There are differences of emphasis and approach between the two factions – indeed *Arquitetura Nova* presented itself as a kind of apostate Brutalism – but they shared hostility to officially sanctioned forms of modern architecture, specifically that of Costa and Niemeyer at Brasília. They understood the flamboyant, sculptural forms of the new capital to be fundamentally dishonest, not only simply because they presented an image of a modern Brazil that was untrue – but also because that image, given Brazil’s actual situation, required an inordinate amount of effort to create (Benoit 2002: 2; Arantes 2002: 48).⁵ In other words, the impression of futurity given by Brasília was no more than an illusion. Not only did its surfaces represent a false national reality, but they were of necessity created by means of fundamentally old-fashioned, labour-intensive materials and methods, ‘of necessity’ because Brazil could not afford any better. What was required, they argued, was an antidote to Brasília’s slick, modern, but allegedly cruel, surfaces; in other words, an architecture that acknowledged the actual state of Brazil’s development, and acted in accordance with it.

The first prominent Brazilian architect to articulate an aesthetics of poverty was Vilanova Artigas. Reading him now is a great corrective to the romanticised Brazil of beaches and *carnaval* that Niemeyer has done so much to underwrite (Niemeyer 1999: 2000). Artigas’s vision of Brazil is tough, compromised and poor, not the tourist Brazil of Copacabana where Niemeyer has long had a studio, but the industrial powerhouse of São Paulo, the world’s third largest city.

Artigas’s view of architecture is underwritten by an uncompromising, xenophobic communism. The clearest exposition of this is the 1951 polemic “A Bienal é contra os artistas brasileiros” (‘The Biennial is against Brazilian Artists’) (Artigas 2004: 30-4). Alert to anything that might be a vehicle for American imperialism, he castigated the São Paulo Biennial, inaugurated in 1951, for representing a “bourgeois, internationalist” conception of modern art that could only be harmful to Brazilian interests (Artigas 2004: 33). Artigas went on: he was against “abstraction” because it only served bourgeois interests (2004: 33). He thought modern art, and by extension modern architecture, no less than “a weapon of oppression, a weapon of the dominant class, a weapon of the oppressors against

the oppressed” (2004: 37). He quoted Friedrich Engels on architecture: in the hands of the bourgeoisie, building housing for the working classes was no more than “the art of hiding (their) misfortune” (2004: 37).⁶ Cities run by the bourgeoisie were “chaos”; books about urbanism were “in general a walk through slum tenements”. But “planning” was a sham, he continued, just a bourgeois attempt to hide the misery of the poor. Worse, it suggests that urban problems (e.g. slums) are not the result of processes of exploitation, but rather of “urban chaos” (2004: 38).⁷

As much as he criticised the US and its supposed imperialism, he enthused about the USSR’s urban policies. It had, he claimed in his 1952 essay “Os caminhos da arquitetura moderna” (‘The Paths of Modern Architecture’), produced 350 new cities in 20 years, and a Moscow “as luxurious as New York” (2004: 47) There were no slums in the USSR, he wrote, yet the bourgeoisie in the West attacks the USSR in the name of aesthetics:

in the name of modern art, whose fundamental mission as we have seen has been to attack the working class and keep them in a state of misery [...] in the name of this great mystification they attack communist architecture for being ‘academic’ because some of the buildings are built with columns, with balustrades, with cornices. Really they want to attack socialism and the proletarian revolution. (Artigas 2004: 38)

Yet the Brazilian communist party (PCB), to which Artigas belonged, did not believe in working directly with or for the working class. Following Engels’ century-old argument, the PCB held that to build for the proletariat was incorrect, as to make it more comfortable in its present circumstances only lessened the chances of revolution. Instead, the PCB advocated revolution via a re-educated bourgeoisie. Artigas’ villas, all built for a wealthy clientele, were meant to participate in this process. Austere and roughly finished, with the processes of their construction left bare, they were supposed to educate their inhabitants as to the value of manual labour. In this way, a villa in an exclusive São Paulo suburb could be presented as a revolutionary project, a response to Brazil’s condition of poverty.

The key concept for Artigas, articulated in “Os caminhos da arquitetura moderna”, was *moral construtiva*, or ‘moral construction’ (2004: 38). In Artigas’ worldview, certain kinds of construction were of themselves immoral, if, for example, they depended on materials that were scarce, or abnormally expensive, or if the building process was unnecessarily labour-intensive, and therefore exploitative. *Moral*

construtiva made use of whatever materials and techniques naturally abounded, and whose deployment was least likely to exploit those involved.



Fig.1: Vilanova Artigas, Casa Elza Berquó, São Paulo, 1967. (Photograph by Jose Moscardi)

For an example of Artigas' principles in a built form, consider the Casa Elza Berquó in São Paulo, built in 1967 (Fig. 1). The origins of the house are themselves highly political: the military coup of 1964 landed Artigas in prison as a security risk, and although he was released after twelve days, he remained under suspicion by the authorities until 1966 when all charges against him were dropped. It was during this period of surveillance that he was offered the commission by Berquó, evidently an understanding client. When Artigas inquired if she was sure – did she really want him to design a house from his cell? – Berquó replied that she was quite happy to take him on as “architect-prisoner” (Arantes 2002: 39). In the end, Artigas stayed out of jail, and the house was built as normal. But it has allegorical aspects that refer, however indirectly, to its origins. The house itself comprises a massive, flat concrete roof held up by nothing more than four tree trunks. Internally, a hole is cut in the roof allowing light to penetrate. In this light-filled space, defined horizontally by the four trunks, a small tropical garden flourishes. The weight of the roof and the unlikeliness of the trunks produced an allegorical contrast. His choice of deliberately poor materials to support the house's most fundamental structure was an ironic commentary on Brazil's development: “this technology of reinforced concrete, which allows this splendid architecture to be made, is no more than an incurable stupidity in respect of the contemporary political situation” (Arantes 2002: 40). The period of military rule was a period of remarkable

economic and urban development, during which an enormous number of modern buildings were realised, above all in São Paulo. The Casa Berquó is an ironic commentary on that process of modernisation: the modernity of its roof is supported by the oldest and crudest of building technologies, as if to say that Brazil's own modernity is no more than superficial, and that it is likely to collapse at any moment (Arantes 2002: 40; see also Andreoli and Forty 2004: 18-19).



Fig. 2: Vilanova Artigas, FAU-USP, São Paulo, 1961-9. (Photograph by the author)

A much larger instance of the same allegorical structure can be found at Artigas' 1961-9 building for FAU-USP, where he was also a professor (fig. 2 and 3). This is a very large, reinforced concrete, horizontally-oriented pavilion, rising to about four storeys. The surfaces are intentionally rough. It occupies a campus, and has a vaguely picturesque relation to the landscape. It has a massive, light-filled atrium covered with glass, and it is open to the elements at ground level. It is held up by columns of improbable lightness, which suggest the idea that materiality cannot be transcended. They taper in the middle, creating a seemingly perverse structural weakness; not only that, but the upper storeys of the building are rhetorically exaggerated in mass – they have no windows, they cantilever out all around the building – as if more than half of this already massive structure rests on these comically insufficient stalks. It looks as if it had a duty to fall down. As Adrian Forty has explained, this is a

metaphor, an intentional crudeness to express the contradictions of Brazil's underdevelopment. It is

primitive in its finish, reliant on a very low level of manual skill in its construction, but sophisticated in the engineering of its slender columns. What we see here is a building that makes use of the one material that Latin America has in abundance, unskilled labour, and combining it with Latin America's other great resource, human invention, suggests a strategy for the endemic social and economic crises of Brazil. (Andreoli and Forty 2004: 19)



Fig. 3: Vilanova Artigas, FAU-USP, São Paulo, 1961-9 [detail]. (Photograph by the author)

FAU-USP articulates on a large scale the aesthetics of poverty; it evidences the choice and advertisement of self-consciously poor materials and techniques, making out of them an allegory of underdevelopment informed by Marxist political beliefs. Unlike Niemeyer's modernism, it is desublimatory in intent. It does not, in other words, seek to lift the viewer out of the everyday world to achieve a sense of the surrealist *merveilleux* or have any other

transcendent experience. Quite the reverse: it seeks to bring him down to earth, to remind him of the boundedness of his existence, of its material and social limits, and in so doing, suggest more realistic ways of living.

To reinforce the peculiar meaning of Artigas's work at this stage, it is worth making a brief comparison with one of Oscar Niemeyer's contemporary buildings, the Palácio do Itamaraty, the home of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Brasília (1960-7) (fig. 4). Built at almost exactly the same time as FAU-USP, it shares that building's scale, materials, horizontal organisation, and openness to the elements (both are open at ground level and both have large gardens or areas of open space). Both are also characterised by the highly rhetorical treatment of external columns. Niemeyer's columns at Itamaraty are almost as improbably thin as Artigas', but they do not appear to support anything other than themselves (there is no heavy concrete roof). They also terminate in reflecting pools rather than the ground, they literally become immaterial. As Norma Evenson wrote shortly after completion, this was a luxurious aesthetic, underlined by the fitting out of the interior. It conveyed

an effect of thoroughgoing opulence, surrounding its occupants in a luxurious ambience of smooth-polished marble, mirrors, deep carpets, tapestries and fine furnishings. (Evenson 1973: 200)

The resemblance to Ken Adam's contemporaneous movie sets for the James Bond series is uncanny; not for nothing did Itamaraty feature prominently in one sequence of the French comedy-thriller *L'Homme de Rio*.⁸ Niemeyer's aesthetic, with its frequently stated aim of lifting the viewer out of the everyday world, of surprising and shocking him with illusion and surprising form, has much in common with Bretonian surrealism (Underwood 1994: 39-40; Williams 2004: 234-5). It is also, in common with that aesthetic, broadly humanistic in purpose, underwritten by a belief in universal human experience and the ability of individuals, aided by art and culture, to transcend their circumstances. Artigas's work, although superficially similar to the uninitiated, is closer in spirit to that of the neo-avant-garde. His architectural politics are, by comparison with Niemeyer's, desublimatory and anti-humanist.⁹



Fig. 4: Oscar Niemeyer, Palácio de Itamaraty, Brasília, 1960-7. (Photograph by the author)

Arquitetura Nova

However, for some of his followers, the radical potential of Artigas' work was curtailed by the nature of his patronage. I have already shown how Artigas' affiliation to the PCB's line on proletarian revolution allowed him to concentrate on high-class housing for select clients. The emphasis on the re-education of the wealthy now seems perverse, a deferral at best, while the precise nature of this 're-education' remains obscure. Nowhere is it made clear how living in surroundings of *beton brut* and tree trunks may inform a revolutionary attitude. Whatever unease these buildings may have been supposed to produce is (if the photographs of their interiors is taken as evidence) ameliorated by soft furnishings and luxuriant vegetation. In any case, in Brazil as everywhere, revealing the frankness of the building process is no guarantor of sympathy with those who laboured in the building. As a revolutionary tool, the Casa Berquó remains obscure. And it has to be said that peasant or working class housing, in which such exposure of process is everywhere typical, has long been appropriated as picturesque by the wealthy, much in the same way as working class attire has been transformed into high fashion.

As radical architecture, Artigas' work therefore had limits. Those limits were tested by three of his followers, Sérgio Ferro, Flávio

Império, and Rodrigo Lefèvre. Under the guise of *Arquitectura Nova*, the three took the idea of an aesthetics of poverty as far as it might reasonably go in architecture before it became something else. In so doing, they explored territory that outside of Brazil is arguably legible as ‘neo-avant-garde’, but they also show with clarity the limits of the neo-avant-garde as a radical formation. As they found with the last of the projects they built together, the Casa Juarez Brandão Lopes (1968), the deployment of unlikely forms and materials did not of itself satisfy their radical political aims. To be radical involved direct actions against specific targets – and it is no surprise to find that the radicalising explorations of two members of the *Arquitectura Nova* group led them away from the practice of architecture and towards armed confrontation with the military regime. The directness of the group’s engagement with contemporary politics is instructive in our readings elsewhere of neo-avant-garde activities, where a radical politics is professed, but the targets ill-defined, the stakes small, and the risks negligible.

The basis of the dispute between Artigas and his disciples is legible in the title of Ferro’s book, *O Canteiro e o Desenho* (‘The Builder and Design’) (Ferro 1979). The title refers back to a dispute at FAU-USP during the 1960s over the most effective solutions architects might deploy for social problems. Artigas, as we have seen, proposed design solutions in an architecturally determinist way. While careful in his use of local materials and labour, Artigas envisaged social change as a consequence of the experience of the finished product. The point of the Casa Berquó was to engender new social attitudes in an influential elite, an elite who would then take the revolution forward. By contrast, Ferro and his group laid the emphasis on the process of building. Broadly, it was through identification with building, not design, that a radical architecture could be achieved. In this respect, Brasília represented for them everything that had to be overturned: it was a place that elevated design at the expense of building, with the result that its realisation involved profoundly exploitative processes.

In the Brazilian context of the 1960s, this was a radical suggestion, given the social chasm between the two sides: an architect’s education in Brazil, like everywhere else, was about forming an elite as much as technical knowledge, an elite who systematically removed themselves from the building process. Yet recent Brazilian history contained examples of persons for whom design and building were the same: in early twentieth-century São Paulo, Italian immigrant builders specialised in certain aspects of the construction of residential

buildings, like the *escadeiro* who would design and build a stair in a gap left for him in a new house – a complex process involving design and improvisation with materials and labour (Artigas quoted in Arantes 2002: 20-1).

What did *Arquitectura Nova* build? At the outset, *Arquitectura Nova* did not operate very differently from Artigas, in that its early commissions were for private houses. But where Artigas sought to make buildings that had the ‘look’ of poverty, as an allegory of Brazil’s underdevelopment, *Arquitectura Nova* built in a poor way as a way of both reducing costs (their clients were mostly their friends) and of finding models of building that would be appropriate for Brazil’s poor. Hence their development of houses in the form of a curved vault, uncannily reminiscent of the Nissen hut.¹⁰ All three were involved in houses of this design. The choice of vault was significant symbolically. As Arantes has described, the vault

as much as it was a concave surface that protected its inhabitant, it [was] an expression of the most primitive kind of human habitat: a covering that produces a womb-like, cavernous space. A reinvented cave. (Arantes 2002: 78)

The vaults of *Arquitectura Nova* recalled the simplest, most primitive forms of dwelling and were meant to look as such. Ferro elaborated further: this was a technology that was simple, cheap, easily generalised, and ideal for housing the poor (Arantes 2002: 79). In contrast, Ferro cited the vaults found in certain works of Niemeyer such as the famous church at Pampulha (1942). The vaults there, Ferro complained, were all “false”, like “curved flagstones with a lot of steel inside, they cost a lot, but in terms of form and material”. In Niemeyer’s work, the vault was a luxurious device, indicative of labour and technical sophistication. For *Arquitectura Nova*, it was a cheap, simple, and adaptable way of building a shelter; recalling the most primitive forms of house, it used the minimum materials and was simple to build.

In practice, the vault appeared in houses like Lefèvre’s Casa Dino Zamatro (1971) (fig. 5). In the perspective drawings of it, and the photographs of it realised, it appears as a single curved volume, rising to two storeys in height. The vault itself is steel-reinforced concrete (expensive materials in Brazil, but here used sparingly). Externally it is an exceptionally simple form, a half-cylinder, glazed at both ends. A brick box forms the entrance and extends into the interior, forming a platform at mezzanine level. The simplicity of the exterior form

largely continues inside: this is a big, informal, open-plan space that absorbs a wide range of possible activities, both work and leisure. In early perspectives, an artist's studio is depicted on the mezzanine; hammocks hang informally in the main space.



Fig. 5: Rodrigo Lefèvre, Casa Dino Zamattaro, 1971

Lefèvre and the others in the group refined the vault for use in further houses for individual clients, and sketched out plans for its use in *casas populares* (vernacular housing), although these were largely not realised.¹¹ In retrospect, these vault-houses suffer from the same problems as Artigas' villas, in that they approach the condition of the *casa popular* without ever really acceding to it. What we are presented with is the look of poverty. The use of rustic or quasi-rustic materials and processes to make, in the end, fabulous weekend houses for privileged clients. But the engagement with process is qualitatively different here compared with Artigas' houses; the design seems less fixed; the materials and building processes are of a decidedly lower grade; the houses, both before and after completion, have an improvised quality about them which Artigas' did not. Ferro wrote of the importance of jazz as a metaphor for their practice: jazz was unlike other western music, he stated, in that it was a music of the players; "everything in it was subordinated to the individuality of the players". Moreover, it was a music that privileged improvisation, which is to

say, it emphasised process and was informed by contingencies (Ferro quoted in Arantes 2002: 83). So it is with the vault houses, at least in theory.

In the United States or Europe at the end of the 1960s, for an artist or architect to invoke process was a briefly radical position. It signified a critique of artistic authorship, an openness to factors beyond the artist's control, and an identification (if only metaphorical) with manual labour. For some critics it also meant the refusal to make finished objects that could be recuperated by a capitalist system that was responsible for an immoral and unpopular war (see Lucy Lippard in Harrison and Wood 1992: 893-5). But for artists and architects in the developed world, such position-taking carried few risks, and offered little in the way of a threat. When Germano Celant called for artists to fight a "guerrilla war" against the "system", it was clear that the war he had in mind was little more than a metaphor.

The picture in Brazil is a remarkable contrast: the experience of *Arquitetura Nova* is instructive. In 1964, Ferro was called as a witness in the trial of the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism. Although under suspicion by the Brazilian authorities, he continued to work and to publish articles directly and indirectly critical of the military regime. He continued as a member of the communist party until 1967, when he left for *Ação Libertadora Nacional* (ALN), a group advocating armed resistance against the government. In 1968, both Ferro and Lefèvre staged bomb attacks and bank robberies in São Paulo. Imprisoned in 1970, Ferro was sacked by FAU the same year for having "abandoned his responsibilities". On his release in 1971, Ferro made his way to France where he took up a teaching position at the University of Grenoble. Ferro is the only surviving member of the group and maintains a thoroughly uncompromising view of architecture and politics, little altered from the 1960s (Benoit 2002). Lefèvre also spent a year in prison during 1970-1 as a result of his terrorist actions with Ferro. Império meanwhile abandoned architecture in 1968, and turned to theatre and painting, resigning from his teaching position at FAU in 1977 after being denied space for experimental theatre by the authorities. The impact of external political events on the work of the group was considerable, and led away from architecture altogether. The group's last project together was a surprisingly bourgeois house, the *Casa Juarez Brandão Lopes* in São Paulo, which made use of two vaults and exposed concrete – but by this stage, the formal device of the vault was no longer a radical aesthetic, and simply a formal device, one of many at the architects'

disposal. At this point, Ferro and Lefèvre renounced their professional careers in favour of terrorism, while Império turned to other, less risky, art forms.

As Arantes has argued in various places, the legacy of *Arquitetura Nova* is perhaps not the little architecture they built in the 1960s, but the *mutirões*, or the self-build housing associations that emerged and were built successfully on the periphery of São Paulo in the 1980s and beyond. The *mutirões* were a long way removed from any avant-garde or neo-avant-garde activity. But in a sense they could be said to have taken up one of the challenges of *Arquitetura Nova*, namely to re-imagine the built environment as process rather than product, in which form is contingent on the surroundings, the available skills and materials, and in which the idea of a single form-giver (an artist, and architect) dissolves in a discussion in which all parties are equally involved. This is an unlikely conclusion, but seemingly the correct one: if we take Arantes' view at face value, then what the *mutirões* have produced is a mode of building that incorporates neo-avant-garde principles to public benefit. This activity in Brazil contrasts with that seen elsewhere, where the neo-avant-garde is at best a mild form of cultural critique, at worst, another cultural commodity.

Notes

¹ Brazilian Marxism itself was highly anachronistic at this point. Frankfurt School theorists (Marcuse, Benjamin, Adorno) were not published in Brazil until the later 1960s. See Jorge Coelho Soares, 'A Recepção das Idéias de Marcuse no Brasil'. On line at <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/Illumina%20Folder/marc1.html> (consulted 14.04.2006).

² This is the background that informs the highly successful film *Cidade de Deus* (City of God), directed by Fernando Meirelles (2002).

³ Performances of Boal's theatre in Europe have always been popular, but produce a palpable anxiety when audiences are asked to identify themselves as 'oppressors' or 'oppressed' – a typical audience sees itself as neither. Witnessed by the author, Contact Theatre, Manchester, 1997.

⁴ Holston's analysis of domestic arrangements in contemporary Brazil draws on the work done by the great Brazilian sociologist on more traditional and historical aspects of Brazil. Freyre's argument, set out first in *Casa Grande e Senzala* (Big House and Slave Hut) is that, in spite of the persistence of slavery and other conservative social arrangements, Brazil permits an unusual degree of mixing between classes and races, at a micro level through such arrangements as the *copa*. Freyre's optimism has been

much criticised, although his account of Brazil as a racial democracy continues to have much appeal.

⁵ In Ferro's case, the hostility to Brasília was informed by direct experience of its construction in the late 1950s. In 2002, he recalled the way the "horror" of its building sites made him question, from a sense of "ethical obligation", the certainties of the architecture profession (Benoit 2002: 2).

⁶ This is from Engels' discussion of Manchester, in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, first published in German in 1845.

⁷ These views persist in Manuel Castells' early work, for example *The Urban Question*. London: Edward Arnold, 1977. Castells complains of an "urban ideology" that insists on seeing cities as natural processes, not products of class conflicts. So all forms of regeneration and renewal are symptoms of the problem, not its solution.

⁸ Philippe de Broca (dir.), *L'Homme de Rio* (1964).

⁹ Artigas still believed in the possibility of architecture to create a better world by example, according to Ferro (Benoit 2002: 7). But there is a realistic quality to his architecture, never found in Niemeyer's work.

¹⁰ Temporary sheds built by the British army in WWII. The similarity is unlikely to be more than a coincidence.

¹¹ *Casa popular* does not translate well into English, as it refers to both housing types and social groups that do not have exact equivalents outside Brazil. It means housing built by and for the poor, using local materials, knowledge and skills. 'Vernacular housing' is the nearest equivalent, although in Brazil it is a contemporary phenomenon, not (as in the Anglophone world) of the historical past.

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THE AVANT-GARDE, NEO-AVANT-GARDE AND RADIO: ROBERT DESNOS AND PHILIPPE SOUPAULT

KEITH ASPLEY

Introduction

In studies of the avant-garde the relative paucity of coverage of radio would seem to suggest that it has a “Cinderella” status among the arts, even though it was undoubtedly one of the most important technological and cultural innovations of the twentieth century. Even in the 1980s critics were trying to explain away this situation:

The lack of serious attention so far paid to the artistic contribution which radio has inspired is perhaps understandable. Because its aesthetic exploitation has varied considerably from country to country, the interest of serious literary and drama critics can only be regarded as a sociological phenomenon. (Rodger 1982: 1)

Ten years later Douglas Kahn was still lamenting the obvious gaps: “[...] the literature on the arts of recorded and broadcasted sound, and of conceptual, literary, and performative sound, is scant at all levels, from basic historical research to theoretical modelings” (Kahn and Whitehead 1992: 1). Yet even the collection of essays from which this observation is taken continues to devote most space to the general relationship between music and sound or noise and the exploitation of sounds and noises in the theatre. However, a few of the essays do consider radio: there is a reminder from Gregory Whitehead, in “Out of the Dark: Notes on the Nobodies of Radio Art”, of the

exuberant aspirations first triggered by Marconi’s twitching finger: promises of communication with alien beings, the establishment of a universal language, instantaneous travel through collapsing space, and the achievement of a lasting global peace. (Kahn and Whitehead 1992: 253-54)

Allen S. Weiss, in “Radio, Death and the Devil: Artaud’s *Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieu*”, recalls the banning of Artaud’s tape for its “scatological, vicious and obscene anti-Catholic and anti-American pronouncements” (Kahn and Whitehead 1992: 272); and Mark E. Cory, in “Soundplay: The Polyphonous Tradition of German Radio Art”, quotes Paul Portner’s reflections:

I trade the desk of an author for the studio of the sound engineer: my new syntax is the cut, my product is recorded over microphones, mixers, and filters on magnetic tape; the principle of montage creates a playful composition (Spielwerk) out of hundreds of particles. (Kahn and Whitehead 1992: 331)

Cory prefaces this quotation with the claim that Portner’s experiment, “a collage of voice and sound effects taken through a series of electronic manipulations until the sound effects begin to speak, the voice to drip like water and shatter like glass”,

ripped the fabric of Germany’s highly successful establishment Hörspiel, fundamentally changing the way radio “drama” in that country would be created. And in critical terms it linked a forgotten chapter of avant-garde experiments from Weimar Germany with the developing aesthetic of today’s New Hörspiel in a fascinating pattern of continuity and discontinuity. (Kahn and Whitehead 1992: 331)

As we attempt to situate radio within the neo-avant-garde, it is worth remembering that one of its central features has been the co-existence of the highbrow and the lowbrow. This was manifestly the case in pre-war Britain: “Before the war the listener had been ‘plunged straight from popular to unpopular material, from highbrow to lowbrow and vice versa’” (Briggs 1985: 244). The post-war introduction of the Third Programmes alongside the Home and Light Programmes made for a clearer distinction between highbrow and lowbrow provision. In France the pre-war situation was complicated by the existence of private stations alongside the State radio service. After the war the creation of *France-Culture* created more or less a Gallic equivalent of the Third Programme (subsequently Radio 3). In the 1930s avant-garde material was thus placed into slots before and after more mainstream programmes. From the 1950s onwards the natural home, in theory, for neo-avant-garde programmes should have been the more highbrow channels, but this was not always the case, perhaps because the frontiers between high and popular culture, in practice, were being

re-drawn. Ian Rodger was undoubtedly exaggerating, not only by ignoring the private stations, when he claimed:

In France, where the avant-garde writer has largely been denied access to radio by a severely controlled state monopoly, there has been little radio drama of much significance and the more eccentric and dissident talents have tended to find their outlet in films. (Rodger 1982: 6)

Consideration of the avant-garde, neo-avant-garde and radio also has to take into account not only technical developments and devices but also ideas and stylistic features, including the fundamental role of voice: unlike literature, words in radio are not just text. By taking the particular examples of two members of the surrealist group in Paris in the 1920s and therefore two men who would appear at first sight to represent the historical avant-garde, Robert Desnos and Philippe Soupault, this essay seeks to study what light their work in radio, in the interwar and post-war periods respectively, sheds on the matter. In the case of Soupault, however, he is being studied as a representative of a certain neo-avant-garde, since he “reinvented himself” after the war with his work in radio, after he “came back from the dead” when he returned to France as a “ghost” in 1945: the title of the diary covering that period was *Journal d'un fantôme*; and in *Vingt mille et un jours* (Soupault 1980: 220) he confides: “I was not surprised to read in a literary journal the announcement that I was dead”.¹ This process of reinvention may be taken as a paradigm for the relationship between the historical avant-garde and some forms or aspects of the neo-avant-garde. Both Desnos and Soupault clearly seemed to assume from the outset that what they did in radio had to be more mainstream in its appeal than their surrealist roots might suggest, but by no means did they discard radical designs.

Robert Desnos

The beginning of Desnos' career in radio almost coincided with his exclusion from the surrealist movement: the publication of Breton's “Second manifeste du surréalisme” in *La Révolution surréaliste* in December 1929 and the vicious attack on him in the pamphlet “Un cadavre” predated by just a few months Desnos' first radio broadcast.² The *content* of that broadcast, on 14 June 1930, did not signal a major departure for Desnos himself, since it took the form of a lecture for

Radio-Paris entitled “Initiation au surréalisme” in a series devoted to the arts: it was specifically about surrealist painting. So it was a cultural programme on an avant-garde subject. His second venture, on 5 January 1931, was a twenty-minute talk about Cuban music for which he was almost certainly assisted by his friend, Alejo Carpentier, who had been his unofficial guide in Havana in 1928.³ Although the music in question would have included folk and dance material, the tone of the broadcast would still have been relatively serious. A similar kind of project was the later series of Persil concerts (‘concerts Persil’), “Trois siècles de chansons”, which traced the history of French song from traditional folk material to the absolutely contemporary Maurice Chevalier (Dumas 1980: 210-11).

Desnos’ mentor, as far as radio was concerned, was undoubtedly Paul Deharme who was a very important promoter of the concept of “un art radiophonique” (“a radiophonic art”). His contribution was analysed thus by Pierre Domène:

In the early days of radio broadcasting, Paul Deharme was in the avant-garde of prophets and researchers. His principle: radio can be self-sufficient. It is not a process of peddling and initiation [sic] but a new instrument endowed with its own intellectual richness and an autonomous and independent mode of expression. (Dumas 1980: 194)⁴

A more precise explanation was provided a few years later by Jean Selz:

Paul Deharme [...] was the first to conceive of a technique in sound appropriate to wireless. He studied the value of words as *phonic objects* and established an effective distinction between *language spoken by a visible subject* and *language spoken by an invisible subject*. For this distinction Paul Deharme had created a theory of listening based on the listener’s capacity for identification with the voice of the invisible being heard through the mediation of radio. (Dumas 1980: 594)⁵

This article was specifically concerned with advertising but the principles that Deharme espoused held true for programmes proper. For some people, the mere mention of adverts would doubtless appear to take us as far as possible from art and the avant-garde but this, of course, is not the whole truth. Deharme had formed a company called *Information et Publicité* and one day his wife Lise, who is famous in the annals of surrealism as the lady with the blue glove in Breton’s

Nadja, took Desnos to its headquarters. As a result of the meeting between the two men Desnos started work there in November 1932.

Arguably Desnos most famous commission was the promotion of a radio programme featuring *Fantômas*, the arch-criminal protagonist of a hugely popular series of detective stories written by Pierre Souvestre and Marcel Allain and published on a monthly basis between 1911 and 1913. What began as an advert became, in fact, a serious creative work, *La Grande Complainte de Fantômas*, which was broadcast on 3 November 1933 by Radio-Paris, Radio-Luxembourg, Radio-Normandie, Radio-Agen, Radio-Lyon and Nice-Juan-les-Pins, so that it could be heard in most of the country.⁶ On the same day the newspaper *Le Petit Journal* published an article by Deharme which reaffirmed his aesthetic principles, including the claim:

In truth, it is not so much a question of compensating for the absence of vision as putting it to good use: music and certain motifs enrich the imagination and all the more so if you listen to them with your eyes closed. (Dumas 1980: 201)

The Desnos text was accompanied by original music by Kurt Weill, Alejo Carpentier was the musical director, Antonin Artaud combined the role of *Fantômas* with responsibility for the “direction dramatique”, and even Lise Deharme’s voice was utilised. Desnos would presumably have had access to the script of the radio programme and would probably have revisited some of the novels to refresh his childhood memories.

The work consists of twenty-five six-line heptasyllabic stanzas (“sizains”), followed by a “Final” in the same format. Something of the style of the poem – for it is indeed a poem – has been captured by Robin Walz:

Fantômas was pure pulp carnival, a mishmash of flat characters, stilted dialog and cheap thrills, the popular novel equivalent of the melodramas staged in the Théâtre Moderne so affectionately described by Aragon in *Le Paysan de Paris* and Breton in *Nadja*. The narrative trappings of *Fantômas* were arcane, melodramatic, Belle Epoque schlock – the “family circle” of principal players, the Manichaean opposition of good versus evil, the sublimity of overstated rhetoric, and the spectator’s total pleasure in riding along for the performance. Yet *Fantômas* exceeded the boundaries of its melodramatic trappings. Moral restitution was fundamentally denied through the motif of the escape of *Fantômas* at the end of each episode. All the reader was left with was an endless, yet predictable string of murders, thefts, disguises, pursuits,

traps, confrontations, arrests, and escapes – and not a bit of it plausible.

Desnos captured a sense of the cultural dynamism of *Fantômas* in the “Lament”. The poem overflows with horrific images, poetic equivalents to the original lurid, full-color book covers illustrated by Gino Starace. In a large bell a moustachioed artisan hangs upside down as a human clapper, swinging from side to side, raining blood, sapphires and diamonds onto the street below. A low-life tavern proprietress, La Toulouche, recovers a treasure-box from the entrails of a cadaver, surrounded by a gang of Parisian underworld *apaches* with monikers like Pretty Boy (*Beaumôme*), Bull’s Eye (*Oeil-de-Boeuf*) and Gas Pipe (*Bec de Gaz*).⁷ Masked bandits brandishing revolvers drive a city bus into a bank, bursting through walls, crashing into counters, strewing money all about. (Walz 2000: 43-44)⁸

The opening line of Desnos’s “Complainte” immediately reveals that it was destined for an audience (in the literal sense of the word): “Ecoutez [...] Faites silence [...]” (“Listen [...] Be silent”). These instructions were probably even more necessary then than now, since the quality of the reception, for many of the listeners, may have left a lot to be desired, and the remainder of the stanza proceeds to remind them, in general terms, of the villain’s crimes, thus bringing back memories of the novels for those listeners who had read them a couple of decades earlier:

La triste énumération
De tous les forfaits sans nom,
Des tortures, des violences,
Toujours impunis, hélas!
Du criminel Fantômas.

(The depressing list
Of all the unspeakable crimes,
Tortures, acts of violence,
Of the criminal, Fantômas,
That are still unpunished.)
(Desnos 1969: 101)

Desnos would have known, almost instinctively, that the requirements of radio, certainly at that time, allied to the requirements of an advert and also the very popular, not to say populist, nature of the subject, meant that he had to employ a very conventional poetic form. The result was a curious mixture of tradition and invention. Furthermore, there is a strange clash between form and content, between the

particular poetic style, which possesses a certain “innocence”, for want of a better term, and the gruesome or horrific material. In stanza 10 La Toulouche resembles a vampire when she sinks her teeth into an Englishman whose entrails become the hiding-place of a treasure. At times the story-line verges on the supernatural, as in stanza 6, where a corpse comes back to life – one of the many situations in which Fantômas cheats death.

On 4 July 1936, to mark Independence Day, Desnos devised for the same channel, in the guise of a “poème radiophonique”, Walt Whitman’s *Salut au monde!* He was not content to offer a simple reading of the text and although the script has been lost, comments made by Germaine Blondin in *Radio-Magazine*, no. 665, 12 July 1936 give some idea of the approach:

To celebrate the anniversary of American independence, the Poste Parisien entrusted the poet Robert Desnos with the task of taking the microphone to present to us the Walt Whitman poem *Salut au monde!* A well placed trust, since it resulted in an admirable fresco in sound which stands comparison, for its scale and its quality, with the unforgettable film *Melody of the World*. In the editing where his culture and professional intelligence rivalled his poetic sensitivity, Robert Desnos discovered the sounds, the songs and the music that you would have said emerged from the brain of the poet at the same time as his verse. It was very great sound imagery which allows us to give a lot of credit to the art of radio. (Dumas 1980: 215)⁹

The success of this broadcast led to a series of weekly programmes likewise entitled *Salut au monde*, in which different countries were evoked through their folklore and customs. These programmes ran between May and August 1937 and covered a diversity of locations, from Great Britain, Italy and Spain to Central America and the French Empire.

Another of Desnos’ important cultural projects involving radio was the “Cantate pour l’inauguration du Musée de l’Homme”. He wrote the libretto which was set to music by Darius Milhaud. The work was first performed on 11 October 1937 in the museum with a group of musicians from the orchestra of Radio-Lille on whose airwaves it was broadcast: the line-up consisted of piano, flute, oboe, saxophone, bassoon and percussion. The conductor was Manuel Rosenthal and the soloist was Madeleine Milhaud, the composer’s wife, who was supported by a four-part Chorus. The Desnos lyrics have the simplicity and the directness that the genre demands. The “Cantate” begins as a hymn to Creation sung by the Chorus but the stars and

planets initially have no names. The Chorus is not heard again until the first appearance of humankind. In section 4, man begins his series of discoveries at the simplest of levels: “L’homme découvre sa main, la nage. L’homme contemple le vol des oiseaux” (“Man discovers his hand, and learns how to swim. Man observes the flight of birds”) (Desnos 1969: 167), but in this observation there is perhaps just the hint of a millennial dream that the Wright brothers and their successors were to realise at the dawn of the twentieth century. A revelation in parentheses at the end of that section shows, interestingly, that Desnos had in mind the performance in the museum at least as much as the broadcast, since he employs a mime: “These themes produced by the music and illustrated by the mime” (1969: 167).

Both the “Complainte de Fantômas” and the “Cantate pour l’inauguration du Musée de l’Homme” clearly come under the heading of “culture”, in the conventional sense of the word, but one could argue that Desnos’ most “cutting edge” contributions in his radio work are to be found in the adverts proper that he devised: the “Complainte” clearly went far beyond the normal scope of advertising. From 1934 until 1939 Desnos was responsible for the ads for all the *Foniric* programmes, including the Salacrou pharmaceutical products, where it was very convenient that an old acquaintance, the dramatist Armand Salacrou, was the son of the founder of the company.¹⁰ Dominique Desanti has described the collaboration between the two writers:

Ten years later, Salacrou was delighted to recount how they had devised commercials that were already real equivalents of videos in sound. Created together (‘but Robert’s ideas came more quickly’), they had to surround the slogans with sound effects and music, with a well-known tune acting as the theme, and alternating voices. (Desanti 1999: 276)

She cites the Vermifuge Lune, an anthelmintic, in which the role of the child was played by the subsequently famous Mouloudji, and also the Vin de Frileuse, a tonic wine, that utilised the song “La Cucuracha”. Desnos himself considered this to be one of the most successful examples: “People are aware of the success enjoyed by the sentence in the *Vin de Frileuse* ad whispered by the announcer into the ears of all the listeners: ‘*Vin de Frileuse* is on sale at your pharmacist’s” (Dumas 1980: 208).¹¹ Desnos built on a slogan that Salacrou had originally devised for the drink, “le plus fort des

fortifiants” (“the strongest tonic”), incorporating it into his own text (see Salacrou 1974: 298).¹²

Desnos was involved in a wide range of radio programmes. One of the most successful was *La Clef des Songes*, which ran on a weekly basis on Le Poste Parisien from 11 February 1938 until June 1939, and for which he was aided and abetted by the novelist Gilbert Cesbron. Listeners sent in transcripts of their dreams and the most “suitable” formed the basis for a reconstruction or dramatisation. It arose therefore out of his surrealist experience but also built in a vox pop dimension. The dreams were then analysed by Desnos who relied considerably on Henri Vidal’s 1921 translation of the *Oneirocriticon* (or *Oneirocritica*) by Artemidorus but it goes without saying that he also included references to Freud. In addition, Desnos wrote the programme’s theme song.¹³ A lot of Desnos’ radio work can be placed at the interface of the highbrow and the lowbrow. Furthermore, what may appear very trite at the start of the twenty-first century may have been truly innovative in the 1930s.

The outbreak of the Second World War signalled a temporary end to Desnos’ broadcasting career but it resumed in July 1941: sponsored by the hair and beauty products firm *Imédia*, he produced *Reflets de Paris*, starring some of the top singers of the day, *De toutes les couleurs* and *Brunes et blondes* that explored themes that arose out of some of its products, and then *Les Opéras immédiats*, whose title played on the name of the sponsors: the idea was to add new words to well-known operatic arias (see Dumas 1980: 217).

The importance of Desnos’ radio work has been assessed thus:

First of all, it [his work in radio] is by a long way the activity that Desnos engaged in with the greatest continuity and intensity: from 1934 to 1939 it occupied all his time, and in 1941-42 it continued as a marginal activity. Next Desnos carried it out with great enthusiasm: an art-form involving contact with the public, radio broadcasts allowed him to experiment in all sorts of ways and to give full rein simultaneously to his spirit of invention and to his taste for musical expression. (Dumas 1980: 218-19)

By talking in terms of experiments and invention, Dumas stresses the innovative, creative, avant-garde character of many of his broadcasts. His collaboration with Darius Milhaud for the cantata was probably the most avant-garde work but the programmes which revealed his surrealist heritage in one form or another likewise demand such an

appellation; and even his radio adverts must be situated in the vanguard of that genre.

Desnos died in June 1945, shortly before his forty-fifth birthday, at Terezin in Czechoslovakia after being shunted from one concentration camp to another.

Philippe Soupault's radio work: a neo-avant-garde rebranding

As for the inclusion of Philippe Soupault as a representative of the neo-avant-garde, Hal Foster's definition springs to mind:

In post-war art to pose the question of repetition is to pose the question of the *neo-avant-garde*, a loose grouping of North-American and Western European artists of the 1950s and 1960s who reprised such avant-garde devices as collage and assemblage, the readymade and the grid, monochrome painting and constructed sculpture. (Foster 1996: 1)

Foster is clearly thinking here more in terms of the visual and plastic arts rather than the verbal ones. It is therefore necessary to make appropriate conversions for a writer working in radio. Similarly Branden W. Joseph's study of the neo-avant-garde, *Random Order*, is a monograph on Robert Rauschenberg, but he does refer to the latter's "theater events" and the influence of Artaud. Foster subsequently considers minimalism and pop art and he does go on to examine the textual but his emphasis is on theory (Lukács, Barthes, Derrida, Baudrillard, Jameson). In practice, the "loose groupings" or even movements that form part of the literary neo-avant-garde conventionally include Concrete Poetry, for example, but perhaps the Nouveau Roman, the Theatre of Cruelty and the Theatre of the Absurd should likewise be included: the idea behind Ionesco's proliferating objects is not totally dissimilar to the serial production of images in Warhol's art.

Like Desnos, Soupault first worked in radio in the 1930s, when Pierre Brossolette, the subsequent hero and martyr of the Resistance, arranged for him to cover literature for the official station Paris-PTT. However, he moved to the "managerial" side of broadcasting when he accepted a request from the then Prime Minister Léon Blum in 1938 to set up Radio-Tunis in an attempt to counter the Fascist propaganda

emanating from Mussolini in that part of the Mediterranean (from Radio-Bari).

Certain aspects of Soupault's radio work are discussed at some length in a conversation between François Martinet and Jean Chouquet (Chouquet 1997). Chouquet and Soupault collaborated on a programme called "Prenez garde à la poésie" broadcast in 1952. It aimed to present contemporary poetry, which was regarded by many people as difficult or elitist, in a manner that might appeal, if not to the masses, at least to a viable audience. Soupault was suggested to Chouquet by a fellow poet, Jean Tardieu, as the possible subject for the first in a series of twenty-minute programmes because he had recently brought out a collection of poems entitled *Chansons*.¹⁴ Before then, when Chouquet had first heard Soupault in the studio, he was immediately struck by his way with words, his fluency, his articulacy, the timbre of his voice: "His speech is clear, lively, and like any great radio man, he knows how to respect the silences between the words" (Chouquet 1997: 191). Since in that broadcast Soupault was talking about a recent trip to Mexico, it was a question of making the listeners 'see' that country with their ears, as Desnos had tried to do with *Salut au monde*. It was thus an example of the reprise of a pre-war avant-garde model.

As for the series "Prenez garde à la poésie", the idea was to set the poems to music, as had been done previously with some of Prévert's poems (for example, Joseph Kosma's music for "Les Feuilles mortes"). Soupault and Chouquet had to select a group of composers who could set their choice of poems to music in the different styles of the period just before rock'n'roll; these included Christiane Verger and André Popp. Subsequently Soupault was to confide that he did not like the result, especially Eddie Constantine singing "Mélancolie" (Soupault 1980b: 226-27).

This dissatisfaction may indeed have prompted a different aspect of his radio work, the series of plays he wrote for that medium. Although some have been staged, more were given an airing on France-Culture. A remark by his close friend Serge Fauchereau is quite revealing: "If Soupault returned to the theatre during the 50s, it was under the influence of radio rather than at the suggestion of his friends Beckett and Ionesco whose first performances he had supported" (Soupault 2000b: 154).¹⁵ Of course, Beckett too was to write a number of radio plays.

Soupault remembers his motives and aspirations when he sought once more to try his hand at drama at that time and betrays his awareness of theatre's commercial imperatives:

I wanted to project onto the stage the atmosphere of poetry. First I wrote a three-act play *La fille qui fait des miracles*. I knew that no director, unless he wanted to go bankrupt, would wish to stage the play. I had no illusions and I was not discouraged. I wrote other plays. (Soupault 1980b: 227)

The comment about “the atmosphere of poetry” is important but the next paragraph quietly reveals that this activity passed largely unnoticed, “except fortunately on radio” (1980b: 227). Radio offered potentially greater freedom to do his own thing.

These plays do not necessarily have to be seen in the light of the evolution and history of the radio play in general, for example in relation to some of the landmark works in that genre, ranging from Orson Welles' famous adaptation of his near namesake's *War of the Worlds* to Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*, but should be examined here for their possible value as neo-avant-garde works of art, perhaps in the context of the Theatre of the Absurd. Martin Esslin reminds his readers that Beckett and Soupault had first met on 27 June 1929 at the “Déjeuner Ulysse” in the Hôtel Léopold at Les Vaux-de-Cernay near Versailles and that the two men were part of the team that attempted to render Joyce's “Anna Livia Plurabelle” into French (see Esslin 1974: 13-14). Esslin also situates *S'il vous plaît* and *Vous m'oubliez* in his chapter entitled “The Tradition of the Absurd” (1974: 319-20), where the former is listed in a group of “bizarre and largely improvised plays” performed at a Dada manifestation on 20 March 1920 at the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre in Paris. Soupault himself gives his particular conception of the absurd in *Vingt mille et un jours* when he recalls a preface, in the form of questions and answers, that he wrote after a request from two young poets who were launching an anthology:

In particular they had asked what I thought of the absurd and logic. I replied that one had to refuse logic in order to admit poetry and that what is called the absurd is ever more necessary. [...] The absurd to which I allude is neither the absurd of Sartre nor that of Camus but the one illustrated and glorified by Beckett and Ionesco whom I was one of the first to appreciate and defend. (Soupault 1980b: 224)

A number of Esslin's definitions of the "Absurd" are not out of place when applied to some of Soupault's radio plays, especially *La Maison du Bon Repos*: he recalls the original meaning of "absurd" as "out of harmony" in a musical context, hence its dictionary definition as "out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical" (Esslin 1974: 5). More precisely, Soupault's radio plays might usefully be examined in the light of the concept of the "poetic avant-garde" theatre in French (Esslin 1974: 7), which implicitly, in the context of the 1950s or 1960s, raises the question of the "neo-avant-garde". Esslin employs the term "poetic avant-garde" in relation to dramatists like Michel de Ghelderode, Jacques Audiberti, Georges Neveux, and, in the younger generation, Georges Schehadé, Henri Pichette, and Jean Vauthier, and defines it as follows:

The "poetic avant-garde" relies on fantasy and dream reality as much as the Theatre of the Absurd does [...] Yet basically the "poetic avant-garde" represents a different mood; it is more lyrical, and far less violent and grotesque. Even more important is its different attitude towards language: the "poetic avant-garde" relies to a far greater extent on consciously "poetic" speech; it aspires to plays that are in effect poems, images composed of a rich web of verbal associations. (Esslin 1974: 7)

Throughout his life Soupault regarded himself primarily as a poet. Moreover, radio was not able to reproduce the tendency "toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself" that Esslin regards as part and parcel of the Theatre of the Absurd (1974: 7), unless sound could be used to play a similar role.

Even before Soupault wrote plays specifically for radio,¹⁶ there are many indications in his dramatic works from the 1950s that he already had eventual airings in mind. In *La fille qui fait des miracles*, dating from 1950, as early as the fifth speech, "the author", functioning as a narrator, gives a visual description of two of the characters, particularly the girl:

I'm looking at Miss Stella who's sitting next to an old gentleman dressed in a crumpled dinner jacket. Miss Stella's green eyes, her magnificent eyes, are staring at the crowd. This clairvoyant doesn't appear to see anything. She's waiting. She really is very pretty. At one and the same time she seems timid and insolent. But how pretty she is! (Soupault 1980a: 47)

There would be no need for such a commentary in the text if the audience could actually see the characters on stage but this is precisely the kind of information necessary in a radio play, what has been called a process of “transcodification”:

In radio drama it [the spoken word] has to carry extra freight, for as well as the dialogue itself it has to convey through dialogue, or at least through narration, almost all the other kinds of information that the theatregoer would be able to see for herself [sic] – that is, whatever the audience needs to know about setting, time of day, the stature, dress and actions of the characters, any physical objects they may make use of, and so on. (Crisell 1986: 138)

In *La fille qui fait des miracles*, the “author” continues to function like a commentator on a sporting event: “The curtain rises. That juggler is pathetic. You can’t stop yourself waiting for him to muff all his tricks” (Soupault 1980a: 48). This particular process of ostension continues throughout the text.

As for Soupault’s radio plays proper, a couple of examples must suffice. *Etranger dans la nuit ou ça n’arrive qu’aux autres* is a one-act play broadcast in 1977 but written in 1974 (see Soupault 1980a: 214). It is essentially a dramatisation of possibilities inherent in the title of the popular song made famous by Frank Sinatra, “Strangers in the Night”, a few bars of which are heard at the end: in a modest way there is a novel integration of the middlebrow into something akin to the highbrow. A wireless set which works just as much as a “character” as the characters proper creates a *mise en abyme* situation – it is indeed included in the *dramatis personae* in the script published in *A vous de jouer!*. The play opens with a voice on the radio announcing the escape from prison of a dangerous murderer. Sound effects immediately start to play a role, helping to create auditory images to replace in part the visual impressions with which the spectator in the theatre is automatically confronted. The listener is exposed to the sounds of plates and glasses, the playing of a piano, then crucially the ringing of a doorbell that signals the arrival of the murderer: the cosy bourgeois dinner-party planned for the evening is thus dramatically disrupted. Some of the “poetry” in the play may reside in moments of surreal black humour, as when the female guest, Michèle, accuses her husband of driving “at breakneck speed”, using this cliché in the account of the immediate aftermath of an accident which had delayed their arrival. *Etranger dans la nuit* contains references to various topical motifs, from the hijacking of aeroplanes

to “near death experiences”, many of which inevitably explore aspects of the basic inter-relationship of life and death, especially absurdist implications of this theme.

La Maison du Bon Repos, a five-act comedy, was broadcast in 1976. Among the influences that Soupault himself has acknowledged are Baudelaire’s translation of Edgar Allan Poe’s tale “The System of Dr Tarr and Prof. Fether”, Molière’s *Les Fâcheux* and Pirandello, especially *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (see Soupault 1980a: 163). As a result of his experience of observing Jacques Reynier at work on sound-mixing, Soupault deliberately gave a role in this play to sound effects (“le bruitage”). Indeed his preface, in which he explains his thinking, was addressed to Reynier, thus stressing the importance of the technical input:

[...] during those sessions I noticed that if a play’s text was the most important element, it was necessary, as in daily life, to give a presence to noises and sounds. Therefore, as I wrote this play, I tried to give a role to what you call sound effects (the artificial reconstitution, as dictionaries put it, of the natural noises that must accompany the author). (Soupault 1980a: 164)

Crisell distinguishes between *noises*, “sounds which are extraneous to speech (the creak of a door, for example)” and *sound effects*, “acoustic treatments of speech or sounds such as the fading up or down of speech or noises, or the addition of echo to a voice” (Crisell 1986: 138-39). Although Reynier’s equipment was doubtless up to the minute, Soupault’s use of noise is relatively discreet: his desire was not to shock but to reconcile the demands of a mainstream medium with new technical possibilities. In order to exploit the particular quality of radio, the play opens with the sounds of a violent thunderstorm, a motor bike and the prolonged ringing of a doorbell. These noises clearly set the tone, operating like Eliot’s “objective correlative” to create a frantic, chaotic atmosphere. There is nothing unusual about this but the effect right from the start is to stress the primacy of sound in a radio play, as opposed to the visual and the kinetic (set, costumes, gesture, movement) in a conventional stage production; but normally in both types of drama the spoken word is ultimately the central feature, as Soupault admits. Arguably, however, the radio listener may well have to concentrate harder than the audience in the theatre. Whereas Desnos had used radio to pursue the surrealist interrogation of dreams, Soupault’s *La Maison du Bon Repos* also arose out of his observation of psychodramas and out of

his very surrealist interest in the fluidity of the frontiers between sanity and madness (Soupault 1980a: 165). The play involves a reversal of roles between doctors, student nurses and patients in a psychiatric clinic. In such a scenario it is almost inevitable that the absurd makes an appearance. "Dr Chaval" insists on the need to operate for appendicitis on a young woman, Jocelyne, who has sought refuge from the storm, despite her protestations that she is in good health and had had her appendix removed the previous year. Her male companion, Thierry, is accused of alcoholism, the proof being his lack of familiarity with the works of Poe. In Act II they are introduced to a couple of the inmates and another "doctor", Bourron; and periodically the dialogue is punctuated by further noises, of the storm and mysterious muffled voices. In Act III another character is introduced, a pianist, who plays part of a Chopin waltz on an out-of-tune instrument. There is the hint of an ironically Romantic poetry in a gratuitous exchange between a pair of twins, Pierre and Paul, would-be poets whose conversation is structured around verse quotations (Soupault 1980a: 187, 190). The play is generally suffused with a gentle, almost gentlemanly humour, despite the threat that the situation seems to pose, to Thierry and Jocelyne at least. A bell summons the "guests" to the table for lunch and further noises are heard, noises which become frightening cries for help that "Dr Bourron" dismisses as "hypnagogic hallucinations". Act IV opens with Mlle Dupin "murdering" the *Moonlight Sonata* as a prelude to a charade which has barely begun before a dramatic opening to the final act: Dr Maillard, the bona fide doctor, bursts in and quickly explains to Thierry and Jocelyne that Chaval and Bourron are merely student nurses and that the "charade" in question is actually a psychodrama. Maillard makes the patients reveal their true identities, putting an end to their delusions of grandeur: for instance, Mlle Dupin, a shorthand-typist before her transfer to the asylum, is made to retire to her room to practise Erik Allais's concerto for typewriter, which must be regarded as an experimental avant-garde or neo-avant-garde opus.¹⁷ Thierry and Jocelyne are thanked for staying to listen to the confessions and are allowed to leave but not before Maillard asks them to think seriously about the parameters of madness rather than jump to rash conclusions. When Thierry reveals that his favourite speed on his motor-cycle is 180 kilometres an hour, the doctor comments: "Everybody's mad in some way". The play ends with a brief silence followed by the sound of a motor-cycle, mad music, the voice of a newscaster on the radio reporting a serious road-accident

and then further crazy music. The last word, so to speak, is thus given to the sound engineers.

In the preface Soupault reveals that in the process of composition, he amused himself by playing the role of “a dramatic author” for a month while knowing that in reality he was merely an old poet (1980a). So he did let his own mask slip and here again talked in terms of some kind of reinvention of the self. This may be a paradigm for the relationship between the historical avant-garde and certain forms of the neo-avant-garde.

Conclusion

There are manifest limits or even dangers to this kind of case study approach but by examining the radio work of Desnos and Soupault, it would be easy to conclude that the former’s contribution was the more important and the more innovative. Soupault’s neo-avant-garde attempt to present poetry on radio did not take that particular exploration much further: both men relied essentially on music to ‘jazz up’, so to speak, the written word. Soupault’s radio plays, though they explored a genre ignored by Desnos, save for his dramatisation of listeners’ dreams, were not absolutely ground-breaking at the technical level but *La Maison du Bon Repos* creates a kind of waking nightmare which transferred to radio the Theatre of the Absurd. In the context of radio, avant-garde programmes were initially held to be situated at the “high culture” end of the spectrum but certain forms of the neo-avant-garde made incursions into popular or at least middlebrow culture. Soupault’s radio plays may suggest that a certain type of neo-avant-garde was quite mainstream in its absorption of the middlebrow (if not the lowbrow) whilst still retaining a surreal or absurdist dimension. Radio, like television, by going into the homes of the public, may have changed the nature of the avant-garde/neo-avant-garde, simply because people no longer had to make the effort to go out and find it, in art-galleries, theatres or cinemas. In the world of radio, art is thus very much involved with the praxis of life. Perhaps it would not be too great an exaggeration to claim that almost all radio drama might possess an avant-garde/neo-avant-garde quality in its erosion of the frontiers between the inner and outer worlds:

As soon as we hear a word in a radio play, we are close to the experience it signifies; in fact the sound is literally inside us. To submit to this kind of invasion, to allow another’s picture

of the universe to enter and undermine our own, is to become vulnerable in a way we do not when we watch a film or a play, where the alien world is demonstrably outside. (Lewis 1981: 51)

Notes

¹ All translations are mine.

² The *Second manifeste du surréalisme* was published in book form on 25 June 1930. Desnos appears to have been the driving force behind “Un cadavre” which probably came out in January 1930 (see Dumas 1980: 168).

³ Carpentier was subsequently to write a book entitled *La musica en Cuba*. 1946. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Economica. An English translation by Alan West-Durán was published by the University of Minnesota Press in 2001; in the introduction Timothy Brennan refers to Carpentier’s avant-garde radio programming.

⁴ Domène, Pierre. *Radio-Magazine*, 554 (27 May 1934); in Dumas 1980: 194. Although the text has the word “initiation”, in this context “imitation” would seem more plausible.

⁵ Selz, Jean. ‘Conception et écoute de la publicité radiophonique’ in *Arts et métiers graphiques. Publicité 1938*. See Dumas 1980: 594, n. 2.

⁶ A version of the text entitled “Complainte de Fantômas” was published in *Fortunes*, 99-109.

⁷ The French noun *bec de gaz* is actually the equivalent of “street-lamp”.

⁸ Walz 2000: 43-44.

⁹ *La Mélodie du Monde (Melodie der Welt)* was made in 1929 by the German film-director Walter Ruttmann.

¹⁰ The two had met at the time of the armistice. See Dumas 1980: 28.

¹¹ Desnos: 1939. See Dumas 1980: 208, where the script is reproduced.

¹² See Salacrou 1974: 298.

¹³ Its text was initially published in a special number of *Europe*, 517-18, pp. 217-19, and subsequently in Desnos 1987: 29-31.

¹⁴ Paris: Eynard, 1949.

¹⁵ Soupault 2000b: 154. At the start of his career Soupault had co-authored, with André Breton, the sketches *Vous m’oubliez* and *S’il vous plait*.

¹⁶ For a fuller listing of his programmes for radio and television, see Soupault 1980b: 279.

¹⁷ Soupault's play predates by several years the In Spe "Concerto for Typewriter in D" (1984) but Leroy Anderson had composed "The Typewriter" in 1950.

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**HOME FURNISHINGS:
RICHARD HAMILTON, DOMESTICITY AND
'POST-AVANT-GARDISM'**

BEN HIGHMORE

The Post-Avant-Garde

No work, I think, is more easily recruited for demonstrating Peter Bürger's thesis concerning the nature of the 'neo-avant-garde' (in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*) than Pop Art. Pop Art, in the guise of Andy Warhol, is the main example that Bürger himself uses to show how the neo-avant-garde (primarily, Western art produced after 1945) is an 'avant-garde' that exists as a mere inauthentic mirage of the avant-gardes of the 1910s and 20s. This new avant-garde no longer aspires to its revolutionary social mission of overcoming the separation of 'art' and 'life' and helping foster a new communal life-world where life-as-art and art-as-life could refashion our day-to-day existence. If the early twentieth century avant-garde had deluded itself about its historical importance (because the gift of radical social alteration was never its to give), the new avant-garde couldn't even claim the social significance of such a delusion. Pop Art, again in the shape of Warhol, is also used by Fredric Jameson, in his once-compelling account of *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. And again it is used to tell a melancholic story of art's inability to imagine socially better worlds. It is worth sticking with this surface connection between these two 'field-defining' texts for a while, mainly because it will help clarify something of what is at stake in designating artworks as 'neo' or 'post avant-garde'.

Let me start with Jameson. For Jameson, Andy Warhol's "Diamond Dust Shoes" (a photographic silkscreen painting from 1980 where "diamond dust" had been added to the ink, to give it a glittery patina) evidences "a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense" (Jameson 1991: 9). It is a chronic example of "the waning of affect in postmodern culture" (10).

Now the point of mentioning this overly-rehearsed argument here is to point out that for Jameson it is the work itself – its symptomatic contents – that allows him to diagnose the culture of postmodernism. And it is from looking at a number of literary and visual works that Jameson will also make a crucial claim about the lack of critical bite that he sees as being characteristic of postmodernism. This lack of criticality is shown most vividly by the fact that in postmodernism “parody finds itself without a vocation: it has lived and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place”. Pastiche, for Jameson, is less critical for the very precise reason that it cannot posit another world against which the mimicked world can be faulted:

[Pastiche] is a neutral practice of [...] mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satirical impulse, devoid of laughter and any of the conviction that alongside the abnormal tongue you have momentarily borrowed, some healthy linguistic normality still exists. (Jameson 1991: 17)

Without some life-world outside the one that is the target of representation, mimicry is emptied of its ability to positively negate its target.

We might, then, by way of an example, imagine Jameson looking at two collages of interiors, the first by John Heartfield (“Hurrah, die Butter ist alle!”, 1935) and the second by Richard Hamilton (“Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing”, 1956). The Heartfield collage shows us a good bourgeois Nazi family, sitting down to eat a dismantled bicycle, while the baby gnaws on an axe and the dog licks a nut and bolt. The target (‘the ulterior motive’) is given in the text; it is Goering and his ultra-nationalist claim that “iron always makes a country strong, butter and lard only make people fat”. By literalising Goering's rhetorical claim, and by mimicking the visual codes of an idealised German family, Heartfield is successful at not only satirising Nazi warmongering, but also a subservient bourgeoisie who are complicit with such a politics. Heartfield's critique is mobilised by a set of values (feeding people as an unshakeable priority of the state, for instance) that are in conflict with Nazism and want to see an end to it.

In the Hamilton collage there is no direct address to an enemy: indeed it would be hard to pinpoint a ‘target’ in Hamilton's work in quite the same way as one could in Heartfield's. For Jameson, perhaps, there might be a lack of another world being imagined outside of the extensive commercialism that is pictured in Hamilton's

interior. But it is also hard to think of it simply within the terms of Jameson's discussion. What is, on reflection, visually striking about Hamilton's work has less to do with its effectiveness in dismantling the values of runaway commercialism and more to do with the way the interior seems to not-quite hang together; the way the floor and ceiling give way to other spaces (a crowded beach, the earth seen from space) for instance. The false perspective produced by the smallness of the vacuum-cleaning woman in relation to the foreground figures, for instance, continues the dissonance that renders the space visually uncanny. (I will return to the spatial dissonance in Hamilton's representations of domestic space in a while.)

Jameson's account of modernism and postmodernism fits where it touches, but it is an account that emerges out of a hermeneutic engagement with the visual and literary texts of modern culture. Peter Bürger's account of avant-gardism and neo-avant-gardism, on the other hand is, at times, inattentive to the works themselves precisely because it is concerned with the social role allotted to the cutting-edge artist and artwork at different historical junctures:

In a changed context, the resumption of avant-gardiste intentions with the means of avant-gardism can no longer even have the limited effectiveness the historical avant-gardes achieved. To the extent that the means by which the avant-gardistes hoped to bring about the sublation of art have attained the status of works of art, the claim that the praxis of life is to be renewed can no longer be legitimately connected with their employment. To formulate more pointedly: the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions. (Bürger 1984: 58)

For Bürger post-war avant-gardism is already assimilated ('recuperated', to use a term of post-war radical vernacular) to the interests of the culture industry because, historically, the avant-garde artist is now fully instituted as an artist (rather than as a revolutionary, or anti-artist) and avant-garde practices have been recognised as producing artworks. In this it really doesn't matter if the work is exactly the same, and motivated by the same social intentions, as that produced by the historical avant-garde: the cultural and social landscape has fundamentally changed making such motivations naïve at best, charlatanism at worst. As Bürger states, his address is to the social functioning of avant-gardism: "it is the status of their products, not the consciousness artists have of their activity, that defines the social effects of works" (Bürger 1984: 58).

Logically, then, Bürger is not really talking about artworks at all, or not specific ones at any rate, but he is talking about the institutional conditions pertaining to art, conditions that affect the production, circulation, distribution, and social role of art. Bürger's claim is much stronger and much more social than his 'neo' allows for: his claim is that post-war art evidences a number of distinct qualities because it is produced under conditions of post-avant-gardism, conditions where avant-gardism as a revolutionary mission is structurally impossible to produce. (And here a condition of 'post-avant-gardism' connects to theories of postmodernity because avant-gardism is associated with the radical re-orchestration of the life-world.) As far as it goes it is hard, I think, not to give credence to this aspect of his account in relation to art: in the contemporary art-scene, for instance, major national and international art prizes (the Turner prize or any number of biennales, for instance) are awarded to artists on the basis of their presumed vanguardism. In this Bürger's account might be more convincing than Jameson's thesis precisely because Jameson's work rests on the assumption that for an artwork to do avant-garde work it necessarily needs to be parodic and critical. But it is not my intention here to argue the pros and cons of this argument, merely to clarify something of the theoretical work being done.

What, then, if we were to treat the work of the neo-avant-garde as post-avant-gardism: not a repetition, but an aligned activity taking place under changed circumstances? What would happen if we were to treat so-called neo-avant-garde art as work done in the face of the impossibility of repeating the desires of the historic avant-garde? This, I think, would mean taking Bürger's analysis of the institution art seriously precisely because his discussion of neo-avant-gardism is so woefully inadequate. Bürger recognises structural change but is unable to see it as having any effect on the production of avant-garde art, even though, ironically, he offers one of the best foundations for grasping its changing purpose.

If neo-avant-gardism was conscious of the historical difficulty or impossibility of imagining other life-worlds from which the wreckage of the immediate post-war world could not only be recognised as misguided and misdirected, but also set on a correct course, then the value of parody, or criticism, or the sublation of art and life, might not be the terms that are best suited to understanding it. Much of this work, I want to argue, does recognise the misdirected and ruinous character of modern life without offering another life-world for which it can be substituted. In fact to treat such work only in terms of its

parodic, critical and revolutionary agendas might be, precisely, to obscure and obviate the productive work it does in describing a misdirected and ruinous social world. Even for work that seems close to the critical and parodic performance evident in a John Heartfield collage there might be benefit in treating it as post-avant-garde.

Other montage practices that figured the domestic interior and seemed to have a mission similar to Heartfield's, emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in relation to the Vietnam War. Using source materials culled from the pages of US homemaking and design magazines artists like Erró (figure 1) and Martha Rosler in her work "Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful", 1966-72, stage a decisive and highly visible breach of the discreteness of domestic space by populating these 'home' spaces with armies from 'away' (Vietnam). As polemical images they breach such domesticity by insisting on a relationship between US middle-class lifestyles and US neo-colonial adventurism abroad: the images might be saying – these two scenes are structurally related, you think your hands are clean in your centrally-heated dream-homes, but they are not. As such they might seem to comply with Jameson's ideas about parody and critical practice.

Yet in a post-avant-gardist sense this might be to ignore the descriptive work they are doing. In a more descriptive fashion they might also be making vivid one of the phenomenal aspects of the Vietnam War for many American civilians (as well as for the populations of many other countries): the constant (nightly) invasion of domestic space by news-footage of bombings, death and disfigurement. As such the domestic interior had already been breached: communication technologies that entered the home necessarily made those spaces porous and challenged their protective shield, but such a fact is brought home (literally) by taking it out from inside the protective membrane of the television screen to stage a confrontation in concrete space. Such work productively figures a relationship between a domestic (and domesticated) population and bloody war, and explores the phenomenological aspects of living with mass communication technologies in a domestic setting. Referring to the work of the German cultural critic Peter Sloterdijk, Slavoj Žižek reminds us that ideology often works through 'cynical reason': it is not that people are having the wool pulled over their eyes but that "they know very well what they are doing, but still they are doing it" (Žižek 1989: 29). By treating Erró and Martha Rosler's work as 'post-

avant-garde' we can see it as addressed, not to the false consciousness of US culture, but to its cynical reason.



Fig. 1: Erró, *Intérieur américain no. 4*, circa 1968. Private Collection.

Richard Hamilton and Post-Avant-Gardism

My argument, then, first needs to refute two possible framings for Hamilton's work. On the one hand I need to insist that Richard Hamilton *does not* carry on the same work of the historical avant-garde under changed circumstances (Bürger's neo-avant-garde frame) even though his involvement with Marcel Duchamp might suggest that he does, and even though he utilises many of the same pictorial devices (montage, primarily) that were central to the avant-gardes of the 1910s and 20s. On the other hand I also need to refuse the language of 'critical practice' (and the lack of it) that is offered by Jameson in his account of postmodernism, even though Hamilton's practice, in his own words, "led to a wilful acceptance of pastiche as a keystone to the approach" (Hamilton 1964: n.p.). I want to argue that by consciously facing up to a condition of post-avant-gardism, Hamilton (and others) shift the role of vanguardism away from

‘intervention’ and towards ‘description’, and that the particular form of description that Hamilton develops in the late 1950s and early 1960s offers a vivid and unresolved articulation of modern post-war culture.

That Hamilton was indeed conscious of the cultural effects produced by the recuperation of avant-gardism by the institutions of art (private, corporate, and state-sponsored) can best be seen in his contribution to the Daily Mail’s Ideal Home Exhibition in 1958. In a piece of interior design entitled “Gallery for a Collector of Brutalist and Tachiste Art” Hamilton stages a gallery space strikingly similar to the new wave of galleries emerging in London and already established in New York (the Betty Parsons’ Gallery was established in 1946 and Leo Castelli opened his massively successful gallery in Manhattan in 1957, for instance). In the space were a small number of Brutalist and Tachiste paintings and one sculpture by Eduardo Paolozzi (though some of these works would more usually be seen as congruent with US abstract expressionism – Sam Francis and Franz Kline, for instance). Included as well was Hamilton’s own “Hommage à Chrysler Corp.,” from the previous year.

Opposite Hamilton’s painting was a ten-foot high faux picture window that framed a photograph of a Citroën DS 19, set in what looks like a domestic-rural landscape. The gallery was furnished with Harley Earl chairs and in the centre was a large “appliance tower” that contained books, gadgets (a tape recorder, for instance), and alcohol. As Reyner Banham said in a contemporary review: “all the technical aids considered proper to a cultured man of the mid-fifties, from cocktails to tape-recorder, have been housed in a single mobile fitment” (Banham 1958: 207). In the exhibition and in the extant photographic documentation Richard and Terry Hamilton appear as ‘collectors’ and, we would assume, as agents for the buying and selling of artworks. The Citroën DS, while signalling an ultra-modern design, also seems to suggest the capital stakes that are involved in the business of art dealing and the material rewards that might accrue. The very terms of Brutalism and Tachism suggest an avant-garde positioning resistant to the blue-chip commodity values suggested by the gallery itself. Hamilton thereby positions himself as both Brutalist avant-gardist, and cultural arbiter in a taste economy. By inhabiting the two roles simultaneously, as a lived contradiction, Hamilton appears as a cultural technician: a designation that in many ways seemed to suit him and other artists of the time.



Fig. 2: Terry Hamilton at home with the appliance tower and Harley Earl chairs 1962. Originally displayed as Gallery for a Collector of Brutalist and Tachiste Art at the Daily Mail's Ideal Home Exhibition, 1958.

When the Ideal Home Exhibition closed, Richard and Terry took the interior elements home and installed the appliance tower and the various pieces of furniture into their Highgate home (figure 2). Here the gallery existed as both a domestic space and a professional space, while the artworks were now the works of the inhabitant (Hamilton). The gallery works as a constant reminder of the contradictions that exist for vanguard art at the time: a contradiction that was lived in its most literal and day-to-day way.

Such a contradiction was at the very heart of Pop Art as it was being imagined in the late 1950s. Then 'pop art' wasn't a genre, or a project, but a condition that necessitated a fundamental reconsideration of the status and purpose of fine art. In 1957 Hamilton, in a letter to the architects Alison and Peter Smithson, describes 'pop art' by a list of characteristics:

Popular (designed for a mass audience); Transient (short-term solution); Expendable (easily forgotten); Low cost; Mass produced; Young (aimed at youth); Witty; Sexy; Gimmicky; Glamorous; Big business. (Hamilton 1982: 28)

Hamilton is not laying out characteristics that he feels should be part of fine art (refashioned as ‘Pop Art’); he is simply characterising “art manufactured for a mass audience” (magazines, cinema, and the like). But, importantly, he is also recognising what fine art already is:

The above Pop inventory was the frame of reference for the proposed study [to turn an investigation of Pop into a new aesthetic]. Were any of these qualities incompatible with fine art as I, and indeed most people, had conceived it to be? A glance through the history of art will show these characteristics as very evident: Rubens was big business, Boucher’s paintings are sexy, Hogarth and Duchamp are witty. I did find one exception, ‘expendable’. I could not think of an artist of the past who meant to make expendable art, it seems a self-defeating goal. Warhol later disproved this exception – defeated less by intention than by museum officials who, realizing the extravagance of the idea and the rightness of its execution, had not the slightest difficulty in preserving his work. Warhol is perhaps the great exemplar; take any item on my list and Warhol is it, extremely so. (Hamilton 1982: 29)

In Hamilton’s assessment of mass-art and fine-art the very terms of avant-gardism, or artistic autonomy, are negated. There is simply no clear moral or ethical position that art could occupy that would set it apart from the culture industry: to believe in fine art’s ineffable difference and resistance to the culture industry was mere cant.

But if fine art was already coterminous with industrial culture and if there was no ethical or political high ground to take in simple opposition to it, then what would this mean for an art that still thought it had a social mission to fulfil? In the place left vacant by the idea of avant-gardism (as a fundamental confrontation with the dominant culture) a social art would need to regroup and fashion a practice that swapped confrontation for analysis, bypassed intervention and provocation and established a practice of description. In a number of ways this returned avant-gardism to its pre-modernist role as providing ‘complex realism’ – avoiding the naivety of naturalism and the social autism of modernism.

False perspectives and spatial dissonance

The fashioning of interior spaces is a constant pictorial interest within Hamilton's practice from 1956 ("Just what is it that...") to 1964 ("Interior I" and "Interior II" [figure 4]). In paintings such as "\$he", 1958-61 (figure 3), "Pin-up", 1961 (seen in the background in figure 2), and "Desk", 1964, an uncanny domesticity is articulated. Even the paintings that don't fit straightforwardly with this interest can in one way or another be seen to evidence aspects of domesticity and interior space: the painting "Hommage à Chrysler Corp.", 1957, sets car parts and body parts in an interior space (a much-abbreviated car showroom), while the painting "AAH!", 1962 (also seen in the background in figure 2), shows the inside (domestic) aspect of a car. Other paintings from this period, for instance the four-part "Towards a definitive statement on the coming trends in men's wear and accessories", 1962, are obviously also concerned with aspects of domesticity.

Hamilton's understanding of his practice, at least from 1956-1964, was that it was aimed at registering contemporary life and (crucially) the social and sensorial perceptions through which such life was experienced:

There was a mood of the late fifties, felt both in London and New York, which made some painters strive for the unique attributes of our epoch – the particular character of our community as it is to register its identity on social history. Those affected by such recurring pressures seek to fabricate a new image of art to signify an understanding of man's changing state and the continually modifying channels through which his perception of the world is attained. (Hamilton 1964: n.p.)

Art historical and critical commentary has tended to interpret such intentions as a concern with the new forms of commercial culture that were flowing into Britain from the US, as well as a general interest in technology, especially communication technology (TV, radios, telephones, magazines). Such interests are seen by most commentators to manifest themselves in the specific items pictured in the paintings (cars, refrigerators, toasters, and such like) and in the style of representation used to picture them (illusionist, diagrammatic, three-dimensional, spray-painted, sketchy, and so on).



Fig. 3: Richard Hamilton, *She*, 1958-61, Tate Gallery.

This approach is, to some degree, forcefully encouraged by Hamilton through his practice of publishing copiously detailed lists explaining the visual ingredients of his painting. In 1961 Hamilton finished the painting “*She*” (interrupted due to Hamilton’s project of translating and transposing Duchamp’s *Green Box*). Continuing the process of radical abbreviation and use of varied pictographic representation first developed in “*Hommage à Chrysler Corp.*”, Hamilton directed “*She*” specifically to the domestic interior, which had been the subject of his 1956 collage “*Just what is it...*”. When “*She*” was reproduced in *Architectural Design* in 1962 it was accompanied by an “exposition” cataloguing all the source elements for the painting and their provenance. This practice has had interesting effects: on the one hand, I think, it has tended to stymie a certain sort of art historical inquiry that is usually aimed at tracing, and speculating about, sources; on the other hand it has meant that commentary often defers to Hamilton’s own expositions and reproduces them in the place of commentary (in catalogues, for instance). Yet when Hamilton speaks of “*She*” as a painting “which is a sieved reflection of the ad man’s paraphrase of the consumer’s dream” (Hamilton 1982: 36), is it not the reduction of the reduction that is peculiarly intriguing – especially when this double reduction is related to another much-truncated form (the dream)? And when we look at the painting “*She*” is it not the

emptiness that pushes us out just as much the pictured elements pull us in? What are we to make of the barely-signalled interior spaces that such a painting articulates?

When the emptiness in Hamilton's paintings is referred to it is often a way of signalling the formalist interests that can be found in them. When Richard Morphet curated Hamilton's first retrospective at the Tate Gallery in 1970 it is this aspect of Hamilton's work that he privileged:

Between 1957 and 1962, Hamilton's method of disposing many separate items fairly widely over the picture surface had a built-in tendency to evince the autonomy (of source and substance) of each element, but this was a factor Hamilton could either have accentuated or have smoothed over. Typically his method was on the one hand to stress illusion by establishing a unified perspective to which all elements related, while on the other enlarging the tendency of the mass media to multiply distinct and even contradictory visual languages in any given immediate area. Thus we repeatedly find the most illusionistic passage in a work adjoining the most diagrammatic, an opposition complicated by a third category of mark – gratuitous in terms of figurative theme, but primary for painting – a passage of concrete, self-advertising abstraction. (Morphet 1970: 8)

Morphet is a dab-hand at applying a version of formalist criticism to the most unlikely of subjects (he would perform a similar feat with Warhol at the Tate the following year), yet the formalism being peddled here returns us to a field of representation and anti-representation, and keeps us chained to the artwork as simply artwork. Morphet (and he is far from being alone) chaperones our contact with the formal aspects of the painting, curtailing attention to the forms that might spill out into the living world of domestic space, space that is being simultaneously displayed and erased.

One of the best, most acute, analyses of the painting “She” does not come from art criticism, nor is it even addressed to (or even aware of) Hamilton's painting. It comes from Henri Lefebvre in his second volume of the *Critique of Everyday Life* which was published the same year as Hamilton finished “She”. This is Lefebvre writing about domestic life and the technological appliances that had already started to dominate home interiors:

Unconnected objects (vacuum cleaners, washing machines, radio or television sets, refrigerators, cars, etc.) determine a series of disjointed actions. Small technical actions intervene

in the old rhythms rather like fragmented labour in productive activity in general. The equipment of everyday life finds itself more or less in the same situation as industrial mechanization in its early stages, in the period when specific tools had unique and exclusive functions. If these gestures increase effectiveness – productivity – they also split things up; they truncate, they make mincemeat of everyday life; they leave margins and empty spaces. (Lefebvre 1961 [2002]: 75)

Truncations, margins and empty spaces are the contents that make up Hamilton's painting both in spite of, and because of, the evident surfeit of material goods they revel in.

Lefebvre's writing is a useful vantage point for looking at Hamilton's work of this period, not because the two men share a common analytic framework (they don't), but because they are both looking intently at the same objects, the same practices, and looking from the same historical juncture. While the different national contexts (France and Britain) could be seen as crucial (especially in regard to the distinct national experiences of the Second World War), geographically the two countries might be similarly placed in regard to two major forces affecting the culture of the late 1950s and early 1960s: the successful extension of US culture into Europe and the Cold War. It is not my intention, here, to persuade the reader that Hamilton promulgates a critique of everyday life in the way that Lefebvre does, or that Lefebvre was a cultural technician in the way that Hamilton was. More importantly I want to suggest that the determining conditions of post-war Europe allowed similar kinds of phenomenological accounts to be articulated across these very different works. If Lefebvre was a Marxist philosopher who elaborated a critique of everyday life as a way of assessing the extent that capitalist cultural forms were penetrating the everyday world (the world of leisure, the working day, and the home environment), then Hamilton and the Independent Group (a group of artists, architects and critics using the Institute of Contemporary Art in London [see Massey 1995 and Robbins 1990]) were involved in a parallel discussion of the characteristics of a new everyday cultural landscape populated by advertising, automobile styling, and domestic 'mod cons'.

Yet there is something here that still leaves a gap: or rather, the void that Hamilton's paintings cannot fill is not fully accounted for by just looking at the effects and affects of new domestic appliances on everyday life. We have to, I think, return to Morphet's assurance that Hamilton proceeds by "establishing a unified perspective", for the performance of his formalist tendencies. While there might be

perspective in the paintings it is, crucially, never entirely coherent. Between the female body parts and the machine tools (in “\$he”, or “Homage à Chrysler Corp.”) there exists, not just bare space, but the uncertainty that such a space could hang together as a “unified perspective”. Such doubt comes to the fore in 1964 in a pair of paintings Hamilton produced based on a still from Douglas Sirk’s 1948 film *Shockproof*. In a number of ways “Interior I” and “Interior II” are the culmination of this inquiry into domestic interiors. These paintings reassert a fundamental aspect of Hamilton’s practice, namely that the work is not aimed simply at the new, but the imbrication of past, present and future into polychronic space:

Any interior is a set of anachronisms, a museum, with the lingering residues of decorative styles that an inhabited space collects. Banal or beautiful, exquisite or sordid, each says a lot about its owner and something about humanity in general. (Hamilton 1982: 62)

Interiors are palimpsests made up of the layering of different technologies, different design elements and habits. When new technologies penetrate this space they do so alongside other, older cultural forms. Yet such space doesn’t simply accommodate newly acquired forms of habitat, there is always the danger that space itself (discrete, Euclidean space) will itself be jeopardised by this penetration.

Writing about his choice of source material for the 1964 interior paintings, Hamilton suggests that what drew him to the publicity still of *Shockproof* was its false perspective (a stage set designed to look much deeper than it actually was) and the sense of unease that the space and figure seemed to generate:

What interested me when I started this painting was the atmosphere of a film still. [...] There was a strangeness of perspective, an excitement through the placing of the figure, something slightly alarming in the arrangement of the objects and shapes and an emotional quality in the stance of the woman. (Hamilton quoted in Spencer 1964: 179)

Hamilton’s interior paintings immediately eradicated the central narrative elements in the original film (a dead body under the table, for instance) leaving only the figure of Patricia Knight, the faked interior architecture, and some of the furnishings.



Fig. 4: Richard Hamilton, *Interior II*, 1964, Tate Gallery

In “Interior II” an Eames “La Fonda” chair, as a constructed relief, emerges out of the picture plane, while as a focal point, a TV at the back of the room shows an image of Kennedy’s assassination from the year before. The TV image punctures the space by showing another space outside and ‘behind’ the room, while the chair protrudes into the viewing space in front of the picture plane. This sense of the domestic interior as breeched, porous, non-discrete space is accompanied by a general emptying out of the interior: the floor is missing, walls are only half there. Communication technologies have a lot to do with the feeling that private, domestic space is invaded (constantly) by information flowing in from outside, but as well as this the stability of domestic space would have been fundamentally jeopardised by the recent and extensive production of nuclear energy and nuclear weapons in Britain at the time. Radio waves and radiation – invisible and unrepresentable – pay no heed to brick walls and the propriety of domestic space. Hamilton, a member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament from the start (1958), was arrested and sent to prison in 1961 for protesting the arrival of US nuclear weapons in Scotland (Polaris). Nuclear energy and weaponry might not be ‘present’ in the paintings of 1956-64, but neither is a fully-realised and liveable interior space. US commercial culture might be carefully detailed, but any straightforward celebration of such a culture is always undercut by the void that seems to follow in its train.

Skimming through the British newspapers in the period 1956-64 the discourse of nuclear power and nuclear weapons is a ubiquitous presence. That the semi-eradicated condition of Hamilton's interiors might have been read in these terms is hard to judge – certainly it was not part of the contemporary commentary. Yet nuclear anxieties were a particularly prevalent factor for the cultural doubt out of which paintings like “Interior II” were fabricated. If the invisibility of nuclear radiation makes it hard to represent, then the image of Kennedy being assassinated might be read as a synecdoche pointing to a more general arena of trauma, an arena that could include nuclear radiation.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s cultural and material forces were everywhere reorganising the geometry of the home in fundamental ways. If domestic appliances were altering the everyday practices of domestic life, other elements were constantly threatening to cast everyday domestic life into oblivion. For an avant-gardism that recognised that social intervention was not its forte the job of describing the phenomenal and social conditions of the new landscapes of the everyday was a serious business. Here Jameson's recognition that pastiche is a figural form that becomes more and more visible, needs to be reframed. Taken out of the context of ‘critical practice’, pastiche can become a tool for describing the phenomenological contradictions that exist between the glut of a new consumerist culture and the void produced by an emergent situation of permanent war. That Hamilton's painting describes this contradiction obliquely and often illegibly shouldn't obscure its potential as a (post) avant-garde practice. Indeed the illegibility of such contradictions was (and still is) often part of the experience of living them.

Conclusion

It is not my intention to instate a new category for modern art (post-avant-gardism) to replace such categories as postmodernism or neo-avant-gardism. To my mind all such categories will always obfuscate and illuminate simultaneously. I am interested, though, in the heuristic possibilities that come from refusing established categories and in paying close attention to the peculiarities of specific practices. The downside to this is that such labour might necessarily (in the short term, at least) have to forego the ambitious scope and scale that is evidenced by theorists such as Jameson and Bürger. The upside,

though, is that such work may now make renewed contact with the dynamic phenomenal world out of which it was made.

Whether or not the terms in which I have approached Hamilton's work has greater significance for attending to post-war art in general is not something that I can pursue here. I would like to think that it does, if only because the themes that are central to Hamilton seem to animate a proportion of the work that is labelled neo-avant-garde. For instance around the same time that Hamilton was fabricating "Interior I" and "Interior II", Claes Oldenburg was installing his "Bedroom Ensemble I" (1963) in the Sidney Janis Gallery (January 1964). Oldenburg's is another example of an uncanny domestic space. Looking like a showroom in a department store, displaying the latest in bedroom fixtures and fittings, it is fabricated so that it actually looks as if you are seeing the display through a fish-eye lens: the bed and sofa, on either side of the frame, are elongated into the foreground. Similarly the look of the soft and luxurious interior is a mere semblance: sitting down on the bed reveals its hard unyielding and unforgiving wooden support.

A few months earlier in an actual furniture store in Düsseldorf (Möbelhaus Berges), Konrad Lueg and Gerhard Richter presented "Living with Pop: A Demonstration of Capitalist Realism" (October 1963). Included in the presentation was a papier-mâché sculpture of John F Kennedy standing in one of the store's many showrooms. Lueg and Richter spent the performance in another showroom, sitting on furniture that was itself placed on pedestals, and ignoring the audience, mostly by watching television. A month or so later anyone with a TV would be able to watch, in the comfort of their own home, a grainy film of Kennedy in a motorcade driving through Dallas and getting shot in the head.

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BODY/GENDER

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GENDER TROUBLE? BODY TROUBLE?¹ **REINVESTIGATING THE WORK OF MARISOL** **ESCOBAR**

KATHARINE SWARBRICK

1. ‘Neo’ movements and the case of Pop art

The term neo-avant-garde encapsulates the legacies and controversies with which the movements it defines are associated. The artistic currents to which it refers are indissolubly linked to the impact of the historical avant-garde, and subject to the way its evolution is perceived. For those critics and historians who view the historical avant-garde as a circumscribed but unrepeatable success, the impact of “neo” movements which succeed it are condemned to the diminished effects of repetition. For those who consider the avant-garde a tragic failure, the neo-avant-garde tends to be understood as a parodic re-enactment of that failure, and its contribution is interpreted in consequence as naïve – or as a cynical acknowledgement of the inevitable demise of avant-gardism as such. Critics, therefore, who defend the continuing relevance and force of avant-gardism, find they must first highlight the ways in which the project of the historical avant-garde can be analysed as successfully launched and enduring in its influence. In whatever state the neo-avant-garde emerges from the critical perspectives outlined above, it is then perceived as facing the necessity of taking a stance with regard to the significantly repressive and desublimating influence of the late capitalist market place. One significant arena of neo-avant-garde production which has found itself at the heart of the above debates is the case of Pop art. If the capacity of Pop art to recreate the challenges of the historical avant-garde has been under discussion since its emergence in the 50s, its distance or complicity with the world of commodities and consumerism has been an equally longstanding subject of debate. “Hard-core” Pop art with its hard-edged technique is valued inasmuch as it can be analysed as offering detached comment on the impact of the market place; but to

define its methods of resistance requires examples which throw its impact into relief. Commentators writing in support of the critical vigour of Pop art have suggested hierarchies of success regarding the ways in which the impact of capitalist culture is held at a distance.

Within established expositions of Pop art, the production of Marisol Escobar has occupied a place whose marginal status has allowed a dominant definition of Pop art to emerge. Marisol's work in fashion photography tends to place her output in a marked association with consumer values, whilst her distinctive sculpture is likewise accorded a more peripheral place with regard to the major defining characteristics of Pop iconography. The most striking feature of the sculptures is the use of wooden blocks or boxes to provide the angular bodies of their human subject, and these shapes contribute greatly to accepted judgements of their value: the sculptures are described in terms of their evocation of folk art, and their reception summarised in terms such as "childlike", "primitive", "affectionate", "amusing".² The effect of their marginalisation is that these sculptures remain unanalysed at deeper levels which would allow them much greater weight and purpose when it comes to re-evaluating not merely the contribution of one particular artist, but the continuing significance and innovatory strength of the avant-garde into the 1960s and beyond. I propose in what follows to re-examine the sculptures of Marisol in order to bring to light the ways in which they stage a return to historical avant-garde objectives so as to penetrate their latent meanings. It is a demonstration which demands a reconfiguring of the relation between the historical avant-garde and what succeeds it of the kind proposed by Hal Foster in his work *The Return of the Real* (1996).

2. 'Neo' movements and psychoanalysis

Foster's persuasive perspective on a more complex understanding of this relation between the two phases involves his challenge to the perception of a fully-formed historical movement emerging as pure origin and thereby consigning what follows to mere repetition. He argues for a more fluid, evolutionary development of the avant-garde where its impact is seen as process rather than event. This development, however, is not linear. It is modelled on the Freudian presentation of the concept of trauma. At the outset, then, Foster's model privileges the connection between avant-garde innovations and

the discoveries of psychoanalysis; and trauma, a term originally referring to a breaching of barriers in the physical organism, directs us immediately to the relation established by psychoanalytic theory between psyche and body. As trauma for Freud now focuses on the impact of disturbances on the psyche as psychoanalysis conceives it, the psychoanalytic body comes simultaneously into play as a construction of that psyche.

Trauma is analysed by Freud as occurring in two stages; in the first an event breaks through the psychological barriers of the subject who fails to recognise its traumatic significance and is preserved as memory; in a second phase, a further event activates the trauma by retrospectively endowing it with its appropriate meaning. The psyche finds itself unable to master the impact of trauma, as the traumatic event is already ensconced in its inner world (Freud 1963: 362-63). For Foster, the impact of the historical avant-garde is equated with this initial irruption of trauma whilst the neo-avant-garde which succeeds it has the effect of triggering its radical sense and fully exploring the implications at its core. Viewed in this way, the avant-garde, in the words of Sven-Olov Wallenstein, “is neither alive nor dead, but always there, virtually, waiting to be redefined and reinvented anew” (Wallenstein 2001: 1). Wallenstein expresses uncertainty, however, as to how Foster might illustrate this deferred action of the trauma for the “neo” movements of the present time. My objective in what follows is to explore in further detail the ways in which major strands of avant-garde criticism are informed and affected by psychoanalytic discourse, in order to find an illustration of the radical retrieval of historical avant-garde strategy in 60s productions which also shows potential in the present.

2.1 Psychoanalysis and the Real

Following Foster’s innovative model, the concept which most firmly implicates the two domains within each other is Lacan’s theorisation of the *Real* which lies at the heart of the trauma and of the dynamic of repetition (Lacan 1964: 43-62). The *Real* lies at the kernel of an initial missed encounter which is compulsively revisited in an attempted process of assimilation. If trauma provides a framework for formulating connections between past and present avant-garde productions, a representation of the compulsive quest for the *Real* within works of the historical avant-garde can be approached through the psychoanalytic concept of the drive (Swarbrick 2000: 229-43). It

is a link directly established by Lacan himself when he presents the structure of the drive through the visual anfractuosités of montage, in his 1964 seminar *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*: “I can tell you that if anything resembles a drive, it’s a montage” (Lacan 1964: 154).³ For the drive structure is aimed at the *Real*, which has become no more than a residual trace. This trace becomes the missing object of the drive and causes it to turn repeatedly around the edges of a void where the object has disappeared. In a Lacanian framework the drive takes the form of a heterogeneous chain of signifiers which cuts into matter, marking it with rents and tears; it demarcates the outline of a hole as it circles the object in missed encounters. Its source and pressure have their origins in the erogenous zones of the body, and it is this body which is a central concern to works of the historical avant-garde which encapsulate the radical, innovatory perspective which turns representations of the human form into a flow of drive patterns.

In this respect, Duchamp’s arrangement of the body in such a work as *Nude descending a staircase* (1912) takes on an exemplary status in that it represents a stream of bold cuts which disassemble received perceptions of the human frame. But this disassembling is by no means arbitrary; for as the title suggests, Duchamp’s body is erotically charged and structured, like the drive, around a pulsating pattern of movements. In the folds of each portrait, the artist marks out a recess or a hole, darker and deeper than the surrounding lines, presenting further homologies with the structure of the drive. Duchamp captures a state of the body prior to the perceived reality of the body as an integrated unity in space and time, and in so doing he literally highlights this body as the construct of a state of mind. His discovery shows striking parallels with Freud’s theory of the body which stresses the latter as an erotically charged psychological projection subject to an ongoing process of dissolution and reconstruction.

From his earliest encounters with hysterical patients Freud discovers the body as psycho-somatic.⁴ When a troublesome organ of the body is described to the analyst it becomes evident that its medical function and anatomy are not what is at stake, but rather the mental image of the organ in question and its particular associations as they emerge in the patient’s descriptions. From this gap between psyche and biology psychoanalysis infers that the body is not simply a given, but it has to be constructed in images and words. The complaints of hysterical subjects are a vivid testament to their difficulties in constructing this body and maintaining its harmonious integration, yet

such difficulties are not confined to hysterics. That such problems affect human subjectivity generally is precisely what Lacan highlights when he introduces the Mirror Stage (Lacan 1966: 93-100). Here Lacan stresses that human infants begin to understand their body as a co-ordinated whole when they perceive a coherent image of it. But the image is projected beyond the subject and presents itself as external, as alien. Language supports this unified perception and plays the role of providing the identificatory links between subject and image, although language, too, is a medium whose otherness in terms of subjectivity is constantly stressed. Last but not least, extracted from the domain of the unified image but tied to the frame of the mirror, the register of the *Real* constitutes a third and final dimension in Lacan's structural presentation of the world of the speaking subject. Impossible to articulate or perceive, impossible to lodge within the body, the *Real* is the most alien and unbearable of the orders with which human subjectivity struggles in order to construct itself a body.

2.2 Psychoanalysis and gender theory

Although the *Real* is expelled from the place where images and words work to produce an adequate image of the body, it is crucial to our understanding of the precariousness of that image, and, more fundamentally to the way psychoanalysis asks questions about how the body can come into existence in the first place. Such questions highlight the difference between discussing the body as a social construct, a practice with which gender theory has made us conversant, and analysing the way the somatic body, onto which socially produced gender practices are grafted, comes into being at the outset. The distinction is pinpointed by psychoanalyst Alan Rowan, in his presentation of the way Freudo-Lacanian theory offers a perspective on the body which obliges us to consider something that comes before the question of contingent gender categories. Rowan starts by noting the importance of the position taken by gender theorist Judith Butler who emphasises discourse as the source of gender and its subsequent mutability:

This is a radical and challenging position which opens up a valuable critique of the dominant discourses in relation to questions both of power and sexual identity, and yet, from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, one can argue it is not radical enough. Why? Well to make just one point at this stage, we can say that for Butler the somatic, if not the sexed, body already exists. Thus the somatic body is the ontological

ground for what she terms the infant's passionate attachment to the other (Butler 1997), which is then the space in which specific socio-cultural "mouldings" open onto a range of potential sexual practices and identities. In other words what Butler bypasses, is that discourse itself, her starting point, is already necessarily embodied and as such contains an excess coming from that point (i.e. a point in the Real outside language). This is of course what Freud termed the drive, and what Lacan will talk about in terms of the *jouissance* of the signifier. (Rowan 2004: 31)

The value of Rowan's insight is to focus our attention on the way the body is assembled prior to its organisation into the *Imaginary* form which appears in the mirror, and prior to its assumption of socially determined performances of gender. This body, sustained by the dynamic of the drive, is a set of multiform, eroticised representations in an ongoing state of flux. The drive signifiers cut a distance between representation and the *Real* but intimate the proximity of the latter as a *jouissance* which, from a point beyond the signifier, affects the constant process of the body's deconstruction and reconfiguration. This is the body discovered by Duchamp and the historical avant-garde, and it paves the way for further connections between the avant-garde and the Lacanian *Real* which will prove invaluable in interpreting projects of the neo-avant-garde.

As Lacan develops his theories throughout the sixties and seventies, he will gradually shift his attention from the *Symbolic* dimension, the order of language and the law, which had greatly preoccupied him, to focus on the order of the *Real*. The implication that the *Real* now deserves urgent attention finds its echo in the work of cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek, whose vast contribution contains ubiquitous references to an encroachment of the *Real* which is associated with the appearance of flaws and failures in the *Symbolic* dimension. Žižek's analysis revolves around the much debated decline of the authority of the father, whose inability to support the prohibitive function of the law in contemporary culture results in a widespread collapse in the belief in authority (Žižek 1998: 146-60). This crisis of Oedipus, previously noted by Freud and endorsed by Lacan, constitutes the underlying grand narrative of psychoanalysis, which presents a history of the erosion of the mandates supporting the social structures of Western culture. The effects of this erosion on the postmodern subject are widely attested: fathers are reduced to *Imaginary* rivals, the legitimate constraints of authority are replaced by the obscene imperative of transgressive enjoyment, subjectivity

acquires an absolute, disorienting freedom to define itself outwith all forms of social constraint. Last but not least, the body itself becomes the site on which these forces leave their indelible mark. At the most fundamental level this body must come into being. Insufficient support from the symbolic functions which serve to bring about the construction of the body lead to one which is not fully symbolised, and which remains for the subject a consternating enigma. Let us return at this point to the 1960s artistic output of Marisol Escobar, for which the term enigmatic has resonances at every conceivable level.

3. Marisol: mystique and masquerade

Cecile Whiting's 1997 study of Pop art, *A Taste for Pop*, devotes a final chapter to the work of Marisol which begins by reviewing a range of observations by the art press of the 1960s (Whiting 1997: 187-233). What follows is essentially a brief summary of some aspects of Whiting's rich discussion to which I am indebted for my understanding of the changing reception of Marisol's work from the 60s to the 90s. Whiting structures her discussion around the influence of gender issues on the value accorded to artistic work and notes the predominance during the 60s of commentaries which foreground the mystique of the female artist embodied by Marisol herself. Marisol's sculpture is correspondingly judged in terms of its evocation of an otherness which takes many forms: ethnic, exotic, childlike, sphinx-like, primitive, folk. It becomes linked with pre-Columbian or African, or early American sculpture, and with voodoo,⁵ and the effects of such classifications, for Whiting, tend to consign Marisol to a place in what she terms the "feminized margins of Pop art" (Whiting 1997: 204), whose hard-core centre is perceived as defined by the dominant masculine artistry of such figures as Warhol, Lichtenstein, Wesselman, Rosenquist or Oldenburg. Whiting goes on to analyse the constructions placed upon Marisol's association with the world of high fashion and their consolidation of the gender stereotype she comes to represent. Narcissistic self-absorption and an intimate complicity with a consumerist ethic leading to the presentation of the self as commodity now add themselves to the enigmatic otherness of the sculptor. Whiting's response is to distance Marisol from the essentialist dogma which surrounds her and emphasise above all a deliberate project of self-construction which underlies the artist's public image.

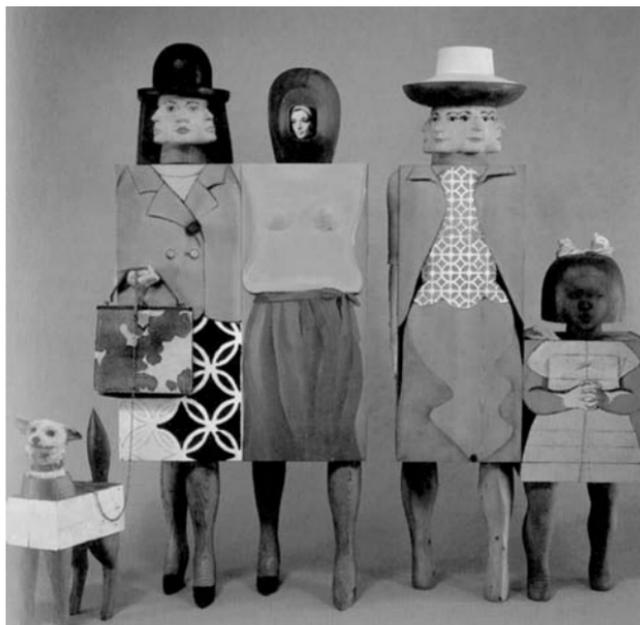


Fig. 1: Marisol Escobar, *Women and Dog*, 1964

This interpretative project depends upon a close reading of the sculptures which focuses the self-conscious artifice which underlies their production. Whiting concentrates for this reading on figural groups of women, notably *Woman and Dog* (1964), a work in which fashionable dress, confident posture and elegant propriety strike the first impression. Hybrid materials and representations, wood, cloth, paste, plaster casts, photographs, highlight Marisol's feminine figures as contingently constructed out of heterogeneous elements and hybrid materials. The process of construction reveals itself in the cracks and flaws which remain visible between the roughly assembled parts. One figure in *Woman and Dog* is accoutred with "falsies" and plaster cast buttocks worn over the clothes. The glossy image of idealised femininity is subverted by these visible discontinuities as well as by the undisguised nature of the representational practices which make up the models. Whiting's reading of the message is clear: "Marisol's figural groups express 'woman' only through a babel of representational practices" (1997: 226). Such practices present femininity as a masquerade. The term masquerade is used in the sense it acquires through the film theory work of Mary Ann Doane (1982: 81-2). Applied to the sculptures it suggests they employ the strategy of flaunting and exaggerating the conventional signs of "womanliness"

whilst suggesting it is a mask which can be removed and held at a distance. This distance highlights femininity as a construction produced by processes of representation and, by implication, masculinity as a construction of the same kind. Whiting argues persuasively for a re-evaluation of Marisol based on theories of gender as a labile social construct. In this respect her analysis takes her close to Judith Butler's presentation of the gendered body, and it tends to assimilate the impact of Marisol's sculptures with that of her work in the domain of fashion photography.

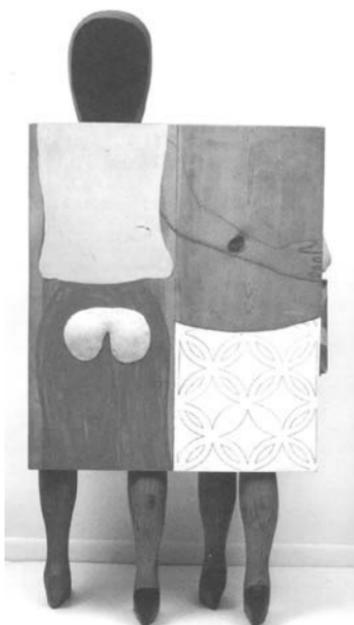


Fig. 2: Marisol Escobar, detail from *Women and Dog*, 1964

Moving away from Whiting's discussion at this point, I would like to probe behind this gender problematic to ask what Marisol's sculptures say about the more occluded level reached by psychoanalytic theory at which the body must first be adequately symbolised. In other words, is it gender trouble or body trouble which most appropriately characterises her presentations? The most memorable aspect of the sculptures lies in the effect produced by the wooden blocks which make up the bodies of most of her figures. The uniform angularity of these blocks allows for no differentiation of shape which would give

indications as to gender difference. In fact they present the body as a quadrilateral and inorganic mass to which the plaster-cast heads emerging above seem oblivious. Equally suggestive of boxes as well as solid blocks, they pose riddles to the onlooker concerning their function as containers. Are they empty or do they enclose something? What is the nature of what they enclose? Is the human form hidden inside, protected or imprisoned? Are these bodies in boxes alive or dead?

3.1 Marisol's Party

In one particularly striking work, Marisol's figures are arranged in a group entitled *The Party*. The word links them to a particular social framework and gives them a semblance of living interaction. Yet the suggested discursive exchange is belied by the positioning of the figures which stand in relative isolation at oblique angles to each other: interaction is precluded by their attitudes and expression in which self-absorbed aloofness takes the place of contact. The boxed arms cannot reach out; the upright pose cannot lean into a conversation. In the background a frame is visible, set into the wall. It suggests a mirror but there is no glass. Mirroring glances and meaningful discourse are alluded to but then blanked out in an artistic presentation which gives a context in which we might expect the image of the body to emerge, to be assimilated, and endorsed by others, but curiously this body refuses to take on its anticipated form. Behind the ideas of masquerade and the process of social stultification alluded to here is a more radical statement concerning the symbolisation of the body. Without mirroring, without words, the body cannot emerge from the opaque realms of the *Real*. Marisol's *Party* is a representation of bodies in a contemporary climate of symbolic impoverishment. The meaning her figures convey is aptly summarised by Žižek commenting on social relations in his recent work, *On Belief*:

In lieu of the proto-transcendental structural a priori of the Symbolic Order, we get the impoverished multitude of the ways human beings, fundamentally solitary, each of them ultimately constrained to the masturbatory jouissance of his/her own body [...] try to improvise and assemble some semblance of relating to and interacting with others. (Žižek 2001: 23)

Žižek's analysis offers a guide as to how we could interpret what the boxed bodies might be experiencing. Marisol's sculptures intimate the real predicament of the modern body, its self-annihilating response to the impingement of *jouissance*. *The Party*, a social scene which is saturated with the imperative to enjoy and stacked with all the material luxuries afforded by the capitalist market manifests unequivocally how *jouissance* infiltrates the world of interpersonal relations and makes inordinate demands on the body. The sculptures freeze under its impact into rigidified cases. The contents are protected but transformed beyond recognition. At worst, the boxes are empty like a body which has been plundered, its internal organs stolen, leaving behind a shell-like structure neither living nor dead. This reading suggests a different relation between Marisol's sculptures and the supple curves characterising the female bodies which, on occasion, appear in fashion shots with similar sculpture blocks beside them. It implies that the masquerade of womanliness is grafted onto an unsymbolised enigma which lies behind processes of sexual stereotyping. In short, it implies that the attributes of modern femininity and masculinity owe their idealised, caricatured rigidity precisely to the body trouble which underlies them.



Fig. 3: Marisol Escobar, *The Party*, 1965-66

The modern body under the effects of *jouissance* can be proposed as an enduring concern of neo-avant-garde productions. Marisol's boxes are a particularly striking example in that the body is presented in such

uncompromising rigidity and opacity, suggesting in its coffin-like mantle that the human form remains unsymbolised either as living or dead. However, there are other ways of conveying the impingement of *jouissance* on the body and these are explored by artists as diverse as Richard Hamilton, Andy Warhol, Richard Prince or Cindy Sherman. Hamilton's approach is to depict an uncomfortable osmosis between the body and the modern interior with its associated objects in works such as *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956). Here the masculine figure holds a lollipop whose cumbersome, exaggerated dimensions impersonate an excessive phallus; the feminine figure with a lampshade hat and on-of switches for nipples suggests the body in the process of actually turning into the sort of commodity it is obliged to seamlessly enjoy. Warhol's *White Burning Car* (1963) shows the threatened integrity of the body through its proximity to situations of engulfing danger. In an untitled photograph of 1977, Sherman captures the terrifying blankness of the petrified gaze in the doll-like, corpse-like face of a woman. For Hal Foster, the effects of what he terms the sunset images of Richard Prince (1981), encapsulate the manner in which *jouissance* saturates advertising imagery with infinitely disturbing reverberations:

In several images a man thrusts a woman out of the water, but the flesh of each appears burned – as if in an erotic passion that is also a fatal irradiation. Here the imaginary pleasure of the vacation scenes goes bad, becomes obscene, displaced by a real ecstasy of desire shot through with death, a *jouissance* that lurks behind the pleasure principle of the ad image, indeed of the image-screen in general. (Foster 1996: 146)

The spread of examples allows us to propose that the neo-avant-garde can and does continue to redefine and reinvigorate discoveries of the historical avant-garde. If the latter invents visual forms of the novel, labile Freudian body, the former pushes those erotised folds to the limits of a *jouissance* which invades and saturates the body to the point of its destruction. It is in this way that the neo-avant-garde can be said to revisit the preoccupations of the historical avant-garde in such a manner as to activate the trauma at their heart. The body of the avant-garde is returned to here, not as a pattern of erotic folds in the manner of Duchamp's nudes, but as the underlying crisis of disintegration which continually threatens its coherence. The varying techniques which the neo-avant-garde uses to bring *jouissance* and the body together do not, however, constitute repetitions of their historical counterpart: the neo-avant-garde discovers a new body which changes

according to the material and technological context it inhabits. Hence the changing invasive elements of the external world from the overwhelming bulk of accessible commercial products, to radioactivity, to the contemporary preoccupation with ultra violet rays and the pervasive media all find their representation in the collages, stills, images of neo-avant-gardism in the present. But the source of this encroachment of *jouissance*, if the grand narrative of psychoanalysis is brought into the frame of avant-garde endeavour, is a fundamental failure of mirroring and discourse of the kind so strikingly represented in Marisol's *Party*.

Notes

¹ I am indebted to Judith Butler for the terms gender trouble and body trouble which are associated with her 1990 work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. The first underlines the contingency and mutability of gender categories and the second refers to psychotic experiences of the body as alien. My use of the term body trouble differs somewhat from Butler's and is applied more generally to hysterical and hypochondriacal experiences of the body.

² These references to Marisol's work occur in across a range of art reviews including *Art News*, *Arts* and *Time* in 1963-4. For detailed summaries see Whiting 1997: 268-70.

³ "Je dirai que, s'il y a quelque chose à quoi ressemble la pulsion, c'est à un montage".

⁴ I am indebted for my discussion of the psycho-somatic body to the psychoanalysts of the Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research, London, their 2003 conference, and subsequent conference issue *hypochondria: the experience of the body in contemporary culture*, JCFAR 2004. I would like to thank in particular Astrid Gesset, Darian Leader, Alan Rowan and Paul Verhaeghe for their contributions which have informed many aspects of my discussion.

⁵ These commentaries again arise across a range of art reviews featured in *Art News* and *Time* from 1963-5. For a fuller description see Whiting 1997: 269.

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**JOE BRAINARD'S QUEER SERIOUSNESS, OR,
HOW TO MAKE FUN OUT OF THE AVANT-
GARDE**

GAVIN BUTT



Fig. 1: Joe Brainard, *Flower Painting IV*, 1967

In his foreword to the catalogue of a Joe Brainard retrospective exhibition, held at the University of California, Berkeley Art Museum in 2001, the poet John Ashbery writes:

In Joe's work, one of his pictures of pansies, for instance, there is a confrontation without provocation. A pansy is a loaded subject. So is the effortless, seed-packet look of the painting. But there's no apparent effort on the artist's part to cause stress or wonderment in the viewer. With Joe, a certain gratitude mingles in the pleasure he offers us. One can sincerely admire the chic and the implicit nastiness of a Warhol Soup can without ever wanting to cozy up to it, and perhaps that is as it should be, art being art, a rather distant thing. In the case of Joe one wants to embrace the pansy, so to speak. Make it feel better about being itself, all alone, a silly expression on its face, forced to bear the brunt of its name eternally. Then we suddenly realise that it's 'doing' for us, that everything will be okay if we just look at it, accept it and let it be itself. And something deeper and more serious than the result of provocation emerges. Joy. Sobriety. Nutty Poetry. (Lewallen 2001: 1)

This I take to be a remarkable commentary that clues us in to the aesthetic preoccupations of the New York School of Poets and, more particularly, of Brainard and other visual artists associated with it. Brainard worked closely and sometimes collaboratively with various poets in New York from 1963 till his death in 1994. Ashbery, himself a central figure within the New York School, interestingly points to the ways in which Brainard's work eschews the provocation of *épater le bourgeois* characteristic of much avant-garde work in the twentieth century. This is not to say that it does not 'confront' its viewers but rather to suggest that its peculiar performance of confrontation is one that does not seek to shock or transgress, or to elicit some excitable argument or response in the manner of e.g. a urinal offered up as a work of art. The performativity of Brainard's work, its "doing", as Ashbery writes, is of a different order. Instead of rousing us to make some declamatory statement or pass some critical judgement, its effect – at least upon Ashbery – is to bring about a far less opinionated response in those who look upon it. Brainard's work, the argument goes, addresses us in ways which short-circuit our customary attempts to take hold of the work of art as a distanced object of criticism, and instead disarmingly makes us *feel* something; pity, even empathy, for example, in the face of a painted pansy and its precarious and vulnerable visibility. What leads me to open my essay with Ashbery's remarks is that this affective relation to Brainard's work is one predicated upon proximity and intimacy rather than a public or impersonal distance and, above all, as Ashbery writes, it is one whose results are "*more serious*" (my italics) than those

commonly secured by art which trades on provocation. This is a seriousness – and, as I shall go on to argue, a *queer* seriousness – which is made manifest in our pleasurable, joyful appreciation of Brainard's "nutty" painted poetry.

I have been thinking about 'seriousness' a lot of late, especially in relation to queer cultural production both contemporary and more historically remote. On one level this may seem a little odd because, as the indexer to my recent book *Between You and Me* made plain to me, seriousness is not really a subject, let alone a subject of academic enquiry.¹ It's a value, she said, not a subject. But of course it is precisely *because* it is a marker of value which makes it interesting to me, and it is also what gives it its place in the struggles around queer sexuality. In many ways modern gay and lesbian politics have been founded upon, and driven by, attempts to overcome routine homophobic derision which mark homosexuality as *non-serious* in its brush with a valorised heterosexuality (whether in being viewed as a 'phase', or a false or unreal copy of 'proper' sexuality). Activists of varying political stripes have been united in getting governmental or other agencies to take homosexuality *seriously*, to treat it as equal in value to heterosexuality, and to grant freedoms, rights, and forms of legal protection to lesbian and gay people. This, arguably, has been as true for some forms of queer politics which comprise more theatrical forms of direct action, such as the 'die-ins' of AIDS activism or Outrage's performance of 'arresting' international heads of state for homophobic 'crimes', as it has been for the more recent gay rights campaigns for gay marriage in the U.S. and civil partnerships in the U.K. The desired aim of political action is, in the end, the same in both queer and gay cases even if the mode of that action is not: i.e. it is to make one's voice heard and to have one's complaint, one's demand, *taken seriously* by government and the people at large.²

But if seriousness is not really a subject, perhaps its location is; i.e. where we customarily find it. At least my indexer thinks so and agreed to make an entry for 'serious culture' in my book instead. For it is in serious culture that we perhaps come to appreciate most what seriousness is, and the range of meanings we ascribe to it.³ In sum, and fairly generally, serious culture is that which is grave in nature; which addresses important matters – perhaps of life and death; it is earnest and sincere in its address to such issues; it requires some effort and attention – it is not something to be frivolous about; and serious culture is often held in high regard by the canons of aesthetic and critical judgement, whose hierarchies of value often privilege the

serious at the expense of the trivial and insubstantial. In this regard I like to think of serious culture as a Foucauldian technology: one which *produces* the objects we take to be worthy of serious attention, whilst at the same time positing the appropriate attitudes and modes of address which comprise such attention. By attending to such objects with sombre or earnest regard then, or by expending effort and attention in evaluating and interpreting them, we reiterate power in, and as, a technology of serious attention. This is a technology which, of course, extends its reach to those objects beyond serious culture which might be deemed *non-serious*, and therefore judged unworthy of our time and effort.

It is easy to imagine how Brainard's work could fall foul of such a technology. As Ashbery writes, Brainard's flower paintings appear as fairly "effortless" productions, being redolent, as they are, of "seed packet" imagery with its prettified, picturesque rendition of the commodity realised in full bloom. Such a reading might swiftly usher Brainard's work into the realm of 'kitsch', that degraded, inauthentic form of culture deemed instrumental to commodity capitalism and famously demonised by Clement Greenberg and other Left thinkers in the mid-twentieth century (Frascina 1985: 21-33). But what interests me about Brainard's work is that, even though, on the face of it, it may appear to court such ingrained dismissals of kitsch triviality – particularly as they are to be found in Marxist or quasi-Marxist discourses on the avant-garde, replete as they are with a tone of high moral seriousness – it doesn't seem to have been nearly quite so solicitous of critical damnation as one might think. And this, I think, has a lot to do with the modestly pleasurable and empathetic relation that, according to Ashbery, is the principal mode of engagement of a work by Brainard.

Ambivalent attitudes

Looking over the critical responses to Brainard's work as a whole, it is possible to see how the lack of provocation in his work makes the customary critical approach stumble. As Ron Padgett – Brainard's friend, poet, and now biographer – writes: "Most of us look at Joe's work and can't think of anything to say except 'That's beautiful'" (Padgett 2004: 135-36). And, similarly, the art critic Peter Schjeldahl writes in a review of Brainard's work from 1969: "It is rather unsettling to confront a perfect little watercolour of some pansies with

the consciousness that no ‘appropriate response’ is possible” (Padgett 2004: 135). This recognition of the disarming of speech and of critical response more generally by the simple charm of Brainard’s work is echoed elsewhere, by John Ashbery again, in another review piece from the same year:

What is a flower, one begins to wonder? A beautiful, living thing that at first seems to promise meaning [...] but remains meaningless [...] Here they merely continue, each as beautiful as the others, but only beautiful, with nothing behind it, and yet. [...] The unfinished clause secretly binds the work together and raises it above a high level of provocation. (Padgett 2004: 136)

Here Ashbery suggests that the painted flowers, with their uncomplicated presence, have the effect of stripping the image of its symbolic import and of reducing it to a straightforward and undemanding beauty. But this simplicity, this reduction of meaning, is, at the same time, seen as a *raising up* of the image. It raises it “above a high level of provocation” into some other realm, one which, if we are to follow yet another critic, Carter Ratcliff, we might almost want to call ‘philosophical’. “Brainard”, Ratcliff writes, “is willing to make the point (usually shied away from so desperately) that for consciousness the world *is* décor” (Padgett 2004: 172-73). So in making such a beguiling art of apparent simplicity, Brainard is seen to actually end up with a rather profound, indeed *serious* art which operates more in the manner of a philosophical proposition rather than a mere embodiment of trivial sentiment. For even if Brainard is often seen to be a largely unselfconscious producer of such works, in the manner of a charming naïf, he is saved from being seen as a producer of ‘decoration’ – that much maligned category within Modernist aesthetics – by dint of the self-conscious attitude which his apparently simple and straightforward floral motifs *bring about in his audience*. The seeming lack of any “appropriate” response, the difficulty of what to do and say in the face of such imagery, is thereby seen to be part of what the work *does*: i.e. it is the work’s gentle unsettling of the spectator’s attempt to ascribe meaning to such work which, paradoxically, in the end comes to be appreciated – by Ashbery and Ratcliff at least – as the very thing responsible for imbuing it with meaning and value, and which ultimately rescues it from the condition of the ‘merely’ decorative.

On one level this might be seen as art critics simply trying to justify the pleasures of decorative beauty in the only way permissible

within the confines of serious discourse – by placing it at a distant remove, and producing some intellectual perspective upon it. Certainly this may be one of the ways in which criticism has attempted to overcome the ‘mute’ challenge of Brainard’s art without being seen to wholly succumb to its sentimental immediacy. Another way that criticism has navigated such dangers has been for critics to celebrate the pleasures to be gained from looking at Brainard’s work whilst maintaining that the value of such pleasures, and therefore of his art overall is, in the larger art critical scheme of things, nothing more than *minor*. Writing of his exhibition at the Fischbach Gallery in 1972, Gerrit Henry, for example, finds Brainard’s work to be “minor” insofar as its “scattered thrust” gives the sense of an “exhibition as some kind of rare, major potpourri” (Padgett 2004: 188). This “scattered thrust” can be understood in the context of a show which incorporated various different aspects of Brainard’s practice in the early ‘70s. As Padgett recalls, the exhibition comprised

drawings, pastels, watercolors, and etchings: portraits, Nancy [the cartoon character] as a de Kooning, grids filled with a variety of small images, cigarette butts, tattooed torsos, Ernie Bushmilleresque interiors, and so forth, mostly 11 x 14 inches. (Padgett 2004: 188)

The implication here is that Brainard’s work, comprised as it is of multiple and unrelated small offerings, is an art which serves to metaphorically freshen and sweeten the air. Hardly enough to warrant the label ‘major’. And as Hilton Kramer writes in a similar vein of the same show:

The tiny collage, the miniature watercolour, the cameo sketch and the minuscule object, slightly altered and hilariously embellished – these are Mr. Brainard’s favored means for a minor but very amusing and endlessly fascinating art [...] What are best here are the collages, which recapitulate with a delightful humour – often very campy, but sometimes elegant and austere – virtually the entire history of the medium [...] very deft and a lot of fun. (Kramer 1975)

What is interesting here is that, whilst being appreciated at some level, there is also clearly a judgement being made: that even though these works are seen as pleasurable and interesting, they are insufficient to be considered in any way as major works of art. They remain minor – perhaps *good* minor – but minor nevertheless.

We can see from all of this how art criticism has variously struggled with the seeming lack of demand that Brainard's work appears to make on its spectators, and its ready offering of sensual and light-hearted pleasures. If art criticism has found difficulty in Brainard's 'easy' art, then it seems also to have caused Brainard himself some degree of anguish. Reading Padgett's exhaustive biography of the artist leaves you with the picture of an artist who was never at ease with his work or his success. For even though Brainard is clearly revealed as an ambitious artist, he also emerges as highly self-critical and, more often than not, simply depressed about the results of that ambition. In letters to the poet Bill Berkson, Brainard reveals that he only enjoys relief from the anxiety and uncertainty his work causes him when he manages to shift his attitude towards himself: "I think I am really beginning to know what I've been telling myself for years: not to be so serious (not to take myself so) (so *much* so)"; and "I may be actually 'growing up' because more and more these days I feel less important to myself. (Less serious about myself)" (Padgett 2004: 162). For Brainard taking himself too seriously was always a danger because it was something which, perhaps, he came to feel was inimical to him. Even though, as Padgett informs us, Brainard often aspired to be a 'great' painter in the manner of his heroes like Manet, Goya, Alex Katz and Fairfield Porter, as the years wore on "he took an increasingly dim view of his work, seeing it as lightweight, facile, and lacking in the qualities of the high art of the oil painters he so admired" (Padgett 2004: 253-54). "Perhaps", Padgett speculates, "he had begun to believe the asides of the few critics who, amid laudatory remarks, classified his shows as minor". This poor view of his own work may also have been responsible for Brainard largely withdrawing from exhibiting his work in the last decade and a half of his life before his death in 1994.

The artist's own problematic relationship to taking himself and his art seriously is interesting. Perhaps this was because, for him, the serious world of art had just become far too bombastic and commodified, especially by the 1970s and into the 1980s. As Brainard is quoted as saying in *People* magazine in 1975: "The art scene has gotten too big, too serious, too self-important, and too expensive" (Padgett 2004: 223). But alongside this evaluation of artworld seriousness as the outward form of a kind of bloated industry, I'm also interested in pondering how this self-same seriousness, and particularly Brainard's ambivalent relationship to it, might be informed by Brainard's homosexuality and what it might have to say

about a distinctly *queer* approach to significant meaning and culture. The connections between Brainard's work and gayness might at first seem straightforward with its pansies, light campy humour, and – in the 1970s – its homoerotic depictions of male bodies, such as in *Untitled (Tattoo)* of 1972.

However, once we attend to Brainard himself on the issue things appear anything but straightforward. In an interview with Tim Dlugos in 1980, he said:

Most artists are very straight, I mean straight in their seriousness and in what they're trying to do. I think I'm a lot more sensual, I mean a lot more ga-ga than that – but on purpose. No, not on purpose. (Lewallen 2001: 18)

Thus Brainard suggests that straightness is not only a sexuality, but also an attitude, a *serious* attitude, which his art departs from by dint of what we might therefore call its 'un-straight', deliberately "ga-ga" sensuality. This is not to suggest however – at least upon my reading – that the homosexuality of Brainard and his work be considered simply as *non-serious* and trivial, and judged accordingly. Instead, and more interestingly, Brainard might be read here as inviting us to consider how his work might be taken as providing an *alternative* approach to serious meanings, ones which we might construe in terms of an un-straight seriousness, a 'queer' kind of earnestness.

Brainard's own commentary here might be taken as example of just such a queer earnestness. For even as he makes such an earnest comment about the nature of his work he quickly moves to undermine its serious import by swiftly contradicting himself ("I'm a lot more ga-ga on purpose. No, not on purpose"); demonstrating in the process his own interpretive uncertainty, and maybe even appearing a bit "ga-ga" himself as he is called upon to talk about his art. Thus, in a manner akin to Andy Warhol's tricky and calculated pronouncements about his own work, Brainard casts doubt upon his own authority, especially when called upon to comment straightforwardly upon his art, appearing perhaps as the stereotypically befuddled fag when faced with matters of hard intellectual thought. Similarly, on the subject of the relationship of this 'un-straight' seriousness to his sexuality, Brainard says in the same interview:

I'm not really sure that has anything to do with being gay, though, 'cause I think my work is very sensual, very lush and all that, but I'm not sure that has to do with being gay. If I was

straight it might be that way too. I don't know. (Lewallen 2001: 100)

The uncertainty of this statement is mirrored by another one written in his 1981 book *Nothing to Write Home About*: "I can't see that being a gay painter makes any difference whatsoever, except that now and then my work seems shockingly 'sissy' to me" (Lewallen 2001: 83). Both of these statements are interesting to me here because they keep in play clashing and dissonant perspectives on homosexuality: it is seen both as insignificant for an understanding of Brainard's art whilst, at the same time, as being something just written all over it.

In some respects such statements proffer an interesting challenge to the (queer) interpreter not to take homosexuality *too* seriously in attending to Brainard's work whilst playfully acknowledging that it might indeed be the most fundamental thing about it. Perhaps this is a challenge that Ashbery takes up in his reflections in the retrospective catalogue with which I began since they cast our engagement with one of Brainard's painted pansies (and I deliberately invoke the cosmeticised queer figure here in using these words) as an allegory of an ethical relationship to the homosexual, albeit one which we might want to take up rather lightly: "[...] one wants to embrace the pansy [...] Make it feel better about being itself, all alone, a silly kind of expression on its face, forced to bear the brunt of its name eternally". Pitying, even loving, the denigrated pansy of Brainard's painting then is offered to us by Ashbery as a bold and jovial example of a less phobic and violent relation to those shamed and despised by heterosexist culture – perhaps an instance of the kind of relationality between self and other theorised by Judith Butler in her 2004 book *Precarious Life* (2004: 46).⁴ But the manner in which Ashbery offers up this allegory to the readers of the retrospective catalogue is *nothing like* the seriousness of Butler's philosophical and political tract. Rather, in spending time and effort writing about the absurd necessity of a sentimental embrace with a flower, he reiterates something of the un-straight seriousness of Brainard and his art, and reminds us of the ways in which the art criticism written by the New York school poets has been dubbed "parallel poetry" by some rather than being taken seriously as art criticism 'proper'.⁵

Revalorising triviality

The connections between poetry and painting are of critical moment here because what I want to consider now is how some of the un-straight seriousness that I have elaborated upon thus far in Brainard's work can also be found in the work of the New York School of poets and, principally, in that of its most iconic figure, Frank O'Hara. As is now well-known there were significant interactions at social, sexual and aesthetic levels between the poets of this school and so-called second generation artists like Grace Hartigan, Fairfield Porter, Larry Rivers, Elaine de Kooning, Norman Bluhm, and Jane Freilicher.⁶ Brainard himself was close friends with many poets including Ron Padgett, James Schuyler, Bill Berkson, and Ted Berrigan and often worked on collaborative projects with them including comic art projects with Frank O'Hara and Padgett, and book cover designs for John Ashbery and Berrigan. In addition, many of the poets, as well as writing poetry, turned their hand to art criticism. For instance, from December 1953, O'Hara began to write previews and reviews on a regular basis for *Art News*, and in 1955 he became an associate curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art, which was to presage a more intensive engagement with art criticism thereafter, resulting in the writing of, amongst other things, a small monographic study of Pollock in 1959 (more of which in a moment). John Ashbery, Barbara Guest, and James Schuyler also wrote for *Art News* on a fairly regular basis, and, according to Brenda Gross, "their pieces proved to be among the most popular and welcome among the painters" (Gross 1989: 34).

Brainard was in good company with his un-straight seriousness, especially with the likes of Frank O'Hara. It appears that O'Hara felt similarly ambivalent about the avowedly 'serious' in poetry as Brainard did about it in art. The rejection of depth models of meaning, his refusal to write seriously about his subjects, and the seeming lack of any avowed political stance in his work, was, as Rudy Kikel tells it, rooted in a repudiation of "stuffiness, self-importance, and a 'seriousness' that he may well have associated with 'manliness', heterosexuality, and the 'closed [...] artistic railway stations' they represented for him" (Butt 2005: 100). Rather than adopt any grand poetic manner then, O'Hara chose instead to model his poetic address in part upon the informal, intimate exchanges of everyday conversation, about which others have written extensively elsewhere.⁷ Such features of O'Hara's poetry, of course, are the ones that O'Hara

himself emphasises in his mock 1959 manifesto 'Personism': for "[w]hile I was writing [a poem] I was realising that if I wanted to I could use the telephone instead of writing [it], and so Personism was born" (Allan 1995: 499). These features – the chatty casual conversational style, the gossipy quip – have been characterised by some critics as the poet's effeminate "queer talk", and have led others still to criticise O'Hara for his perceived inability to work earnestly and symbolically with subjects of great import, and thus for his overall superficiality as a poet.⁸ It is not difficult to see how Brainard's work might be caught within the sweep of this kind of criticism in the realm of art, since, as Padgett's biography makes plain, Brainard's motivations for making work were often first and foremost to delight his friends. Padgett paints him as a generous, kind-hearted person (he often gave his work away or sold it for much less than it was worth) and, as Padgett writes of Brainard's garden paintings, the artist set about producing more of them very largely "to please his friends and admirers, who liked those works enormously" (Padgett 2004: 137). We can easily see then how Brainard's art can be seen as produced within a similarly intimate economy of exchange as O'Hara's, addressed principally, or at least initially, to friends and loved ones in order to make them *happy* rather than to necessarily challenge or enlighten them.

What interests me here, however, in the context of an essay that seeks to rethink our attitudes to Brainard's work outside of the more customary evaluations of serious culture, is how O'Hara's purported triviality has been reclaimed, and revalorised within gay culture itself. In his elegy to Frank O'Hara, the beat poet Allen Ginsberg wrote of how O'Hara taught us to appreciate "more and more / a common ear / for our deep gossip" (Ginsberg 1995: 459). Whose gossip O'Hara was given to listen to, who is the community signalled by Ginsberg's "our" here, is a moot point. Is it the gossip of common humanity, or the common place parlance of queer communities? Writing in *Social Text* in 1979, Bruce Boone argues very much in favour of the latter. In criticising other critics of O'Hara's poetry, Boone refuses to take O'Hara to task for the vernacular structuring of his work, for its lack of 'proper' grammatical connectives etc., and instead takes it to embody an 'oppositional' gay language practice (Boone 1979: 59-92). If critics can only find in O'Hara superficiality and meaninglessness it is because, Boone argues, they are positioned on the 'outside' of its campy vernacular, unable to hear its differentially constituted codes of coherence. Boone therefore, along with Ginsberg, doesn't find

triviality in O'Hara's poems but instead a 'deep' community discourse comprising different protocols and forms of address to those of 'official' straight language.

But even though I find myself in sympathy with both Ginsberg and Boone here, particularly as they expose and reject normatively heterosexist appraisals of O'Hara's work, I find it troublesome that O'Hara's campy playfulness comes to be revalorised through being seen as 'deep'. This inversion of the putative value of a denigrated object – i.e. turning the superficial into the deep, the trivial into the important etc. – is often the way in which revalorisation works. It has been the most customary way in which various delegitimated cultural products, downgraded by dint of genre (folk, popular, mass etc.) or on account of the identity of their producers (women, queers, people of colour), have been reclaimed from the critical dustbin. But my issue here is as follows: by invoking O'Hara's gossipy poetry as 'deep' rather than superficial, do such revalorisations simply reproduce 'deep' as a sign of seriousness, as a sign of significant meaning and worth? Does this subsume the playfulness and surface pleasures of O'Hara to a 'deep' (albeit gay) invocation of value? And if so, does this only go to reiterate the power of the serious technology with which I began this article, a *straight* model of seriousness? Is making O'Hara deep the only way to take him seriously? Or is it possible to think of his seriousness differently, queerly?

We can perhaps approach this last question by turning to O'Hara's art criticism, and particularly his study of Jackson Pollock which I mentioned earlier (O'Hara 1975: 12-39). Although, as Marjorie Perloff notes, there are major differences between O'Hara's poetry and his art criticism, especially in terms of the latter's more formal mode of address, his criticism has often been seen in the same light as his poetry. Generally speaking it has been given little or no attention in art history, usually being dismissed as being too "subjective" and "impressionistic" to be worthy of serious critical attention (Perloff 1977: 89). Hilton Kramer dubbed O'Hara's reading of Pollock as an example of "the 'poetical' school of criticism" whilst others objected to its "purple prose and intensely personal response to the painter" (Perloff 1977: 91). Others still chided him for having no original thoughts of his own, arguing that his text was merely a rehearsal of Rosenberg's arguments about action painting. To some degree, this latter criticism is apposite, as the Rosenberg line is clearly being adhered to in O'Hara's claim that Pollock's "action is immediately art" and that it is "significant purely and simply of itself" (O'Hara

1975: 26). However, what distinguishes O'Hara's from Rosenberg's reading is the former's recognition of "qualities of passion and lyrical desperation" in Pollock's art, ones which largely compromise the seriousness of its Rosenbergian gloss as an originary act of Being (O'Hara 1975: 26).

A few examples will suffice to illustrate this here. Pollock's *White Light* of 1954 is seen to possess a

blazing, acrid, and dangerous glamor of a legendary kind, not unlike those volcanoes which are said to lure the native to the lip of the crater and, by the beauty of their writhings and the strength of their fumes, cause him to fall in. (O'Hara 1975: 29-30)

Others such as *Number 1* from 1948 are seen to have an

ecstatic, irritable, demanding force, an incredible speed and nervous legibility in its draughtsmanship; and the seemingly bloodstained hands of the painter, proceeding across the top just beyond the main area of drawing, are like a postscript to a terrible experience. (O'Hara 1975: 31)

And 1953's *The Deep* emerges from O'Hara's discourse as "one of the most provocative images of our time, an abyss of glamor encroached upon by a flood of innocence" (O'Hara 1975: 38). Even if we can say that there is a tendency to the Gothic in Pollock criticism, O'Hara seems to go further than most with such Baroque hyperbole (Pollock, he writes, is "relaxed and grand [...] writing out his marvellous inspirations in a full lyric hand") (O'Hara 1975: 31). The extravagant power and force of Pollock's painting is conveyed in a language which is excessively exuberant, so much so that it becomes almost too much to bear – 'too much', that is, to be taken seriously. The 'depth' of Pollock's work is given a theatrical turn, expressed in the almost paradoxical notion here of "an abyss of glamor". As O'Hara reads the typically constructed seriousness of action painting – contemplating, for example, the painterly immanence of Pollock's physical and spiritual being – he inflects it with a level of theatricality and glamour that could only be described as 'high camp'. According to Isherwood's character Charles in *The World in the Evening*, high camp is described as that which "always has an underlying seriousness":

You can't camp about something you don't take seriously.
You're not making fun of it; you're making fun out of it.

You're expressing what's serious to you in terms of fun and artifice and elegance. Baroque art is largely camp about religion. The ballet is camp about love [...] (Isherwood 1954: 125)

... and O'Hara is camp about Pollock. What O'Hara appreciates about Pollock's surfaces are precisely those things which Rosenberg appreciates, but the *manner* of his appreciation is different. It is the "artifice and elegance" of Pollock which O'Hara foregrounds in his discourse, or rather Pollock *as* artifice and elegance. Rosenberg argues earnestly for an understanding of action painting as a kind of Ur-painting – "painting at the point of formation, when everything has to be redone" – positioning it as an absolute originary act which breaks with all political, artistic and moral convention (Orton 1991:11). O'Hara, on the other hand, *camps Pollock up*.

What I find interesting in this denigrated and campy art criticism is how the deeply serious is not postulated, or enjoyed, as *other to* surface elegance. Depth is not posited in any binary opposition to surface but the two are seen to be deeply entangled *in* one another – which is perfectly and poetically captured in the phrase "an abyss of glamor". It wouldn't do for me to try and latterly reclaim O'Hara's take on Pollock here as 'serious' – at least in any received sense of the term – because it clearly resists such forms of valorisation. *The Deep*, and indeed depth itself – the deeply serious – emerges from O'Hara's discourse with a marked paradoxical twist. Instead of reclaiming O'Hara's critical writing against the grain as latterly 'deep' then, we might take it instead as exemplary of what might constitute a *perverse* valorisation of Pollock, one in which the painter's work is appreciated as *queerly serious*. In what follows I want to finally pursue something of this problematic entanglement of depth and surface, seriousness and triviality a little further by finally returning to Brainard's work. This I do in order to shed additional light on what might constitute queer seriousness, in particular by concentrating on the affectionate humour so evident within much of Brainard's oeuvre.

Flirtatious affection

O'Hara's art criticism shows us how the act of taking something seriously in camp can be a pleasurable and playful one in, and of, itself. This should not be confused with any straightforward mockery or satire, however, because camp's queer relation to its objects, at

least on the basis of Charles' understanding of it in *The World in the Evening*, resides not in making fun of them, but rather in making fun out of the very act of taking them seriously; it imbricates levity and light-heartedness within the very act of recognising its objects as significant and important. Further this is a good humoured act which bears some kind of affection for that which it addresses: it is warm and embracing, like Ashbery's approach to Brainard's pansy, or indeed O'Hara's to the work of Pollock. It does not belittle or denigrate. And this is what finally brings about something which is, in Ashbery's words, "deeper and more serious than the result of provocation". In writing thus, Ashbery risks revalorising Brainard's work on precisely the same terms that Ginsberg and Boone revalorise O'Hara, invoking ideas of the 'deeply serious' in order to signal its importance. As with O'Hara though, I want to suggest by way of closing that Brainard's affectionate playfulness troubles any such avowedly 'deep' appreciation of his artistic oeuvre.

From a pansy, then, to a Nancy – or a number of painted Nancys to be precise. The subject of two Brainard works from 1972 – *If Nancy was a Boy* and *If Nancy was an Ashtray* – is the cartoon character Nancy, the creation of Ernie Bushmiller, who appeared in her own eponymous and other cartoon strips for a 30 year period from 1933 to 1963.



Fig. 2:
Joe Brainard, *If Nancy Was a Boy*, 1972

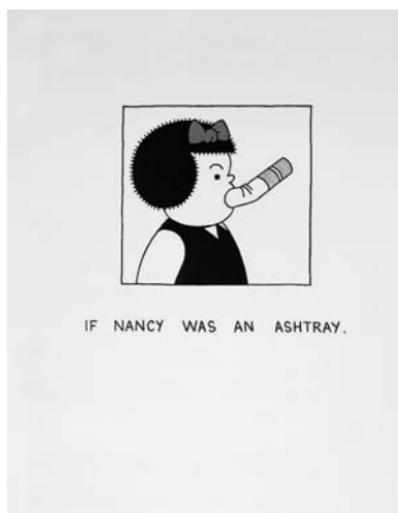


Fig. 3
If Nancy Was an Ashtray, 1972

These belong to a larger series of Nancys undertaken almost a decade after Nancy finally appeared in print. This might also make them part of what Andrew Ross has called the “necrophiliac economy” of camp with its “amorous resurrection of deceased cultural forms” (Ross 1989: 152). Though it may appear difficult to construe the *amour* in imagining Nancy’s mouth as a receptacle in which to stub one’s fag butts (and innuendo abounds here), I nevertheless take these images to be equally illuminated by Ashbery’s comments on the flower paintings with which we began. There is a level of pathos in these images which invites us to sympathise, if not empathise, with Nancy as with his painted flowers; either Nancy the transgender boy, or the unfortunate Nancy deployed as an ashtray. They ask us – to invoke Ashbery once more – to make Nancy feel better about being herself, whoever she ‘really’ turns out to be; all alone in the cold unforgiving expanse of Brainard’s paper, “a silly kind of expression” on her face, “forced to bear the brunt of [her] name eternally”.

Made in 1972, one might be tempted to see Brainard here as operating in neo-avant-garde mode, perhaps as a latter-day surrealist or situationist, deploying strategies of appropriation and *détournement* in addressing his cartoon subject. But this would be to attribute a level of conventional political commitment that is largely absent from the work and largely alien to its maker (“I’m not ‘anti’ anything. If I don’t like something I just tend to ignore it”, Brainard has said in an interview [Padgett 2004: 107]). For rather than being ‘committed’ to some kind of critique of mass culture as spectacle here, I read Brainard’s work instead as one which engages the artist, and by extension his viewers, in a *flirtatious* relationship with his subject, with Nancy – one which keeps *in play* our level of commitment to her and her fate. It is one which calls upon our capacity to feel pity for her even as we realise the absurdity of having such concerns for a cartoon character – and a ‘dead’ one at that. We are meant to take her plight seriously, even if in a light-hearted way.

This queerly serious appreciation of Nancy extends to the last image I want to consider which is Brainard’s adornment of the cover of the ARTnews annual from 1968, which is dedicated to the avant-garde. Perhaps we could imagine the title of this piece – since it doesn’t appear to have been credited with one – to be *If Nancy was the Avant-Garde*. 1968 is somewhat of a mythologised moment in the history of avant-garde production, especially in Europe. It was the year of the Paris uprisings, a time of the coming together of radical thinking – from Maoism to deconstruction – with the reanimation of

the historical avant-garde in the political actions of May '68. It was therefore a very important year for the development of avant-garde practice and thinking. Brainard's collage recognises this for it is not only Nancy here who is solicitous of our affections but also the avant-garde itself, invoked by readily recognisable markers of avant-garde production: from the work of Carlo Carrà to Manet, Picasso, Matisse, Pollock, Mondrian, De Kooning, Judd and others. In amongst all of these we see multiple Nancys, whose childish appearance emerges out of a Mondrian field of colour or can be seen leaning up against one of Judd's minimalist objects. In attempting to endear herself to us with her goofing, Nancy also hopes to endear our hearts perhaps to the avant-garde itself. But the cover also includes within its collaged fragments work by artists which even the most expansive concept of the avant-garde would have difficulty incorporating: e.g. Goya, Leonardo, Rembrandt. In this way the cover design signals once again its non-serious or trivialising address to the concept of the avant-garde; threatening to disperse the category meaninglessly, if not irresponsibly. Interestingly it flirts with such a dissolution precisely at such a high serious moment in the avant-garde's history.



Fig. 4: Joe Brainard, Back and front covers of ARTnews Annual 34, 1968

In many ways the cover can be read as a commemoration of the history of the avant-garde. But, we are left wondering, are we commemorating it because it has died? Like Nancy the 'late' cartoon character, has it ceased to be vital and current? Or – if not exactly

dead *yet* – are we being asked to identify with the avant-garde in order to feel sorry for its terrible fate looming up before it? Like the painted pansy with which we began, the avant-garde now becomes the object of our pathos; as a kitsch, now commodified dream of revolutionary rupture and change. This is signalled by Brainard’s use of collaged postcards of avant-garde art, ones likely purchased from a museum shop – the avant-garde reduced to the culture industry. Perhaps, then, we are encouraged by Brainard to make the avant-garde feel a bit better about itself, “forced”, as it is, “to bear the brunt of its name eternally”. Maybe its time, the collage suggests, to reparate rather than rail; to embrace rather than provoke; and to lay to rest some of the high hopes and grandiose claims of avant-garde culture. This is what I find seriously funny about the piece. As I see Nancy ‘drowning’ under the skeins of Pollock’s dripped and splattered paint I am encouraged to take the fate of both Nancy and the avant-garde seriously – albeit in a queer, light-hearted way – and to reflect affectionately on their respective fates. Poor Nancy. Poor old avant-garde.

Notes

¹ It is here (Butt 2005) in my self-styled flirtatious address to the ‘serious business’ of writing art history that I glimpsed for the first time the possibilities of thinking about ‘seriousness’ more broadly from a queer perspective.

² There may be something, however, in the theatricality of queer activism which makes it, as a politics, depart from the desire to be taken seriously on the terms of normative, mainstream political culture. This issue will form the subject of another essay elsewhere.

³ These meanings, elaborated below in relation to ideas about serious culture, have been generally derived from standard dictionary definitions.

⁴ Butler writes about the political and ethical necessity, highlighted in the wake of the attacks on the U.S. in September 11 2001, of addressing the other in all its foreignness and difference. As opposed to the violent attempts to vanquish the precarious other in the name of a ‘war of terror’, Butler argues for a recognition of the Otherness of others, and to embrace the “enigmatic traces of others” within the self in constituting an alternative political culture to one driven by retribution and murderous fear (2004: 46). I am fully aware of the ironies involved in drawing this discourse of high seriousness – concerned with global geo-politics, war and death – into a discussion about paintings of garden flowers. I am completely un-straight in my serious intention here.

⁵ Coined by Rudy Burckhardt and cited in Gross 1989: 33.

⁶ For an extensive account of the New York School and its social world see Lehman (1998). For useful accounts of the poets collaborations in artistic and theatrical projects see Gross (1989), Ferguson (1999) and Perloff (1977). Joe LeSueur's *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara* (2003) comprises a compelling, and candid, account of sexual culture and sexual practices in and outside New York's queer bohemia in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

⁷ See Feldman (1979) and Smith (2000).

⁸ For a discussion of this see Butt (2005): 95-100.

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DISCOURSE/POLITICS

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THE DIALOGICAL IMAGINATION: THE CONVERSATIONAL AESTHETIC OF CONCEPTUAL ART

MICHAEL CORRIS

Within the history of avant-garde art there is a recurrent interest in process-based practices. A substantial claim made by proponents of this position argues that process-based practices offer far more scope for the revision of the conventional culture of art than any other type of practice. In the first place, process-based practices dispense with the idea of the production of a material object as the principle aim of art. While there is often a material 'residue' associated with process-based art, its status as an autonomous object of art is always questionable. Such objects are more properly understood as props or by-products, and are valued accordingly by the artist (but not, alas, by the critic, curator or collector). Process-based practices themselves raise difficult questions for connoisseurs; there is often no clear notion where to locate the boundary dividing process works from the environment at large. The process-based work of art may not result in an object at all; rather, it could be a performance (scripted or not), an environment or installation, an intervention in a public space, or some sort of social encounter, such as a conversation or an on-going project with a community. The point of all these practices is to radically alter the subject-position of both artist and beholder. By so doing, the very idea of the autonomy of art is placed in question. Once attention and purpose are shifted from the making of what amounts to medium-sized dry goods, so the argument goes, both artist and spectator are liberated. What does this freedom consist in? Principally, to be able to cast off a cluster of tradition-bound rules and regulations, institutions and habits that prescribe the nature of art and set out the protocols under which art is to be encountered, enjoyed and appreciated. All avant-garde art aims to complicate and transform the social roles of artist and spectator alike. When the maker of art is no longer solely the initiator of the process or performance, or author of the script the

notions of 'artist' and 'beholder' are rendered meaningless and presumably stripped of their cultural authority. Of course, such social effects are generally demonstrated rhetorically, although there are instances where the 'artist' actually sets out to destroy the institutions of art altogether. Otherwise, artists are content to work between or across better-defined disciplines or fields of practice, without worrying overly about what to call their activity. Indeed, the wide accessibility of some important means of distribution of contemporary cultural activities – namely, the internet – has made this possible, by shifting the strategic thrust elsewhere and, so it is believed, entirely circumventing the institutional superstructure of art as a portable commodity.

In this essay, I would like to make some historical reflections on certain kinds of process-based practices in art that emerged during the mid-1960s and their legacy. I am interested to consider how these practices actually functioned within the so-called world of art. The story I will tell involves the history of some Conceptual Art practices since 1972, although the pre-history of what I call the dialogical imagination in art occurs earlier, at the least during the decade of the sixties. Now, anyone who has studied Conceptual Art and the critical discourse that accompanies its reception will immediately recognise the commonplace assumption that Conceptual art practices are intended to undermine the interpretive competencies of the beholder by presenting in the place of art what usually amounts to a body of text. (Or, in Robert Smithson's less sympathetic but vivid rendering, a 'heap of language'.) Conceptual art was not necessarily meant to be about language as such, but to function as a significant metaphorical shift that took the structure of art to be language-like. At the same time, two further positions around the relationship between language and art emerged. Some Conceptual artists wished to go beyond the (weakly) metaphorical position that posited an analogy between grammar and syntax and the varieties of visual experience in art. They argued that language deserved to be a central concern for the visual artists because it frames our entire experience of visual art. We not only report what we see through the means of language; we see through language. (This is a strong version of Russell Hanson's notion of the theory laden-ness of observational language; a conceptual approach that originally emerged during the late-1950s, early-1960s in the context of the philosophy of science.) Others saw the displacement of the aesthetic approach to art as a positive development that served to eliminate obstacles to the critical reflection on the conditions of

art's consumption and production. That is, the hermetic or poetic in art was suppressed in the name of a potentially more vital demotic form. By substituting reading for looking, the expectations of the beholder were certainly challenged and ultimately frustrated. Yet, the expectation was that out of this frustration or irritation with the minimal amount of visual incident, the viewer comes to a realisation about the conventions of art.

Conceptual artists generally assume that late modernist art – typically, painting and sculpture – presents the beholder with few options to engage with the work of art as other than a highly refined entertainment or spectacle that effectively confirms the subject-position of the beholder and the authority of the artist, whose work is a demonstration of the superiority of the enterprise of modernist art to provide the pre-eminent aesthetic experience. The most radical Conceptual artists tried to frustrate this experience, in order to render redundant the competencies of the beholder. They did this, as I say, by quite literally removing the art object from view. This was accomplished in a number of ways; these methods or strategies constitute the variety of forms and media approaches that one finds within the field of Conceptual Art. In place of an art object whose media identity was secure and of sufficient external complexity and detail, Conceptual Art substitutes text, ephemeral performances, banal photography and installations virtually indistinguishable from the environment in which they are sited.

I would like to bear down on those practices of Conceptual Art that seek to reconstruct entirely the beholder through artistic strategies that foreground the act of conversation, employ a mechanism that enables interactivity, and pursue a radical application of intellectual resources associated with the task of indexing and information retrieval. What can we say plausibly about such an encounter where the performance of the beholder's knowledge, memory and cultural values become the constitutive elements of the artwork? Under such conditions of engagement, can one sensibly speak at all of a work of art? If so, what might the 'work' be that a work of art of this sort aims to do? What, indeed, is the work that is actually accomplished? These questions – by no means an original inquiry – have been, and continue to be, raised in various forms and in diverse contexts by those seeking to understand the social dimension of the practices of Conceptual art of the 1960s and 1970s. I wish to consider them anew with regard to some practices of Art & Language. At the outset, I should say that I

approach some of the objects of this inquiry as a partisan maker and some merely as an interested, yet informed, bystander.

Sites of meaning

‘Outside a dog, a book is man’s best friend. Inside a dog, it’s too dark to read.’

– Groucho Marx

The iconic image of late-modernist absorption in the act of making a painting is found in a photograph of around 1966 of Ad Reinhardt (1913-1967) labouring over the completion of one of his so-called ‘black’ paintings. The image contrasts markedly with earlier photographs by Hans Namuth of the artist Jackson Pollock in motion in the midst of one of his drip paintings. The contrast is intentional, I think. Reinhardt was well aware of the popular image of the Abstract Expressionist painter as an athletic, entranced flinger of paint, as “Jack the Dripper”. Reinhardt’s goal here is to present another kind of studio culture; considered, meticulous, possibly more cerebral and meditative. While Pollock and Reinhardt shared the idea of the studio as the principal site of art’s meaning, it is Reinhardt who is most energetic in proselytising his particular vision of art through voluminous published writings (the artist’s ‘art-as-art’ dogma), cartoon strips that appeared in evening newspapers (his famous series titled “How to Look . . .” which were published in PM from 1946-47), numerous public lectures and, of course, through his role as professor of art and art history. Reinhardt’s writings caught the eye of many a young Conceptual artist – notably, Joseph Kosuth – and planted the seed that it might be possible to shift the production of meaning from studio to study and beyond. In other words, the significance of a work of art was as much a function of its marketing and distribution as its production. Eventually, the machinery of promotion and distribution took precedence over the making.

For an artist like Mel Ramsden, it was important during the late-1960s to find a means to produce a painting that is as self-reflexive and as abstract as Reinhardt’s ‘black’ paintings, but demands far less of the beholder’s attention and carries its meaning on its surface. Ramsden calls these works “100% abstract”, and writes that they are “virtual paintings”:

They began as paintings which merely listed the chemical composition of the paint used to produce them: a kind of reflexive materialism, or a tautology of the real. (Baldwin, Harrison and Ramsden 1998: 145)

Somewhat earlier, during 1967, Ramsden initiated a series of works produced “under the spell of Ad Reinhardt”. They consist of two panels: the first appears to be a perfectly blank black monochrome; the second is a framed statement reading: “The content of this painting is invisible; the character and dimensions of the content are to be kept permanently secret, known only to the artist”. Describing these “Secret Paintings”, Ramsden argues that “such paintings can’t be made public without an explanation or some kind of account of their production” (Baldwin, Harrison and Ramsden 1998: 217).

What is interesting is how they relate to Reinhardt’s ‘black’ paintings: both are produced in the studio, both are imagined to be blank at first glance, and both require some kind of support in order to fully function in public. I am oversimplifying both Ramsden’s and Reinhardt’s work here in order to make a point about the consequences of moving the locus of meaning-formation out of the studio. Of producing and distributing, if you will, a partial product, an incomplete product. For me, what is of interest are the paradoxes that ensue when one enters this path; particularly the way in which the notion of ‘public’ meaning starts to take shape and the way in which one’s relationship to the work of art is disturbed, both physically and conceptually. The position of the beholder is threatened from all sides. Kosuth, in some of his projects of the early-1970s, reduces this to the act of reading; hence, the “reading rooms” that consist of tables piled high with the artist’s working library. The spectator is forced to become a reader if they wish to engage with the work in a significant way. They are sucked in to a vortex of information. Once the ambiguous object of art (painting) is dispensed with, a kind of positivity takes hold. The material categories of a thesaurus, for example, become a kind of public art when placed, unadorned, on a billboard or inserted in a daily newspaper. All this anti-pictorialism leads the beholder into new territory. All of a sudden, everyone who is a competent reader can become a lover of art. For some Conceptual artists, the corollary was even more potent: any competent writer could be an artist. That, at least, was how it seemed to some avant-garde artists by the end of the 1960s.

Language has a hold on us

This optimism proved to be short-lived. Granted, scepticism towards the art object got the artist out of the studio. But language, it turns out, is not as reliable as it seems. Language, being context-dependent, has an indexical side. An unruly, ambiguous, discursive side. Various indexes were produced by Art & Language from 1972-1974. The first of these was constructed in 1972 for Documenta V. According to Art & Language,

the principal motif of the series was the nature of the identities of artist and onlooker. In participating, that is to say in working with the Index, the 'spectator' produces a conceptual possibility whereby the work is realised. This realisation is not in the metaphorical sense in which any work of art may be said to be realised and apprehended by a viewer. The Index is a mechanism for generating detail as a pragmatically discursive possibility – a conversation-equivalent perhaps. (Baldwin, Harrison and Ramsden 1999: 58-59)

Index 001 (1972) consists of four card file cabinets containing excerpts from texts, readings and transcripts, all of which had figured in the group's discourse. The spectator was encouraged, in the initial installation at least, to browse through these cards. The fragments of discourse, assorted intellectual landmarks, trivia and all, did or did not map onto the life-world of the spectator. From this encounter, an 'alternate' index is formed. This is the 'work' of the spectator, which is generated dialectically through the 'work' of Art & Language. The early indexing projects presented the beholder with a conundrum not unlike that posed by Reinhardt's "black" paintings: to refuse to engage with them is to render them invisible; return them to the realm of objecthood. However, to accept their invitation to participate risks the possibility of a one-way ticket out of art. Art & Language speaks eloquently of these works now as having extended a scepticism toward the art object "into a scepticism toward the authorship of art" (Baldwin, Harrison and Ramsden 1998: 59). I enjoy this emphatic endorsement of discursiveness in art, but wonder how it will fare in the context of museums and galleries.

Culture as learning and sharing

For Art & Language in New York during the 1970s – and in the UK, as well, I imagine – the sociality of the small group remained the surest means to keep the pernicious influence of the so-called art world at bay. The public, it turns out, is a fickle collaborator. The only solution was to recruit willing co-workers. ‘Culture as learning and sharing’ – admittedly an uncontroversial anthropological observation – had some purchase for us only because it was so patently obvious that the usual public contexts of art discourse had nothing to do whatever with either learning or sharing. We characterised virtually all art criticism as vagrant opinion-mongering and set about to explore the mystery of how it is that we can even speak to one another, let alone understand, share and learn from conversation.

The “annotations” project, initiated in 1973, took place in a discursive context. A group of us circulated brief texts on what we took to be the key issues that defined or threatened our commonality. The commentary that was generated, week after week, was collected, indexed and reconstituted into a kind of handbook for the public. One of the key concerns of the project was to constitute a model for ‘going-on’ as an artist in an art world utterly hostile to anyone but a maker of art objects. Of course, we mounted numerous exhibitions during this period. Yet, they aspired to function more as informational displays or remote sites for conversation. In the event, they were quite easily consumed as expensive graphic design. Installation views pose spectators uncomfortably reading while standing up and close to the photostat affixed to the wall. The image resembles that of spectators in the presence of, say, one of Barnett Newman’s enormous paintings of the late-1950s, like “Vir Heroicus Sublimus”. Still, the analogy between ‘looking’ and ‘reading’ and the instability inherent in these two terms held some potential for mischief which Art & Language would realise in practice only later on, during the 1980s and 1990s. Meanwhile, it was clear to us that the ‘work’ of the beholder, now co-worker, needed to be pinned down. Much Conceptual art was ‘completed’ in the mind of the beholder; our game was not about ‘dematerialisation’, but conversation and disruption and, possibly, community-building. From the handbook sprang the “workbook”, which yielded a variety of form-filling opportunities, all of which, it must be said, parodied gleefully the administrative culture of late-capitalism. This 1974 “workbook” and allied indexes of 1973 were interactive in the sense that the ‘user’ was forced to actively make

choices in order to go on. There was little point in simply ‘admiring’ the workbook formally; one had to engage with it. In 2002, Thomas Dreher and staff at ZKM developed a fully-interactive web-based version of “Blurting in Art & Language New York” (1973), thereby realising its potential as hypertext ‘software’ *avant la lettre*.

Communities of discourse

Taking the notion of a community of discourse literally involved us in all sorts of political intrigues. In an effort to escape the small group, we became engaged with larger groups, sometimes groups of artists, at other times, groups of political activists.¹ We experimented using telegrams as a means to initiate conversation at a distance. We also travelled to universities and art centres to hold a series of conversations. The conversations were transcribed and excerpts were displayed in a graphic format, headlined with provocative questions directed at an imagined reader. We experimented with cartoon strips, using our daily experience as subject matter, reflecting on the contradictions that constituted our world. We even initiated a magazine designed to ‘address’ a wider community of artists; to function as a forum in which all aspects of artistic practice, from the 1960s to the mid-1970s, could be examined critically. At this point, one could say that we were using a variety of non-art media to advance a critical practice. At this point, perhaps, we were furthest from an artistic practice based on the development of a material culture.

During the 1970s, Art & Language self-consciously flirted with its equivocal position as a kind of avant-garde virus within late modernist art practice. This dubious kinship was acknowledged through a number of projects involving explicit quotation or appropriation of historical avant-garde projects, most notably those arising in the former Soviet Union during the 1920s and early-1930s. This phase of production – characterised by some as “vulgar propaganda” or “black propaganda” – ended by the late-1970s (Baldwin, Harrison and Ramsden 1998: 99, 249).

It signifies the height of Art & Language’s tortured engagement with the public sphere and the final critical commentary on the morally suspect, managerial aspirations of some of their colleagues. Contemporary art has already embraced such strategies as commonplace. Public intervention is virtually an academic category of

artistic practice; certainly every art student is aware of its protocols. It is worth recalling that such stirrings were beginning to be felt during the late-1970s; I have in mind Jenny Holzer's reaction to the textual, gallery-bound bias of most 'historical' Conceptual art.

The amateur

What remains of conversation in Conceptual art? One may speak of a conversational aesthetic, but that seems to take us back to the original condition that Conceptual art wished to address and change. To displace the object of aesthetic attention is to seek to revise the work of the artist. But what is the proper work of the artist today? More precisely, what is the proper work of the artist who seeks to irritate the mainstream without turning his or her back on it? The sheer complexity of Art & Language's practice fascinates and repels; even more so, nearly forty years on. As Paul Wood has remarked, the practice of Art & Language

has always been an art practice. Much of the enduring interest of Art & Language work can be traced to the fact that, even now, such a claim is open to interpretation as a truism or a provocation, as evidence of an achievement or a betrayal. (Wood 1993: 11)

Wood talks of a tension in Art & Language's work between "outward address" and "inward address". Many contemporary artists recognise this double bind and find it possible to construct a career within its borders. Wood goes on to argue that the "stability" evidenced in Art & Language's production since the early-1980s was hard won and somehow determined by the upheavals of the 1970s. All this brings into focus the fate of any self-described avant-garde practice, of which Conceptual art is certainly one. Wood recognises the contingent nature of Art & Language's practice; its provisional nature as art. Perhaps this is the best one can do as an avant-garde artist: to keep the resolution of the game in suspension, to resist the temptation to take the notion of revolution in art literally. In the face of the irrepressible professionalisation of art, perhaps the most radical approach available is to adopt the passion and the mocking estrangement of the amateur.

Notes

¹ For an account of this period, see Michael Corris, 'Inside a New York Art Gang', in Alberro and Stimson (1999).

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DESTRUKTION RSG-6: TOWARDS A SITUATIONIST AVANT-GARDE TODAY

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The focus of this essay is a relatively unknown exhibition of works by the post-WWII avant-garde group called the Situationist International (1957-1972) that was held at the Galerie EXI in Odense, Denmark in June 1963. The title of the show was ‘Destruktion Af RSG-6: En kollektiv manifestation af Situationistisk Internationale’ (in English: ‘Destruction RSG-6: A Collective Manifestation of the Situationist International’). I have chosen this particular exhibition for its anomalous, yet significant, place within the history of the Situationist International (henceforth the SI).¹ It was the first and last collective exhibition of so-called ‘situationist’ works within a gallery context.² And, crucially, its 1963 date dispels the commonplace assumption that after the group split in 1962 (into what is often erroneously referred to as a division between the Debordists and the Nashists) the so-called Debordist faction gave up being artistic cultural producers to become instead dry, political theoreticians.³ A rejection of such a false division between theory and practice, typically read as a separation between politics and art, is made emphatic by the title and contents of Debord’s essay for this exhibition’s catalogue, namely, ‘The Situationists and New Action Forms in Politics *And* Art’ (my emphasis). From its opening lines this text defines and affirms three particular constituents of the SI’s decidedly intertwined artistic-political project. Firstly, it asserts the SI’s status as “an artistic avant-garde”; secondly, that this artistic status involves a search, through experiments in culture, “to find the way to the human being’s free arrangement of everyday life”; and thirdly, that the theory and practice of the SI revolves around the construction of a “new revolutionary contest” (Debord 1963: 9). It was only a targeted opposition in all three areas simultaneously that for Debord offered the possibility of a “free creativity, the dominion of the human being over his own history in every sphere” (Debord 1963: 9).

In general, this much overlooked essay presents an important distillation of Situationist writings on the question of an avant-garde mode of praxis that, I argue, still generates productive conclusions. In particular, it provides a novel model of avant-garde temporality, whereby acts of cultural-political interventions are understood as taking place immanently, in the ‘now’ of time. Such ‘nowness’ was intended to work against horizons of future actions associated with the military heritage of the meaning of an avant-garde, literally as a group that was situated ahead of, or in front of, the rest. But, somewhat paradoxically, this ‘now’ time did not abandon links to the past. This is because the SI’s concept of the ‘now’, as I explain later on in more detail, is constituted through a complex overlapping of past and present revolutionary moments, but, crucially, without recall to, or melancholic laments for some lost, originary historical avant-garde moment, contra Peter Bürger.⁴ It is precisely Bürger’s model of a periodised division between a genuine, first historical avant-garde c.1920, followed by later, poor imitations, the so-called ‘neo-avant-gardes’ of the 1950s and 60s that I contend is challenged by the SI’s particular temporal definition of an avant-garde that acts in the present, since ‘nowness’ troubles models of a discrete before and after. Or, to put it more emphatically, from the SI’s perspective there can be no such thing as a so-called ‘neo-avant-garde’ (in Bürger’s belated and repetitive sense) since to be avant-garde means to act now, never later on.

By claiming that the “Destruktion” exhibition presents a novel avant-garde temporality, I do not infer by this that the SI offers a new, or original model of avant-garde praxis as such. Indeed, throughout Debord’s essay certain familiar avant-garde principles remain in place, such as the intertwining of art and politics to form a critique of everyday life aimed at transforming that life. To use, that is, revolutionary artistic practices as a model for an alternative liberating life praxis, as opposed to merely aestheticising the everyday or committing what Peter Bürger calls a “false sublation” of the autonomy of art into the means-end rationality of everyday debased living within a culture industry (Bürger 1984: 54). Or to put it into situationist speak, to avoid the recuperation of a living artistic praxis (what the SI called a “constructed life situation”) by the alienating machinations of the society of the spectacle. What is unfamiliar or different here is of course the particular historical moment at which the SI announces their mode of radical or avant-garde revivalism.⁵

This is specifically a post-war/cold war context when, as Debord put it in this catalogue essay,

one must first and foremost – without any attempt at holding onto comforting illusions – come face to face with the defeat of the revolutionary project in the first three decades of the century in all its dimensions. (Debord 1963: 9)

The cultural guise of this revolutionary defeat is spelled out more clearly in one of the founding texts of the SI from 1957, which has the rather inelegant title of “Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency’s Conditions of Organization and Action” (Debord 1957: 17-25). Under the simpler subtitle “revolution and counter-revolution in modern culture” familiar early avant-garde movements such as Futurism, Dada, Surrealism and Brechtian theatre (as well as some less familiar avant-gardes from the 1940s and 50s, such as Cobra and Lettrism) are singled out, their limits and merits duly listed. For example, Dada is praised for its refusal of bourgeois society and for its destructive aesthetic that succeeded in delivering a mortal blow to traditional conceptions of culture. But it is criticised for being too nihilistic, its “purely negative definition” leading to its final self-destruction (Debord 1957: 18). What was lacking, from the SI’s perspective, were more constructive possibilities leading to continued attacks within what they described as “social conditions that impose the repetition of rotten superstructures” (Debord 1957: 19); conditions that may have been intellectually condemned but not yet practically wiped out. Despite their actual, historical failures, many of the avant-garde groups listed here still retain, for the SI, hidden or repressed constructive potentialities that remain to be salvaged and realised. For the ultimate defeat of such groups not only involved the inevitable recuperation and dilution of their styles of negation by the culture industry, where, as the SI put it, the ruling class always works to dissolve the avant-gardes’ radical and dangerous potentialities into “ordinary aesthetic commerce” (Debord 1957: 20). Their defeat was also linked to a broader failure of the revolutionary project, the failure that is, to successfully implement a properly socialist/communist society. In the SI’s eyes the Soviet revolutionary example was a perversion, involving the transformation of a vanguard party into a dominating, bureaucratic class stratum, resulting in a dictatorship *of* and not *by* the proletariat.

An inevitable question then is what can come after such failure, whereby revolutionary social upheaval is either in abeyance or off the agenda? That is, are all subsequent avant-gardes that work within the alienating conditions of capitalism (including its latest guise as “the society of the spectacle” diagnosed by the SI as operating during its lifetime) inevitably doomed to the status of reductive, repetitive ‘neo-avant-gardes’? The answer from the SI is a paradoxical yes and no. In the “Destruktion” catalogue essay Debord dismisses what he describes as the then current emergence (c.1963) of “neo-dadaists” (Debord 1963: 12). Here, the neo-dadaist label (note, not ‘neo-avant-garde’) is generically applied to recent works that formally adopt the anti-art ‘style’ associated with Dada from the 1920s, but divert it to reactionary ends by deploying it to merely decorate the present world, as opposed to ruining it, what the situationist Raoul Vaneigem diagnosed as the tendency to make “a spectacle of refusal” rather than “refusing the spectacle” (SI 1962: 26). More specific neo-dadaist examples are given in another essay called “The Avant-Garde of Presence”, published in the SI’s journal *internationale situationniste* (no. 8) in January 1963, just five months before the “Destruktion” exhibition. In this anonymously written text so-called New York Happenings dating from 1962 come under attack (again no names are given, but no doubt the likes of Allan Kaprow are included here, considering his *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* show took place around this time). Happenings are dismissed as a “dadaist style improvisation of gestures performed by a gathering of people within a closed off space” where social encounters are orchestrated in the form of a “hash produced by throwing together all old artistic leftovers, and a too aesthetically encumbered attempt to renovate the ordinary surprise party or classic orgy” (SI 1963a: 109-10). And in a published questionnaire for “The Centre for Socio-Experimental Art” (in December 1963) it is the “Visual Art Research Group” that is castigated as a parody of the revolutionary thesis of putting an end to the passivity of separated spectators through a poor imitation of constructed situations, whereby the “freeing” of the spectator comes in the form of a dictatorial and proscriptive order. For example, in a tract given out at the Third Paris Biennale the group announced that it was “forbidden not to participate” (SI 1963b: 144).

In contrast to such forced and thus false acts of participation proscribed by others, the SI only supported forms of free, autonomous, creative activities. The collective itself was anti-hierarchical (in principle at least, if not always in practice), conceived

along the lines of a loose association of autonomous, but like-minded, individuals. The SI was not structured as a revolutionary organisation (and they deplored the notion of disciples) but as an organisation with specific, revolutionary tasks such as the negation of the society of the spectacle in all spheres of life. What is meant by such negations of the spectacle is clarified by the SI's critique of another contemporary French art group (in the same questionnaire mentioned above), the so-called "New Realists". They were all summarily dismissed as "an apologetic trashcan art" in that their dadaist-inspired unconventional form of art "fits quite well in the margin of pseudo-freedom offered by a society of gadgets and waste" (SI 1963b: 144). That is to say, the SI acknowledge that such neo-dadaists continue to challenge the conventions of art, but what gets abandoned is the commitment to a total social revolution, which is substituted by a limited revolution in the compensatory domain of art. Or, in more precise situationist terms, the neo-dadaists failed to demand nothing less than the simultaneous end of art *and* the end of the proletariat.⁶

Such remarks hark back to the origins of the split in the SI itself in 1962. Then, the divide was not over whether to be or not to be either cultural producers *or* theoreticians, for the explicit programme of the SI was defined as a "theory-in practice" (Debord 1995: 59).⁷ Rather, it was a dispute over the sufficiency or not of remaining specialist artistic producers within the institutions of art. The split arose between cultural saboteurs prepared to work within the given artistic apparatus, and maintain the title of artists, and those whose goal was the total rejection of the prevailing consumer society and the overcoming of all separations including that between artists and non-artists – hence the phrase "all conniving avant-gardes are public enemy no. 1" (Atkins 1977: 60). A non-conniving avant-garde on the other hand, would continue to work within the prevailing conditions of culture, but in order to end it as a separate sphere. As it was put in "The Avant-Garde of Presence" article, "we take our stand on the other side of culture. Not before it, but after" (the phrase *après-garde* comes to mind here) and it continues,

we say that it is necessary to *realize* culture by superseding it as a separate sphere; not only as a domain reserved for specialists, but above all as a domain of specialized production that does not directly affect the construction of life – not even the life of its own specialists. (SI 1963a: 110)

The rhetoric of such anti-specialist/specialised concerns is reflected more generally in the SI's calls for "amateur" situationist producers prepared to work in any field and any medium without prior training. No member of the group was exempted from taking on a wide range of tasks, such as writing articles for their journal, editing it or producing films or paintings. Such an anti-hierarchical and anti-specialist diversity of production is intimated in the captions below the photographs of the participants in the "Destruktion" show where each is variously described as a combination of editor, writer, painter and filmmaker.

It is clear that the SI acknowledges the failure of various avant-garde projects from the 1920s and rejects many contemporary "neo-dadaist" artistic enterprises as poor imitations and spectacularised repetitions of their more radicalised Dada predecessors. This does not mean, however, that they adopt some nostalgic position that looks backward to some lost originary moment, nor do they turn away from the task of acting both within and against the present cultural conditions. That is to say, the SI do not propose some ideal, Archimedean point situated outside the spectacle from where they can critique it; that is, from some imagined vantage point of an uncontaminated distance. Instead, they deploy a form of immanent critique, speaking the language of the spectacle but against it, thereby automatically speaking a different language. The name that they gave to this process was "détournement", which literally means to hi-jack, but is used to describe a process of appropriating "pre-existing aesthetic elements" and devaluing and revaluing them by situating them in different contexts (Debord and Wolman 1956: 8).

In a 1964 article called "Now, The S.I" they make explicit the temporality of their demand for a critique of the spectacle as it was developing in their 'now' time (suggesting a sort of *maintenant-garde* positioning) (SI 1964: 135-38). This development of an immanent critique of the present, deeply anchored in the culture and art of their time, is a key distinguishing feature of the SI's project as a whole, helping to establish the group as part of a new revolutionary current as it was then unfolding and so enabling a labelling of them as the latest avant-garde. What is distinctive, or so I argue, is not simply the SI's critical use or *détournement* of current 'ready-made' cultural elements, but the relation of their critique of the present to past events. For what was specific, temporally speaking, was the SI's attempt to set up a unitary critique of the contemporary conditions of the spectacle by linking up present day contestatory experiences and

situations (and the people instigating them) with so-called “irreducible moments” of past revolutionary experiences that have remained in abeyance, forgotten or repressed. Forgotten moments, which in the light of present, eruptive and negating situations “reappear like ghosts” (SI 1965a: 152). The possibility of such historical spectres reappearing in the present, or for present realities to open up to past revolutionary potentialities, was an example of what Debord called, in the “Destruction” essay, a “reversible connecting factor” (Debord 1963: 9) and elsewhere a “reversible coherence of the world” (SI 1965a: 150). Such reversible connections reveal how the trajectories of past and present events do not follow a discrete, linear path, but are porous to one another in unpredictable, yet generative, ways. Such untimely encounters were conceived as being able to open up unexpected vistas on the relationship between past and present scandals. Or, as the SI put it, the reversible coherence of the world reveals “present reality in relation to possible reality” (SI 1965a: 150).

In other words, the SI’s strategy suggested in this catalogue essay was to reveal current day resistances (beyond the limited realm of art) in terms of their resumption or salvaging of particular past radical negations of the status quo that continue to haunt the present: but in the recognition of the inevitable alteration to both situations in light of their new, temporal conjunctions. At stake here, or so I argue, is a model of constructed situations (the SI’s term for their mode of praxis) that involves a complex and unpredictable overlapping of present and past situations. Not, however, in order to recover a similarity of styles of protest (as they accuse the neo-dadaists of doing) but so as to produce historically productive remembrances by connecting present day revolts to the transformatory potentialities of events in the past (even if these had failed).

The praxial task of the SI here can be summed up as an attempt to construct a situation that *détourne* a current event or action and by so doing gives it a new “memory and language” (Debord and Sanguinetti 1985: 14). This process underscores the SI’s mode of *avant-garde* praxis as such, as outlined in the “Destruction” catalogue essay. As Debord states, the *avant-garde*, everywhere (and we might add everywhere) it exists, is a question of uniting these experiences and these people and of publishing and making known these actions, of explaining and developing them: types of actions that are easily recognisable in that “they unite new combat forms and new – manifest or latent – content in their criticism of the existing world” (Debord 1963: 10). Specific examples of such “existing” actions that the SI

openly approved and supported, were listed in the catalogue essay. This includes an incident on January 16th when armed revolutionary students in Caracas removed five paintings from a French art exhibition. They offered to return them on condition that some political prisoners were released. The police were, however, successful in taking possession of the pictures again in spite of the fact that Winston Bermudes, Luis Monselve and Gladys Troconis tried to defend them. A few days later, others of their comrades threw bombs at the police car that was transporting the recaptured pictures, but unhappily, for the SI, did not manage to destroy them. For Debord this was a manifestation of the only right way to treat pictures from the past, “to restore them to a place in the game of life where they really can have meaning” (Debord 1963: 10). He then makes a productive link between this recent scandal and an incident that occurred during the revolt in Dresden in 1849. Allegedly, Bakunin suggested (though without its being followed up) removing paintings from the museum and setting them up over the barricade at the town gates in order to see whether the attacking troops would be self-conscious about continuing to shoot. According to Debord’s principle of the “reversible connecting factor” we can see how the affair in Caracas “at once joins together with one of the high points in the revolutionary rising in the last century and at the same time goes one step further” (Debord 1963: 10). I take this to mean that this time the theft of paintings was followed up, even if the exchange for political prisoners failed. The latter now becoming an unfinished action still to be completed or realised now.⁸

The possibility of such productive connections did not just occur between historically distant actions. Recent connections between present day actions in one geographic area could be linked to those happening in different locations. This is made evident through the title of this exhibition, which is explained as a direct reference to the English avant-garde comrades, the “Spies for Peace”, who made public the secret location of six of the British government’s regional nuclear shelters, referred to as the “Regional Shelters of Government – 6” (hence the title reference to RSG-6). It was this attack on the ruling organisation of social space that the SI claimed they wanted to salute and carry further by arranging in Denmark the manifestation “Destruktion of RSG-62” that recognised “not only this struggle’s international dissemination, but just as much its extension to another front, to the artistic side of the same global struggle” (Debord 1963: 11). Again we can see how the SI understood this artistic struggle to

be integrally bound up with the political. What constitutes avant-garde cultural activity for the SI is made explicit here. It cannot be separated from a broader emancipatory social project carried out within the present. As confirmed by Debord, “the creation of life situations and the realization of these cannot thus be separated from the history of the movement for the realization of all the revolutionary possibilities that the present society contains” (Debord 1963: 11).

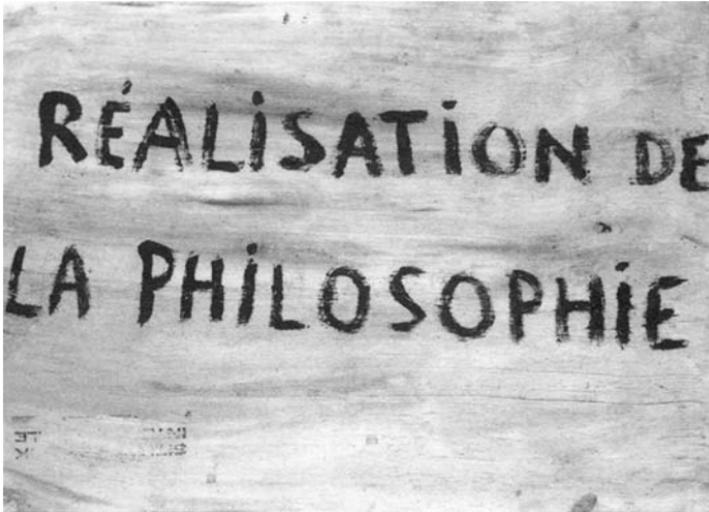


Fig. 1: Guy Debord, *Directive no. 2*, 1963

The task of revealing such residual revolutionary potentialities within the present was of course also given over to the practical works exhibited in the “Destruction” show. I will briefly analyse three works, by three different producers, for their productive connections between present and past (both recent and distant) revolutionary events, a process that I contend is an essential aspect of the SI’s status as an avant-garde. The first example is one of Debord’s so-called “Directives” paintings. Unfortunately the exhibition catalogue doesn’t reproduce any images of these works. It only lists them as “Directives, numbers 1-5”. A verbal description, however, is given in Debord’s catalogue essay where they are referred to as forms of political proclamations, “exhibited on empty paintings or on newly applied abstract paintings that should also be considered as slogans which it is possible to see written on walls” (Debord 1963: 12). Fortunately, a photo of one of these “Directives” was published in the second volume of Debord’s autobiography [fig. 1].⁹ It revives the political

proclamation “realization of philosophy” that is daubed across an empty or abstract background (it is a black and white photo so I am uncertain as to whether the letters are in black or red or any other strident colour). This manifestation of a “directive”, understood as meaning an “order”, may seem to be no different from what was dismissed earlier as the orchestrated and proscriptive method of the “Visual Research Group” and its “forbidden not to participate” demand. Yet, Debord makes it clear in the catalogue essay that the SI does not recommend the “conformity of art to politics” in the sense of art merely performing or acting out a fixed political dictate (Debord 1963: 9). I would argue that the type of directive given here fits in with this. For what is actually being asked or directed here? The task to “realize philosophy” is somewhat ambiguous. What it means, how it is to be interpreted or acted out, is left open. Rather than an order or a command, the “directive” at stake is more like an indicator or pointer, a vector of an action to be followed, but with no proscribed means or outcome.

This particular “directive” evidently relates to the past in its détourned salvaging of a task by Karl Marx that concerns his materialist critique of the idealist philosophy of Feuerbach. According to the axiom of Marx, so far philosophers had only interpreted the world, the task now was to transform it. This meant putting ideas back on their feet so to speak, to give them a concrete, praxial form rooted in everyday material existence. For Debord such a task was still incomplete, still to be realised. And one way to give it a renewed material form was its subsequent redeployment as a slogan to be graffitied, not on the reified walls of the gallery, but those found in the dirty streets. By so doing, the empty, abstract background of the canvas would be replaced by the living and shifting fabric of everyday life or the blank wall would become the support for a utopian directive that aimed to give ideas an embodied form. Moreover, such a directive is not imagined as produced by a specialist artist, using a prepared ground or expensive paints, but as the creation of any amateur, anonymous graffitist with access to a piece of chalk or can of paint.¹⁰

The second work I have chosen is one of J.V. Martin’s “Thermonuclear Cartographs” that is titled *Europe, 4 hours and 30 minutes after the Third World War* [fig. 2]. The catalogue lists seven of Martin’s maps with titles such as: *Two Hours after the Start of the Third World War*; *On the Second Day They say there will be 82 Megabodies* and *Whoever Won the War – We Lost It*. (Galerie EXI

1963: 22). Debord again gives a brief verbal description of these “cartographs” as

immediately beyond the laborious search for a new figuration in painting because they unite the freest method of action painting with renderings which can lay claim to being realistic perfection of various parts of the world at different times of the next world war. (Debord 1963: 12)

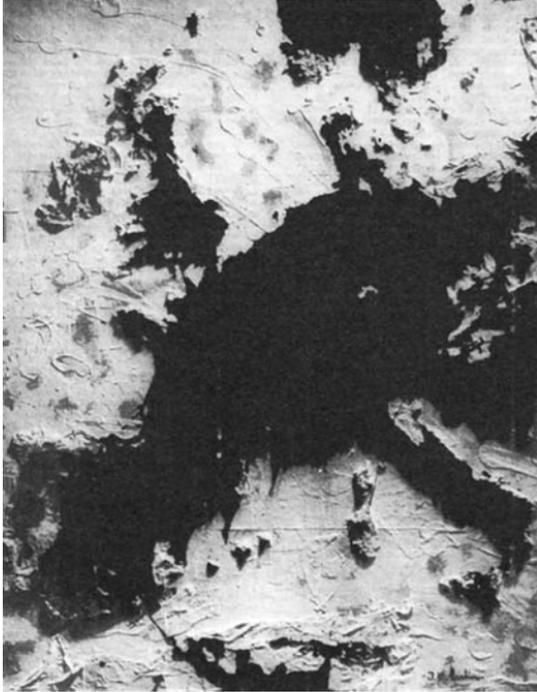


Fig. 2: J.V. Martin's "Thermonuclear Cartographs", titled *Europe, 4 hours and 30 minutes after the Third World War*, 1963

Such manifestations of a future world may seem out of kilter with my assertion that what is distinctive about the SI's mode of avant-garde praxis is their connection with the past through present situations. But, an all too real and recent past is being revived here. This is a work made by someone who had witnessed, albeit second hand through newspapers, TV images or films such as Alain Resnais' *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), the actual after-effects of a nuclear explosion, namely, the dropping of the first A-bombs on Japan in 1945. The realism of our future assured destruction, based on images of devastation and annihilation from the recent past, is not just pictured

in the figurative contours of these “cartographs” that outline recognisable countries with blackened, supposedly nuked, areas. For what is not mentioned in the catalogue is the fact that these thermonuclear maps were made out of soft cream cheese, whose fleshy organic texture literally rotted and stank over the days of the show.¹¹ The contours of the countries would be in constant flux, changing as their cheesy make-up decayed. This was not just an image of futural wasting, but a work that literally wasted away daily. That is, this was not just a picture *of*, but also a picture *in* the process of self-destruction, materially playing-out in the here and now the decay to come. Aptly, all that now remains of this work is its photographic trace.¹²

The final work I have selected is one of Michèle Bernstein’s “Victory” series [fig. 3]. This is a detail of a work called *Victory of the Commune of Paris*. Two other “Victories” are listed as exhibited: *Victory of the Spanish Republicans* and *Victory of the Grande Jacquerie in 1358* (Galerie EXI 1963: 22). Debord’s description of the works is as follows,

with the victory series – which is also a mixture of the largest, ultramodern freedom from restriction and a minute realism of Horace Vernet – it is a matter of a renewal of the battle-painting: but in opposition to Georges Mathieu and the ideological reaction upon which he has based his little publicity scandal. (Debord 1963: 12)

Such “actor-painting” (as the situationist Asger Jorn called the works of Mathieu) was not interested in the history of the battles being restaged in the paintings (captured in titles such as Mathieu’s *The Battle of Bouvines*) but more interested in the spectacle of its performance. Dressed in a Japanese Kimono, Mathieu would perform these large canvases in front of a live audience, as well as an invited press core. The restaged “battles” were more about accruing status and publicity for the cult of Mathieu, the specialist artist. Here we have a paradigmatic example of what Vaneigem called the “spectacle of refusal”. There was, however, a performative aspect to Bernstein’s small “anti-tableaux”, the name given to them in the questionnaire for “The Centre for Socio-Experimental Art” (SI 1963b: 147). The word “tableaux” connotes something fixed or static, but Bernstein’s “anti-tableaux” militate against such stasis in their material facture. Again, what is not mentioned in the catalogue is that these were not paintings but 3-dimensional pieces, made of plaster, splashed with paint and

covered with toy plastic soldiers. Their anti-tableau status comes from the fact that as you walk round these splattered and uneven terrains their contours changed with the viewer/walker's shifting perspective. There is no one ideal or fixed viewpoint established.



Fig. 3: Michèle Bernstein's "Victory" series, detail of a work called *Victory of the Commune of Paris*, 1963

What is very different (from the likes of Mathieu) is the relation of these "victories" to the past battles they revive. As Debord writes, "it corrects the revolving of history we arrive at here, this time to the better, to be more revolutionary and more successful than was" (Debord 1963: 12). These "victories" fly in the face of history. Past, revolutionary battles such as by the Paris Commune, or the Spanish Republics, battles that were lost, brutally suppressed and defeated by the forces of imperialism are replayed as victories. The pop or kitsch toy soldiers are given the impossibly weighty and imaginary task of rewriting history, of turning what had failed into a conquest. In his text "The Bad Days Will End" the Situationist Vaneigem gives an important insight into the desire behind such alternative or counter memorials, beyond the case of delusional denial. He suggests that if the desire to experience the revolutionary festivals of the past is urgent enough it "enables one to rediscover *lost* history, to salvage and re-judge it" (Vaneigem 1962: 85). I interpret this to mean that the recollection and commemoration of an alternative history allows the subject to imaginatively view the world through a different optic. This

counterfeit prism refracts the past to enable a different view of the present, to imagine how it might have been if the revolutionaries had won or how it could be if the battle is restaged and won. To rectify the past according to Vaneigem is “to change the psychogeography of our surroundings, to hew our unfulfilled dreams and wishes out of the veinstone that imprisons them, to let individual passions find harmonious collective expression” (Vaneigem 1994: 234). And pertinently, as concerns Bernstein’s series of alternative memorials, Vaneigem claims that it is through such processes of historical reconstruction that one is able to de-reify events, to rescue them from an artificial entombment in the past. Perhaps such a re-constructive process is also a parodic reminder of and retort to Novalis’ claim that history is written by the victors.

The parodic aspect of these works is not accidental, because, as Debord suggests, in times when such urgent revolutionary battles are still to be realised and rectified, “it seems that each new attempt to transform the world is forced to start out with the appearance of a new unrealism (*nouvel irréalisme*)” (SI 1963b: 147). By this he does not mean that Bernstein’s victories are false, but that they exist as forms of speculative transformation that are real, but yet to be realised, that is, actualised. At the same time these alternative, or better still, unreal “victories”, also open up onto a past avant-garde praxis, via Debord’s description of them as a continuation of “the unconditionally optimistic rotation with which Lautréamont has already, with pretty boldness, set up a claim of false documentation toward all the forms of misfortune and their logic” (Debord 1963:12). In keeping with the possibility of such “reversible connecting factors” the last paragraph of the “Destruction” catalogue essay is presented as a *détournement* of a passage from Lautréamont:

I do not accept evil. Man is perfect. The spirit does not fall. Progress exists [...] Up to now misfortune has been described as instilling horror, pity. I will describe happiness as bringing out the opposites of these things [...] As well as my friends will not die, I will not speak of death. (Debord 1963: 12)

I would like to suggest, as an end point, that this refusal of death also applies to the SI’s continuing avant-gardist project. I do not mean that they deny the historicity of each movement, for the SI are clear on one thing, and that is that every avant-garde must have its day. This is a sign that everything changes, that the movement of history is in constant flux and it is precisely eternity that is the grossest idea for the

situationists.¹³ Each avant-garde is necessarily of its time, its strategies of negation aimed at a particular historical moment. But, such strategies of action may have resonance, albeit in altered form, across different historical moments. And it is important to note that for the Situationists, such a turning to the past was crucial in the particular era of the spectacle, that so-called “capital of youth” defined by its denial of the past in its quest for a perpetual present, where for instance, “that which the spectacle ceases to speak of for three days no longer exists” (Debord 1995: 115, 106). According to Debord’s diagnosis, in a *détournement* of Marx, a spectre was haunting the spectacle, “the spectre of history” (Debord 1995: 141).¹⁴

This haunting was possible because for the SI the past was intertwined with the present, bound up in unpredictable ways that can be revealed through new constructed and conjunctural situations. For the SI, the task of an avant-garde was to revive lost and productive remembrances between past and present revolutionary actions. Here, the phrase *entre-garde* comes to mind, to designate a group working within and between different historical moments. And as long as the ultimate task of the avant-garde remained incomplete, in the SI’s case as long as the class war was still to be realised, then the time of the avant-garde is now.

Notes

¹ For an introductory overview of the Situationist International (henceforth the SI) and its pre-history see Ford (2005), and Raspaud and Voyer (1972). For a list of the constantly changing international membership between 1957-1972 see Gray 1974: 162-3.

² At the SI’s 5th conference held at Göteborg, Sweden from 28th-30th August 1961, it was agreed that from then on the term ‘antisituationist’ would be applied to all works produced by a member of the SI: “*antisituationist* art will be the mark of the best artists, those of the SI, since genuinely situationist conditions have as yet not at all been created. Admitting this is the mark of a situationist”. See ‘The Fifth S.I. Conference in Göteborg’ (tr. in Knabb 1981: 88). The “genuinely situationist conditions” refers to the defeat of capitalism, in its new imagistic guise that the SI defined as the Society of the Spectacle. See Thesis no. 34, “The spectacle is *capital* accumulated to the point where it becomes image” (Debord 1995: 24).

³ For a typical example of this misinformed cleavage see Maayan 1989: 49-53.

⁴ See Peter Bürger’s seminal definition of an originary historical avant-garde moment, c.1920s in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984).

⁵ “To revive radicalism naturally involves considerable research work, with a view to all the earlier attempts at freedom” (Debord 1963: 9).

⁶ On the connection of a cultural revolution with a revolt by a re-defined proletariat see Guy Debord and Pierre Canjuers’ (a member of the group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*) essay ‘Preliminaries Toward Defining a Unitary Revolutionary Program’ (1960).

⁷ See Thesis 90, “the theory of praxis verified by virtue of its transformation into a theory-in-practice” (Debord 1995: 59).

⁸ This raises interesting questions about the SI’s relation to terrorist tactics. They support violence as a necessary tactic in a violent and violating society that marginalises and oppresses the poor. A good example of a strategic use of violence is given in their text ‘The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy’ on the 1965 South Los Angeles Watts riots (SI 1965b).

Many of the SI’s analyses about the causes of poverty and class repression still seem relevant to the recent riots taking place in France in November 2005. However, terrorism as such, especially the mindless killing of innocent victims, was not something the SI unambiguously supported as indicated by the following: “From the perspective of social struggle it must first of all be said that one should never play with terrorism. But even serious terrorism has never in history had any salutary effectiveness except in situations where complete repression made impossible any other form of revolutionary activity and thereby caused a significant portion of the population to side with the terrorists” (in SI 1969: 98). SI member Gianfranco Sanguinetti also described how terrorism can be used by the State to work against the proletarian cause, as was the case of the Italian State and The Red Brigade in 1969 (see Sanguinetti 1982). More generally the SI claims that what prevents explosions of anger and violence is the end of the proletariat through the collective construction of everyday life. This is a paraphrase from Vaneigem’s ‘Notice to the Civilized Concerning Generalized Self-Management’ (1969: 287).

⁹ See Debord’s *Panegyric* (2004). An image of ‘Directive no. 2’ (1963) appears on: 116.

¹⁰ On the role of situationist graffiti see Stracey 2005: 123-141.

¹¹ I gained specific details of these works from my interview with M. Bernstein in 1999.

¹² Many of the works exhibited in the *Destruction* show were destroyed in a firebomb attack on the SI’s Danish headquarters in 1965. For details of this attack see ‘L’I.S. et Les Incidents De Randers’ (SI. 1966).

¹³ “The permanence of art or anything else does not come into our considerations [...] eternity is the grossest idea a person can conceive of in connection with his acts [...]” (Debord 1957: 25).

¹⁴ The phrase is “history itself is the spectre haunting modern society” in Debord 1995: 141. This is a détournement of the line: “A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism” in *The Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels 1985: 78).

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DISSEMINATION

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“MOVENS” OR THE AESTHETICS OF MOVEMENT AS A PROGRAMMATIC PERSPECTIVE

FRIEDRICH W. BLOCK

Dedicated to Franz Mon
on the occasion of his 80th birthday

Pejorative ascriptions

“Be always absent-stupid-minded”,¹ this is the motto of all new avant-gardes. The poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s essay on “the aporias of the avant-garde”, written in 1961, culminates in this polemic, with which the *angry young man* initiates the critical discourse on the historical and the neo-avant-garde in Germany. He writes that the concept requires elucidation. But when Enzensberger attempts to shed light on the subject, he ends with a sweeping condemnation of the contemporary avant-garde, which he accuses of being doctrinal, uniform, arbitrary, a bluff and long since claimed by the consciousness industry. None the less, the essay includes two arguments particularly relevant to the continued discourse: these are the failure of the historical avant-garde and the regressive repetition of the present avant-garde. As we know, Peter Bürger went on to set out this double condemnation in his influential “Theory of the Avant-Garde” thirteen years later (Bürger 1974). Accepted or not, these arguments of failure and repetition still feature in the academic discussion to this day. In all its differentiation the discourse has thus persistently circled around condemnation of and apologia for what is seen to be avant-garde.

Another thing Bürger and Enzensberger have in common, to some extent at least, is to whom they ascribe the idea of the current or the neo-avant-garde. Along with certain trends in art and music, in the case of literature this primarily concerns experimental writing such as

concrete poetry and related manifestations. While Bürger mentions concrete poetry only in passing, Enzensberger expresses himself a little more clearly concerning a project which I would like to focus on in this essay: namely the anthology “movens” published by fellow poet Franz Mon the previous year, in 1960 (Mon 1960). Particularly Enzensberger’s criticism of the poetic notion of experiment, as he sees it developed in the “movens” volume, has repeatedly been picked up by the academic discourse ever since. However, Enzensberger’s argument continues to be completely polemical when he claims, for example, that projects like “movens” follow a latent totalitarian violence addressed towards the artistic material: colours, tones, blunted words thrown like hand grenades, he writes.² Later, “movens”, or the poetic opinions developed therein, play a role in the critical discourse of Bürger’s “Theory of the Avant-garde”. In Germany, this discourse has been developed strongly in the field of literary studies. Hans Christian Kosler (1976), for example, defends experimental literature along the lines of “movens” and its editor against Bürger’s negative idea of the neo-avant-garde. Importantly, Kosler finds no evidence of experimental literature concurring with a renewed intention of attacking the institution of art.

Thus, the connection between the aesthetic positions represented in “movens” and the so-called neo-avant-garde starts off as a question of ascription. These ascriptions occur in the system of art, on the one hand, and in that of science, on the other hand. Therefore, we need to differentiate. I shall say in advance that we are dealing with ascriptions which, in the case of “movens” at least, have no explicit equivalent in the object: there is no mention of being avant-garde or neo-avant-garde in this book or in the poetological program it represents.

Hence, for the moment, I shall attempt neither a poetological nor a scientific classification of the neo-avant-garde. Instead, I will try to filter out the programmatic aims formulated in the “movens” project. The artist Carlfriedrich Claus will then be introduced as an example to show how this program is carried out, and what prospects it offers. Only then shall we move on to discuss possible references to the avant-garde discourse.

“movens” and the concept of movement

The title of Franz Mon’s anthology “movens” already conveys the central idea of movement. The subtitle announces “documents and

analyses on literature, art, music, architecture", that is to say, a panorama of art in its entirety. The first part contains poetic texts by artists or writers such as John Cage, Dieter Rot, Jean Tardieu, Emmett Williams, Gertrude Stein and Kurt Schwitters. Throughout the book there are illustrations of visual, architectural and musical works. The second part consists of essays on contemporary manifestations of art. In the middle of the volume, the editor has inserted 16 red pages containing a basic essay – called "Perspective" – and a "Synopsis". The synopsis is particularly interesting because it systematically organises the aesthetic categories deployed in the different contributions of the book. We will focus on the following two remarks on context:

1. The "documents" announced in the subtitle remind us of the "documenta", the so-called world art exhibition, which had just taken place for the second time the year before. The programme of "documenta II" celebrated *abstract art* as a world language of freedom. The "documenta" curators considered this artistic freedom as involving both a moral and a political dimension, not only aimed at the experiences of National Socialism but also at the political system of the Eastern bloc and its doctrine of *socialist realism*: the abstract art of the "documenta" was politicised against the background of the cold war. Of course, the documents of visual art in "movens" can be attributed to abstract art – most of the book's visual artists also participated in the "documenta". But the concept of abstraction plays no theoretical role in the aesthetics of the book; it is noticeably avoided.

2. Above all, "movens" is a poetic project, in spite of the fact that other areas of art are discussed. Conceptually, theoretically and in the examples it makes use of the project differs from the ethos of the German literary scene as represented by the "Gruppe 47" ("Group 47"): starting out from the same situation of 1945, the so called cultural *Kahlschlag* ("demolition") resulting from the catastrophes of World War II, Holocaust and Third Reich, the "Gruppe 47" demanded an unvarnished relation to reality; experiment and its traditions were decidedly rejected. Against that, the view held in "movens" can also be found in concrete poetry, although the main emphases lie a little differently. Anything reminiscent of doctrine is avoided: labelling or the combative air of a manifesto, for example. And, "movens" goes much further than concrete poetry (as practiced by Eugen Gomringer), as the discussion on so-called labyrinthine architecture, dynamic theatre, electron painting and new or electronic music shows. It

designs a programmatic perspective with concepts that have been developed in post-concrete forms of language art until today.

Let's move on to the synopsis and to the poetics of the volume. In the preceding essay "Perspektive" (82-86), Franz Mon makes it clear that the project sees itself as pointing to a theory of modern arts. The starting point is the linguistic basis of all art according to its communicative semiosis. Language is conceived to be processual, an articulation between memory and expectation. The aesthetics of movement are then set up in five short sections of the "Synopse" (87-96). Basically, *movement* is not only understood in a kinetic manner, but as a semiotic process and as aesthetic self-observation.

In detail the individual theoretical sections each develop one central idea amongst specified concepts. The conceptual pair "Phase und Experiment" ("phase and experiment", 87f.), for example, stands for methodically clear, precise and rational interventions into a string of events or actions. In works of this kind, the process matters more than the result. The "Material" (89f.) which is processed is conceived as inherently dynamic, as far as consciousness concerned with material can itself be considered material. The "Analyse" ("analysis", 90f.) of the material tries to observe even the smallest elements of articulation and to position these in a larger context. "Gestik und die Organisation des Materials" ("gestures and organisation of the material", 92-95) focuses on different performative qualities and levels of sign processes. Finally, with the keywords "Organismisches Maß und Spontaneität" ("organismic measure and spontaneity", 95f.), the persons involved in the art process, artist and recipient alike, are conceived as an empirical condition of this process.

The form of the synopsis is – as is the whole book – both poetic and theoretical: theory poetry so to speak. Though the essayistic style is academic, its wording can be indifferent, affective and metaphorical nevertheless. This corresponds to the method of the keyword register attached to every commentary, formally contrasting with it. Furthermore, this offers one of many possibilities for reading the book. Finally, as a third element, every section includes quoted fragments from theoretical texts of modern aesthetics – from Adorno, Boulez and Cézanne, Kandinsky, Klee and Nietzsche to Schlemmer, Sutherland and Valéry. This specific structure also has a gestural, performative character: the development of modernism, including the so-called historic avant-gardes, a tradition which was wiped out completely in Central Europe, has been reconstructed and assimilated.

Carlfriedrich Claus: life as experiment

With these aesthetics of movement, "movens" supplies a programmatic perspective for what has been termed the "experimental poetics" of the next few decades. This is a perspective – over and above concrete poetry towards conceptual and inter-media poetry, or media-reflexive poetry – which is flourishing at present, particularly in the area of digital technology. We will concentrate on three important aspects here: firstly, movement as process and performance, secondly reflection upon media as reflection of self, and thirdly, experience as an experiment.

This will now be elucidated by using the example of Carlfriedrich Claus, who was represented in "movens" and who continued to develop its program in an unusually radical manner until his death in 1998.

Carlfriedrich Claus' work moves between visual and sound poetry. The "Lautprozesse" ("sound processes") are vocal articulations which are recorded on tape and are complexly composed material. The "Sprachblätter" ("speech-sheets"), drawings and etchings, consist of handwritten wordings in transition to graphic formulations, which are often carried out on both sides of transparent paper, and are frequently linked to cycles. The sheets always arise in the context of some special, intensive theoretical occupation such as the study of various different languages, mysticism and Tibetology, contemporary philosophy, particularly Ernst Bloch, or cybernetics, and, of course, modern art. Claus has set down his personal poetics in an important essay written in 1964: "Notizen zwischen der experimentellen Arbeit – zu ihr".³

The fact that Claus lived in the GDR is highly significant. Since 1956, at the latest, he was officially isolated as an artist, following his public defence of Picasso against the doctrine of *socialist realism*. His work was produced in complete seclusion and was acclaimed only in the West, following his participation in "movens". It was not until the end of the seventies that he received any attention in the GDR. Nonetheless, Claus was a convinced Communist and saw his artistic work as a contribution to a communist utopia. Since German reunification he has been honoured frequently. So far, the highlight of this delayed recognition is the extensive exhibition held in Chemnitz in 2005, which placed Claus in the context of modern art, along with more than 120 artists.⁴

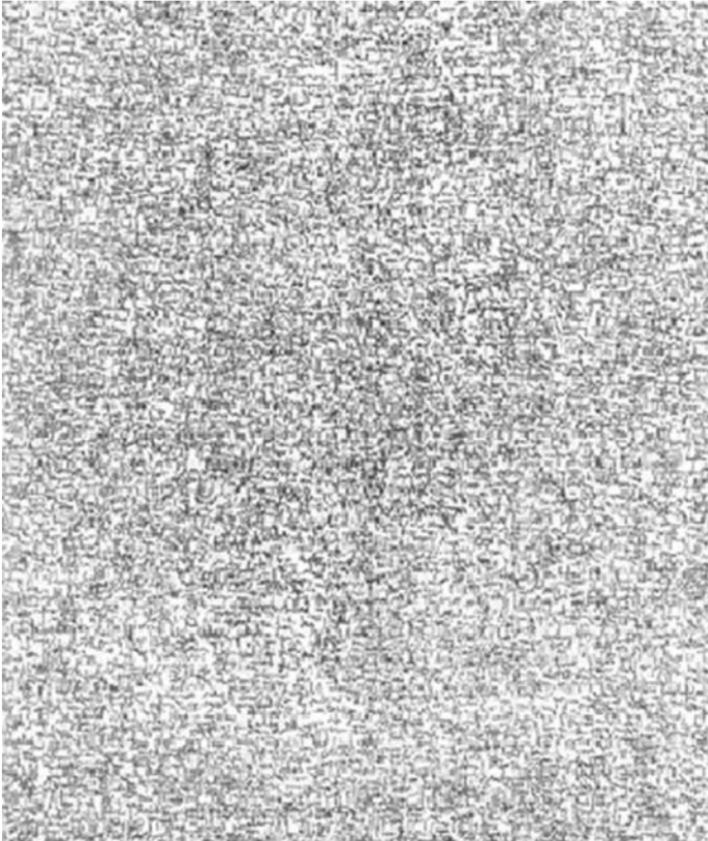


Fig. 1: Carlfriedrich Claus, *Vibrationstext*, 1960

1. Movement as process and performance: Claus contributed a handwritten “Vibrationstext” (“vibration text”, 77) and a poetological statement (76) to “movens”.⁵ According to the statement, he was concerned with the meticulous observation of organic and perceptual-psychological processes during experimental articulation. His is an artistic analysis, which concerns the connections of body, mind, natural and social environment, as well as the ways in which they are symbolically conveyed. This refers to the activity of both the artist and the recipient. During the production of speech sheets, Claus explored the interrelation of cognitive, motor, and media techniques. He worked with both hands simultaneously, from right to left and the other way round, forwards and backwards, with normal and mirrored writing, revolving surfaces for writing and projection, grades of

transparency, transition from legibility to illegibility, from verbal to iconic codes etc. An equivalent could also be formulated for the sound processes.



Fig. 2: Carlfriedrich Claus, *Emotionale Bewegungen im Formulierungsprozess*, 1988⁶

2. Media reflection as reflection of self: Claus' second appearance on the international stage was in 1963, in Amsterdam, with the exhibition "Schrift und Bild / Art and Writing" where he was represented by 10 handwritten speech-sheets.⁷ This large exhibition was a direct result of "movens", concentrating on the convergence of visual and scriptural art. Contemporary developments such as Art Informel, Tachism and Visual Poetry were contrasted with material going back to the 8th century. The intermedial connections between word and image can be interpreted as an aspect of the proceeding "lingualisation" of art,⁸ which, in turn, must be seen in the context of the development of information technology. There has been a noticeable increase in the

artistic attention placed on different forms of media and the way they are implemented. In the age of electronic information processing, Claus' complementary observation of handwritten and vocal processes is important inasmuch as these are technologies of self. They refer to the human medium and thus, dialectically, produce a kind of anti-grammatology.



Fig. 3: Detail of Fig. 2.

3. Experience as experiment: as Claus (1964) makes clear in his poetological outline, the “notes between the experimental work”, he is interested in a “Erprobung: im Selbstversuch” (“test: in self-experiment”, or “exploration by way of experiment on oneself”, 6), dealing with the “rückwärtige Landschaft des informierenden Ichs” (“back feeding” or “reverse” “landscape of the informing I”, 13). Claus refers to the concentration on the thresholds of the formulation

process: the boundaries between inside and outside, materiality and immateriality, as well as between determination and freedom. He explores the transformation of psychosomatic experience into language or writing, the transition of theoretical reflection into spontaneous expression and vice versa, and the sublimating observation and transformation of sexually motivated forces, and of states of ecstasy or experiences on the verge of consciousness etc.

In this context, 'experimental' means the artistic manipulation of personal experience, literally *making* experience out of specific deliberately chosen conditions. This then is experience as experimental subjectivity or, as Claus would have it: "life as experiment".⁹

Neo-avant-garde?

With these insights, we can now address the neo-avant-garde issue. Inasmuch as this is a programmatic question, the aesthetics of movement, as illustrated with the example of "movens" and Claus, can be interpreted as an expression of the experimental poetics program. The term *program* is used here as a concept – in analogy to cultural 'software' – to observe poetological condensations in the art system. Programs consist of certain strategies, principles, values, work attitudes, questions and objectives which shape single artistic events and manifestations and help to organise their systemic factors (like actants and their perceptions and communications, media, works, institutions) towards a certain poetics.¹⁰ Programs occur in various planes of complexity which may cross each other. They develop intrinsic values and the specificities of these may be indicated – usually with type or genre titles or, if required, with group or movement names. Some examples of programs and partial programs, in order of abstraction, are: Futurism, Zaum, star language / digital poetry, New Media Poetry, L.A.I.R.E., *poème à lecture unique*. Of course it is not necessarily the norm to interlock more comprehensive programs with partial programs or concretions – since the sixties post-concrete language art has, if at all, favoured smaller programs: mainly strategies of individual artists (like "Lautprozesse" or "Sprachblätter") without a clear 'superstructure'.

Experimental poetics as a program has intended not so much to aid the classification of certain texts or works, but rather to establish the

parameters of a setting repeatedly said to have the following common criteria:

- the interest in working *with* rather than *in* the language, i.e. the concentration on its semantic and material aspects as well as its use in connection with other sign systems
- the experimentation with new media of perception and communication and their technologies
- making the processes of producing, perceiving, and understanding aesthetic forms a central theme
- linkage and integration and therefore also extension of media and procedures used in more traditional forms of art
- the connection of poetry / language art with other genres of art – particularly with contemporary developments in the fine arts and music – and also with science and politics, the reflection on the limits of art
- the very rational and cognitively oriented attitude of the producers
- their cooperation in groups and their international integration.

As we have seen, the aesthetics of movement interfere with and specify these criteria. However, the concept of *neo-avant-garde* plays no role in this poetological orientation. And for the most part, the same goes for the notion of *avant-garde* if we discount polemic ascriptions à la Enzensberger. At the most, conceptions, like the one Richard Kostelanetz formulated in 1982 for the historical and contemporary poetic avant-garde, could be viable if interpreted as a purely poetological statement:

[Avant-garde] transcends current artistic conventions in crucial aspects, establishing a discernible distance between itself and the mass of current practices; second, avant-garde work will necessarily take considerable time to find its maximum audience; and, third, it will probably inspire future, comparably advanced endeavours. (Kostelanetz 1982: 3)

Franz Mon is even more cautious with the concept of “new” (Mon 1997: 14). On the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the “Bielefelder Colloquium Neue Poesie”, where about 45 international experimental poets met annually, he writes that the term *new poetry* (“Neue Poesie”) was accepted by the participants as neutral and could thus be agreed upon – the rejection of any labels would become an extra point

on the program agenda. The choice of the term *new poetry* emphasised the fact that there was an interest in unknown or not yet existing poetic procedures, which react to changed conditions.¹¹

Theoretically, observing the art system, we should question if the term 'neo-avant-garde' is in fact suitable for the historical or structural classification of experimental poetry in the 50s and 60s and thereafter. To go even further: the notion of neo-avant-garde seems to be theoretically inadequate for the analysis and explanation of any phenomena of art. This is the case even if the notion was considered in the positive light of the neo-avant-garde adapting the avant-garde "project" to changed conditions (Asholt & Fährnders 2000: 16) or extending and radicalising it in preoccupation with developments in art, history, media, and theory (Schaffner 2006: 18-19). Neo-avant-garde can hardly be conceived as a (more general) aesthetic program in the sense developed above. If, as told by the trivial consensus in the critical readings of Bürger's reductive avant-garde concept, developments of art since the fifties cannot be judged to be repetitive or epigonic, if avant-garde should be thought not to be completed but dynamic, the notion of neo-avant-garde is both distorting and unnecessary.

Indeed, already the term avant-garde is too general to distinguish the specialised facets of contemporary art: thus it would be difficult to define which art of the 50s and 60s would not be (neo-)avant-garde or, rather, to define how avant-garde would specifically differ from any art actually presented to and discussed in public in the last decades. This is also shown by the colourful bunch of phenomena discussed in this book. Thus 'avant-garde' seems to indicate an interpretative and historical perspective on various art forms rather than a program of the art system itself.

Self-referentiality, that is to say the more or less critical reflection on structures, processes and boundaries of art, may be an important criterion for avant-garde, but self-referentiality in art usually relates to certain aspects of artistic events and does not cover their complexity and their specific character. At least this holds true for the examples discussed in this essay.

In *literature* the avant-garde issue seems to be less diffuse than in fine art or contemporary music: the dynamic program of experimental poetics could be interpreted as a development of avant-garde as outlined by Anna Katharina Schaffner in her differentiated thesis on "language dissection" since Futurism (Schaffner 2006) in order to qualify "a discernible distance between itself and the mass of current

practices” (see the quotation of Richard Kostelanetz). But the aesthetics of movement and experiment find themselves in such a distance to official literature and its dominant model of narrative fiction that one could really speak of a poetic language art in its own right and apart from literature. In other words: for (experimental) language art the ascription ‘avant-garde’ is as redundant as for contemporary fine art – unless we want to focus on its relation to the radical developments of art in the early 20th century.

With this sceptical view, I would nevertheless like to conclude by picking out several aspects of the diverse avant-garde discourses and relating these to the described phenomena of the experimental poetics of movement.

Conclusion

1. Let us first look at the relations to the historical avant-garde movements. In accordance with Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster, we should closely examine how contemporary art views the avant-garde tradition. As already mentioned, the poetics of “movers” assimilate approaches of the avant-garde which are deemed interesting. And, no doubt, the poets or artists accommodate themselves to this appropriation. But this isn’t just the repetition of the achievements of the avant-garde tradition, it is a *retro-perspective* in dialectical proportion to anticipation and reconstruction (cf. Foster 1996: 14). Or, as Schaffner (2006: 281-82) puts it, they “enhance them, develop them further and adapt them to their own sensibilities and distinctive background situations, drawing upon new theories and concepts”. Claus’ intensive treatment of Russian Futurism illustrates this. He wasn’t interested in the futuristic attack on the art institution or the “slap in the face of public taste”, as a manifesto by Velimir Xlebnikov and Alexej Krutchonych from 1913 was called. Instead, in line with his experimental poetics, he was interested in the radical manipulations of language processes, methods of handwriting and sound poetry developed by artists such as Xlebnikov and Krutchonych, in the sphere of Sa-um:

Erfindung einer neuen Sprach-Realität aus dem Material selbst, den bewußtwerdenden phonetischen und graphischen Elementen der Sprache: Laut (Vokal, Konsonant), Schriftzeichen, Silbe, Wort und deren Beziehung zu Linie, Fläche, Raum, Zeit, Farbe, Zahl. Erzeugung knirschender

Verbindungen. Aus-Spaltungen: Explosionen. Implosion".
 (Claus 1990: 146)¹²

Claus interprets the revolutionary gestures combined with these procedures according to his utopia of consciousness change as world change. If we read his corresponding essays in relation to his concrete artistic practice, then, like Foster (2005: 15), we can't fail to notice that here, at last, an adequate understanding of the historical avant-garde is revealed.

2. The question of attacking the art institution: seen system-theoretically, the historical avant-garde movements were concerned for the first time with questioning the boundaries of art in due clarity, that is to say dealing with the distinction between system and environment. With that, the aestheticist autonomy postulate is both surpassed and deconstructed: differentiating its self-organisation, art itself explicitly sets its own boundaries. The constant reflection 'what is art?' or 'under what circumstances and possibilities, for which reasons and in what ways can art happen?' has been with us ever since. The ways in which this question is concretely realised are very diverse. A dynamic treatment of the system-environment-difference reacts flexibly to the cultural, technological, political, and social challenges of modernisation.

For the program of the poetic experiment, the flirtation with science is particularly important, here: as a development of "poetics in the age of scientific knowledge theories" (Wiener 1987). (Critical) theories of language and culture, analytic philosophy, semiotics, media and information theory, mathematics, cybernetics, cognitive and genetic research etc. are intensively studied, used or extended by artists and mediators in the experimental program. The issues at stake are epistemological questions under artistic conditions, which have, compared to science, quite different procedures. They are, above all, not orientated objectively or academically but subjectively towards the individual self: life or experience as an experiment.

3. In his critique of Bürger's simplifying art concept, Dietrich Scheunemann (2000) has pointed out a further challenge: the rapid development of the information technologies faced by the avant-gardes. This certainly also applies to experimental poetry. Concentration on sign processes, on the materiality of language, the development of intermedial processes, the poetic trail of any medial dispositive – from voice and handwriting, via typography, photography, film, video, holography, radio, electronic sound-processing to multimedia, Internet, programming code – all of this shows how

sensitive one is to media reflection within the program of experimental poetry. Most important here is the precarious connection between subjectivity and media – precarious in the sense of subjectivity being constantly under question as a consequence of modernisation (Block 1999: 13ff., 283ff.). The work of Carlfriedrich Claus, his attentiveness to what could be called *human media* in the context of the technological build-up, particularly expresses this. However, it can just as well be observed in current manifestations of digital poetry.¹³

4. Finally, we come to a last aspect: the connection of art and life. With *life practice* Peter Bürger means social practice, and his formula relates to the intention of producing societal change through art. Ignoring the fact that this distinction isn't unproblematic in itself (isn't art always life or social practice?) I would interpret it as the previously mentioned processing of the system-environment-difference and the self-reflection of art.

However, in view of the aesthetics of movement within the program of experimental poetry, the distinction of art and life does actually gain a completely different and important meaning. "Life as an experiment" does not mean that life *worth living* has to be judged, in an elitist fashion, as an art work, for instance as in the aestheticist concept of the dandy or as a hermetic form game. Nor does it mean the exposition of social life or public and communicative processes as in actions, happenings, Living Theatre etc. First and foremost, *life* in poetic experiment, as Carlfriedrich Claus radically carried it out, means the individual space of experience, and begins artistically with the cognitive domain of man: embodied feelings, perceptions, imagination, thoughts and expressions in their dependence on symbolic systems and communication. The methods are self-observation, self-reflection, self-description. One function of contemporary art becomes quite clear in relation to this: the concentration on the *poiesis* of individual consciousness in the context of its medial or communicative or total occupation.

Notes

¹ "Sei immer blödsinnig geistesabwesend" (Enzensberger 1962: 305).

² "blindlings geschleudert werden Farben, Töne und Wortstümpfe, nicht Molotow-Cocktails oder Handgranaten" (Enzensberger 1962: 308).

³ "Notes between the experimental work – on it" (Claus 1964).

⁴ “Schrift. Zeichen. Geste. Carlfriedrich Claus im Kontext von Klee bis Pollock”, Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz, 24.7.-9.10.2005, cf. Mössinger & Milde (2005).

⁵ The third part of his contribution consists of a page of typewritten letter constellations.

⁶ “Emotional movements in the process of formulation”.

⁷ The “Schrift und Bild” exhibition was curated by Dietrich Mahlow, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 3.5.-10.6. 1963, Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden 15.6.-4.8. 1963. The catalogue (Staatliche Kunsthalle Baden-Baden 1963) is introduced with an essay by Franz Mon and was published in Mon’s edition “Typos”.

⁸ ‘Lingualisation’ means here that language and text are incorporated as material or perceptual media into artistic production – from the fine arts all the way to a “literature” outside of literature. This poetic treatment of language has developed its own dynamic alongside the traditional arts in the course of the twentieth century – to such an extent that one can say it constitutes its own genre, for which I use the term “language art”. Second, this concept is meant to convey that language and text also function in this context as paradigms and as a medium for artistic self-reflection.

⁹ Quoted from an interview with Carlfriedrich Claus (Hanika 1999).

¹⁰ This concept is related to a general systems theory of art as developed by Siegfried J. Schmidt (1989), Niklas Luhmann (1995) and – concerning experimental poetics – Friedrich W. Block (1999).

¹¹ Although not every protagonist in this field would identify him- or herself with the label *experimental*, and even though there are perhaps more appropriate terms, this concept seems to this day to be the one most capable of acquiring international currency.

¹² “Invention of a new reality of language out of its own material, the phonetic and graphic elements of language coming to consciousness: sound (vowel, consonant), grapheme, syllable, word, and their relation to line, square, space, time, colour, number. Creation of crunching connections. Ex-splittings: Explosions. Implosion”.

¹³ Aesthetic concepts of the man/machine distinction and of so called interactivity are especially crucial here (cf. Block 2000).

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THE AVANT-GARDE IS DEAD; LONG LIVE THE AVANT-GARDE!

MARTIN PUCHNER

I.

Theories of the death of the avant-garde are not difficult to come by these days.¹ Frequently, they are grounded in the alleged demise of the manifesto, a genre that epitomises the utopian progressivism of the early twentieth century and thus everything that the postmodern present is not. The reported death of the manifesto thus becomes the symptom and proof of the death of the avant-garde more generally. Peter Bürger (1974) is one proponent of this historiography, whose underlying assumptions, however, are surprisingly widespread. They can also be found in Perry Anderson's influential *The Origins of Postmodernity* (1998):

Since the seventies, the very idea of an avant-garde, or of individual genius, has fallen under suspicion. Combative, collective movements of innovation have become steadily fewer, and the badge of a novel, self-conscious 'ism' ever rarer. For the universe of the postmodern is not one of delimitation, but intermixture – celebrating the cross-over, the hybrid, the pot-pourri. In this climate, the manifesto becomes outdated, a relic of an assertive purism at variance with the spirit of the age. (Anderson 1998: 93)

There is a gulf between manifesto modernism and a post-manifesto postmodernism that turns the manifesto into an “outdated” “relic” incapable of capturing the “spirit of the age”.

While historians of decadence and demise have decided that the time of the manifesto is over, various political, social, and artistic groups and individuals have continued writing them with impunity. What are we to make of these facts on the ground, the repeated resurgences of manifesto writing since the end of avant-gardes of the early twentieth century? Given the close affinity between the idea of

the avant-garde and the genre of the manifesto, such resurgences are good occasions for raising the question of the relation between what is often called the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde. In the following pages I will use the repeated waves of manifesto writing, as well as the types of manifestos produced, to track the changing attitudes toward the avant-garde in the sixties and beyond.

Scattered texts had been called manifestos for centuries, but it was Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* that gathered these texts into a distinct genre. The *Communist Manifesto* is a text forged in accordance with Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, that philosophers should not only interpret the world, but also change it. Divided between doing away with the past and ushering in the future, the *Communist Manifesto* seeks to produce the arrival of the modern revolution through an act of self-foundation and self-creation: we, standing here and now, must act! Manifestos tend to present themselves as mere means to an end, demanding to be judged not by their rhetorical or literary merits – their poetry – but rather by their ability to change the world. But Marx also emphasised their form, which articulates most succinctly the desires and hopes, manoeuvres and strategies of modernity: to create points of no return; to make history; to fashion the future.

Some time in the second half of the nineteenth century, an art manifesto split off from the political manifesto, so that now different types of manifestos found themselves in a fierce competition with one another, at times seeking to build on their common ancestry and at others trying to establish their independence from one another. André Breton and Leon Trotsky's manifesto, *Towards a Free Revolutionary Art* (1938), can be seen as one of many attempts to bring the political manifesto and the art manifesto together again. The theme of this widely circulated text, how art should relate to politics, was also a question of authorship, how avant-gardists such as Breton should collaborate with professional revolutionaries such as Trotsky, and of form, how the art manifesto should relate to the political manifesto. *Towards a Free Revolutionary Art* (1938) expresses the troubled relations among political and artistic avant-gardes in the thirties; it also marks the end of an era characterised by the twin concepts of revolution and manifesto. During the forties and fifties, marred by WWII and reconstruction, avant-garde art and manifesto politics receded into the background, at least in the West, even though they never went entirely away.

All this began to change in the sixties, culminating in what is sometimes called the high sixties, a period that witnessed nothing less than a second wave of avant-garde activity. Once more, the horizon of the revolution seemed to define the culture, politics, and forms of expression in Europe, North America, and many former colonies, and once more revolutionary art and revolutionary politics were competing for attention and influence.

The resurgence of political and artistic avant-gardes is nowhere as visible as in the remarkable resurgence of manifesto writing. However else one may judge the sixties' mixture of personal liberation, drug culture, protest behaviour, and new avant-garde art, it proved to be a powerful formula for the manifesto. New manifestos and new versions of older manifestos once more populated journals, magazines, and billboards, and some of them even demanded, in a Marxian manner, a new poetry of the revolution. Art manifestos, political manifestos, and, most importantly, combinations of the two began to spring up everywhere, articulating dissent, accusation, and resistance. Small, local groups demanded to be heard and soon began to form associations and networks across national borders. The sixties and early seventies thus witnessed not only a quantitative rise, but also a qualitative change. Even though many writers of manifestos looked for guidance to the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century as well as to the political manifestos of the nineteenth, they recognised that the new poetry of the revolution could not simply rely on its past and that new forms needed to be invented to meet the challenges of their own time. The second wave of a manifesto-driven vanguard was holding Western societies in thrall.

One term that is commonly used for the avant-garde art of the sixties is neo-avant-garde, a problematic term not only because its meaning is restricted to repetition, but also because it forces into one category a large variety of art movements, collectives engaged in civil rights battles, protesters against the Vietnam War in the United States, mass universities in France and Germany, and repressive, alienated society everywhere. Sometimes the manifestos written by these so-called neo-avant-gardes repeated slogans from the early twentieth century, for example when one group, Black Mask, demanded, futurism-like, "DESTROY THE MUSEUMS" (Stansill and Maiowitz 1999: 37), or when the Living Theater ordered: "Abandon the theatres" (88). Such repetitions, however, were driven not so much by nostalgia for earlier times as by a sense of history; they were

recognitions of the fact that even something as sceptical of history as the avant-garde had acquired a tradition of its own.

If the historicity of the avant-garde is an irony, it is a productive one; the avant-gardes of the sixties used this history with profit. Far from being burdened or paralysed by the earlier avant-gardes, the newer avant-gardes learned from their predecessors' successes and failures and managed to transform their techniques. Rather than speaking of a historical and authentic avant-garde and its empty repetition in a neo-avant-garde, a distinction that has been criticised most succinctly by Hal Foster (1996), one should consider the repetition indicated in the prefix "neo" a productive transformation, indeed a condition for inventing new and timely articulations.

The perspective offered by the history of the manifesto allows us to specify the relation of the new avant-gardes to earlier political and cultural vanguards. The frame of reference used by these newer groups and formations in the sixties spans the entire gamut of the history of the manifesto and even includes much of the pre-history of the genre. The San Francisco Diggers, for example, constructed a genealogy going all the way back to the Diggers, who had first started to use the term manifesto in their struggle against Cromwell. At the same time, the new manifestos turned to another text in the prehistory of the manifesto, namely the *Declaration of Independence*, which they transformed into a "prophecy" (Stansill and Mairowitz 1999: 44) of an independent Free City. Other groups, such as the Dutch Provos (a band of angry young Amsterdam intellectuals specialising in provocation) riffed on the *Communist Manifesto*, coining the notion of the "Provotariat" (20). Such borrowings seemed to confirm, once more, the authority of the *Manifesto*, but their wit also dissociated the Provos from the more orthodox Marxist groups whose legitimacy had become increasingly hollow.

Indeed, the new avant-garde manifestos, like their early twentieth-century predecessors, were highly attuned to the history of socialism and its manifestos. However, while the avant-gardes of the thirties had been in thrall of the Third International and needed to struggle against its dominance, the new avant-gardes of the sixties by and large refused to bow to Moscow and the reconstituted International, Cominform. Communism and socialism in the West had been undergoing a profound shift and fragmentation. One reason was that the communist parties in the West woefully underestimated the transformative potential of the sixties. Because many of the protest movements, in Europe as much as in the United States, were triggered by students,

communist parties denounced them as petty bourgeoisie phenomena; the PCF (French Communist Party) even thought that the students were being manipulated by Charles de Gaulle (Sassoon 1996: 384). Many of the intellectuals who had not participated in the exodus following the party's endorsement of the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 were finally turned away by the entrenched dogmatism of the party in the sixties, and instead associated themselves with various splinter groups known as the New Left.

The fragmentation of socialism was also due to the fact that in contrast to the twenties and thirties, there were now several different communist nations and thus several models of actually existing socialism, including Cuba, Vietnam and China. It was the latter that constituted a real competition for bolshevism – but also for Trotskyism – in the West. For many, Mao represented a return to Marxist values such as equality and collectivism, and his call for the continuation of class struggle in socialist society, his “continuing revolution” (*jixu geming*), promised to redress the hierarchical bureaucratism of the Soviet Union and most of its satellites without adopting the watered-down model of Yugoslav market socialism. This fragmentation of socialism had profound consequences for the manifesto. It meant that no party or International controlled either the form or the content of manifestos. Despite the close attention paid to Marx's writings, the preservation of the *Manifesto* and its immediate legacy became secondary and the need to invent new manifestos occupied centre stage. The result was an unparalleled explosion of manifestos, quasi-manifestos, and mixtures of manifestos and artworks.

The ephemeral and heterogeneous nature of this second wave of manifesto writing makes a survey or quantitative analysis impossible. Too many small groups issued manifestos and declarations, too many utopias were constructed, too many programs outlined, and too many of them disappeared almost instantaneously. In 1971, two participant observers noticed that the hundreds and thousands of sixties manifestos, pamphlets, leaflets, and declarations were disappearing as fast as they appeared and decided to collect them in an anthology. The result was an extraordinary anthology, named after the Malcolm X slogan, *BAMN (By Any Means Necessary): Outlaw Manifestos and Ephemera 1965-1970*, which ranged from the situationists and the Weathermen to the Living Theater.

Published in 1971, only one year after the fact, this editorial project is preservationist even as it conjures the immediacy of the events preserved. In the opening sentence, the two editors declare:

At some moment in the social frenzy of the past six years, you may have held a piece of this book in your hand. Perhaps you read it or glanced at it and, seeing it was only a thing of the moment, you added it to the great paper oceans that fill your streets. Or perhaps it caught your eye as a flyposter, nailed to a tree, published in a ‘now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t’ magazine or news-sheet. [...]

This book is an attempt to offer up to you for a second time certain bits of paper, now embalmed between covers, which once got away. (Stansill and Mairowitz 1999: 12)

From the immediacy and even danger of the street to the “embalmed” preservation in a book, these second wave manifestos are printed “a second time”, which also means that the collection is “by its nature incomplete and out-of-date” (1999: 13). Embalming the ephemeral, archiving what was once immediate, is the necessary operation of all anthologies, but an anthology committed to the manifesto must view this necessity with regret. At the same time, the editors endow these manifestos’ original context with revolutionary myth. In a gloss on “My Cultural Revolution”, a manifesto written by Salvador Dalí, they inform us that this manifesto was “picked up behind the barricades in Paris” (130) before it was included in the collection. Dalí’s pamphlet, however, had tried to distance itself precisely from this romanticism of the barricades: “the finest and most profound cultural revolutions take place without barricades”. The editors’ barricade fantasy can be found in most manifestos: the desire to be the trace of an action that took place in its name. While “embalming” the manifesto is a rescue operation that is necessarily belated and “out-of-date” – part of cleaning up the streets after the battle – this barricade fantasy fulfils the manifesto’s most secret wish, namely that of becoming the weapon itself: “[A bit of this book] may even have whizzed past your head while wrapped round a brick and thrown through an established window” (12). An explicitly “cultural” manifesto is thus turned into political violence, the “finest and most profound” revolution into the realities of street combat.

All twentieth-century avant-gardes had been political in some sense, and all had been driven by some conception of a social revolution, whether it was a socialist revolution, as in the case of Berlin dada, surrealism, and Russian futurism, or a fascist one, as in

the case of Italian futurism and British vorticism. But the second-wave manifestos were even more directly involved in making political interventions. How to relate an artistic avant-garde to revolutionary politics, as Breton and Trotsky tried but failed to do, how to integrate the artistic manifesto with the political one and the new avant-garde with a new Marxism, became the central task of the sixties' avant-gardes.

The brief case study I am going to offer, the path through this complex historical and geographic terrain, is the history of one journal, a journal that testified to the theatricalisation of the avant-garde like no other and that prodded CAE into its defence of the manifesto: *TDR*, subtitled, *The Drama Review: The Journal of Performance Studies*.² Begun in the fifties, *TDR* ended up becoming the foundational journal of a new discipline, performance studies, whose primary venue it has remained until today. In the process, it has reflected and articulated the fate of the theatrical avant-garde and of the manifesto in the United States from the sixties to the present. *TDR* makes for a useful case study because unlike most academic journals, it has shunned specialisation and regarded culture at large as its domain. Like the discipline of performance studies more generally, *TDR* came to regard every social, political, and aesthetic phenomenon to potentially lie within its field of interest. At the same time, *TDR* has had a keen sense of its own mission, a mission that amounted to nothing less than promoting and furthering what could be gathered under an expanded notion of avant-garde. Challenging, shocking, subverting, transgressing, resisting – these are the keywords of the vocabulary promoted with varying emphasis in the pages of *TDR*, coupled with an awareness that the techniques of the historical European avant-garde had to be studied but also changed to serve the new purpose of forging an avant-garde in the United States. There are few journals as dedicated to the avant-garde, few as attuned to its historical challenges, and none that can show us better how difficult and how necessary it has remained to write manifestos – even now.

II.

The history of *TDR* closely tracks the emergence of the second wave of manifestos in the 60s. *TDR* began as a small journal in 1955 under the name *The Carleton Drama Review*, published at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota by Robert Corrigan, a professor of English

and drama. After only a few issues, Corrigan and his journal moved to Tulane University in New Orleans, where it acquired the three initials it was to retain throughout its tumultuous history: *TDR*, standing then for *Tulane Drama Review*. In this initial phase, the journal was dedicated to a high modernism, featuring articles on such dramatists as Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and Jean-Paul Sartre, discussing a theatre whose political ambitions were mediated by existentialism and the theatre of the absurd. In fact, Martin Esslin published the lead essay of *Theatre of the Absurd* in the pages of *TDR* in 1961. There were some authors who bemoaned the decline of political theatre. What they meant by political theatre, however, was nothing akin to the avant-garde or manifestos, but instead Clifford Odets, the Group Theatre, and the Federal Theatre Project. Mostly, the review published texts by Lionel Trilling, Eric Bentley, Jacques Barzun, and Lionel Abel, leading New York intellectuals, writers, and dramatists who captured these final years of the fifties with their reflective, even meditative, type of criticism.

The journal's second phase was initiated with a change in editors: Richard Schechner, also teaching at Tulane, succeeded Corrigan. The new tone of *TDR* could be heard immediately, when Schechner initiated the so-called *TDR* "Comment" in the first issue of 1962. The "Comment", Schechner writes, will serve the editors by

presenting as forcefully as we know how our views on the theatre. These views will often be personal and affective; sometimes they will be angry and outrageous. *TDR* will [...] be a rallying point for those young and eager theatre workers [...]. In some sense we hope to restore [...] purpose to theatre workers. (*TDR* 7, no. 2 [1962]: 8).

TDR was entering a discursive field in which it was necessary to be angry and affective in order to achieve such a high goal as restoring to the theatre a new "purpose". What this would mean became clear a few issues later, when Schechner and Hoffman found that the best way of giving the theatre such a new purpose was to write a manifesto:

The new theatres, with rare exceptions, have been founded without overt ideology. There are no manifestos to collect and dissect, no stylistic innovations to brag about. But new theatres ask for new ideas, and if we are to have a real theatre on this continent, one which readily translates art and theory, ideas will necessarily emerge that recognize the particular historical, political, and social facts of American life as well as

the unique aesthetics of our own theatre practice. [...] Right now our task is to explore the implicit framework that binds the new theatres into a fertile conspiracy (if not a “movement”), despite their admirable diversity. (*TDR* 8, no. 2 [1963]: 10.)

The new theatres springing up everywhere were promising, but they had not yet found their guiding theory. Supplying such a theory is the purpose of Hoffman and Schechner’s manifesto, whose seven succinct points make the implicit manifest and lay the foundation for the unification of all these admirably diverse activities.

The decision to write a manifesto was itself well-attuned to the “historical, political, and social facts of American life”, which was moving into the period of the high sixties, brimming with all kinds of manifestos, theories, and practices. As in the teens and twenties, the significance of this second wave of manifestos can be fathomed from the opposition it encountered. Corrigan, the former editor, attacked Schechner and Hoffman for writing a manifesto, a form he found “pretentious”, “inflated”, and bound to “alienate” the audience. “Manifestos”, he concludes his complaint, “are an absolute necessity for politicians and certain of our public institutions, and sometimes even for daily newspapers, but they are a useless appendage to a quarterly magazine” (*TDR* 8, no. 4 [1964]: 16). Corrigan was fighting a losing battle. In 1964, manifestos were beginning to be written in increasing numbers; Schechner quotes, for example, from a manifesto written by Judith Malina, co-founder of The Living Theater, which was to become one of *TDR*’s favourite theatres. It is noteworthy, however, that both Schechner’s defence of the manifesto and Corrigan’s critique associated manifestos primarily with political pamphlets. Schechner had mentioned as his model “political pamphlets” that “record, assess, and influence” the future, and Corrigan’s attack was likewise premised on the assumption that manifestos are “necessary for politicians”, but not for artists. The controversy about the manifesto was thus a controversy about *TDR*’s relation to politics.

If there still existed opposition to the manifesto in the early sixties, by the later sixties, the manifesto had clearly won. In defence of Schechner and Hoffman, Paul Gray had written a letter to the editor, stating: “Even if we have a manifesto every day, there can be no more creative a magazine than one which admits to growing pains in the search for a new theatre” (*TDR* 8, no. 4 [1964]: 19). In the high sixties, Grey was going to have his “if” clause fulfilled with a

vengeance: there indeed were new manifestos every day. The high sixties can be considered a third phase in the history of *TDR*, marking its full engagement with the political and avant-garde spirit of the time. Around the same time *TDR* moved from Tulane to New York University, where it has remained, along with its editor, until today (and where it changed its three initials to stand for *The Drama Review*). Schechner's first manifesto of 1963 turned out to have been only an anticipation of the kind of writing that was going to populate *TDR* in the coming years. In 1967, for example, Schechner launched his famous *Six Axioms for Environmental Theatre*, which was widely regarded as a foundational manifesto for performance art and performance studies alike. This third phase witnessed a quantitative increase in manifestos, and *TDR* was now thriving in the grey area between political intervention and street theatre. Schechner wrote enthusiastically about the Bread and Puppet Theater and Guerrilla theatre, supplying his readers with excerpts from a "handbook" on how to do Guerrilla theatre themselves. A 1968 issue featured a Black Panthers cover, and the following year an issue opened with a Provo manifesto. *TDR* became the kind of journal from which the editors of *BAMN* had picked their material, a central player in the second wave of manifestos. This volatile period also saw two editorial changes: in 1969 Schechner resigned as editor to devote his time to The Performance Group and Erika Munk took over only to be succeeded, less than two years later, by Michael Kirby, who was to remain with the journal for the next fifteen years.

My central question is how *TDR* tried to salvage its dedication to the avant-garde during the seventies and eighties, a period that witnessed a sharp decline in manifestos and avant-garde consciousness. This was a time when the exuberance of the high sixties turned into anger and frustration, with the police and the Weather Underground feeding off one another in a cycle of violence. Kirby's first strategy for saving the avant-garde from decline was to connect it to its historical predecessors in the teens and twenties. Schechner, too, had published historical material, including the manifestos of Artaud and others, but only Kirby systematically pointed to the roots of the present avant-garde in the historical one. Many of his special issues contained an explicit "historical" section, acquainting American readers with the more outlandish products of the largely, though not exclusively, European avant-garde of the early twentieth century.

Kirby's attitude toward the avant-garde of the twenties also sheds light on how this American avant-garde relates to its European antecedents. It has been repeatedly argued that it is inaccurate to refer to the sixties and early seventies in the US as a neo-avant-garde, since this period witnessed the first real avant-garde in North America. This is an argument that needs to be qualified. Even though there had not existed in North America a full-fledged avant-garde in the teens and twenties, Kirby and the North American avant-garde more generally nevertheless were able to adopt this earlier European avant-garde as their predecessor, actively forging a lineage, tradition, and inheritance across the Atlantic. Kirby, for example, spent a lot of effort resuscitating futurism; in fact, his study of futurist theatre and futurist manifestos is still in print today.

Kirby himself extended his notion of the avant-garde to the present, placing contemporary happenings side by side with futurist manifestos. While Bürger and Anderson diagnose the irredeemable loss of the avant-garde and therefore speak of a necessarily and exclusively *historical* avant-garde, Kirby envisions something closer to a *repeated* avant-garde, an avant-garde that moves in cycles but that also moves geographically from one place to the next. The historical section of *TDR* was motivated by a second doctrine: the documentary style. Through his own experience, Kirby had seen just how fleeting and ephemeral most avant-garde products really were and how difficult it therefore was to reconstruct them properly afterwards. Why not, therefore, anticipate this continual disappearance and document the present so that future avant-gardes will have available to them a complete record of the vanguards of the sixties? Working for the future as "tomorrow's past" (*TDR* 15, no. 4 [1971]: 3). Kirby imposed onto his writers the bitter cure of a radically descriptive, rigorously objective, deliberately opinion-free style. It was a style in every sense opposed to the manifesto. *TDR* began to read like a *nouveau roman*, one descriptive sentence following the other. No polemic, no value judgment, no criticism, no manifesto, no comment allowed. This documentary style constituted a radical break with Schechner's *TDR* "Comment" and his manifestos, with all the ways in which *TDR* had actively participated in the manifesto craze of the high sixties.

However, the act of documenting avant-garde performance cannot change the hard facts on the ground, namely that by the mid-seventies, there were markedly fewer self-declared avant-garde groups, that their tone had changed, and that the revolutionary *esprit* of the sixties had subsided. In 1975, Kirby complains: "Some have given up the search

for new ideas; some repeat themselves; some copy what has already been done” (*TDR* 19, no. 4 [1975]: 3). While he is doing *his* part by documenting performances for the future, the avant-garde is not doing *its* part in producing works worthy of such attention. The task, this becomes increasingly clear, is not how to document the avant-garde, but how to stimulate and to revive it.

In this time of need, Kirby turns to the manifesto. Given his belief in borrowing from previous avant-gardes, Kirby promptly turned to the history of the manifesto, publishing in his “historical” section a documentary appendix with several Russian futurist manifestos and underlining their influence on theatre practice. This is precisely the kind of hope Kirby harbours for the present. His special issue is entitled *New Performance & Manifestos*, and it is through new manifestos that he wants to stimulate the apparently exhausted avant-garde into producing new work. Here, however, his doctrine of the documentary style imposes constraints on his role as editor. Where Schechner could have turned out manifestos by the dozen, getting artists fired up through the very pages of *TDR* as he had done in the sixties, Kirby’s hands are tied by the self-imposed discipline of merely documenting what is out there already. And this meant that Kirby had to maintain that the manifestos collected in the special issue were not written especially for *TDR*, but rather arose naturally out of the avant-garde culture around him: “of the manifestos we are publishing only that of Charles Ludlam was written specifically for *The Drama Review*” (*TDR* 19, no. 4 [1975]: 3), he admits ruefully.

However, the manifesto issue abounds in signs that not all is well with the manifesto: “Perhaps the manifesto is not as popular with the avant-garde as it once was”, Kirby muses in his editorial preface. Reviving the avant-garde by publishing new manifestos was therefore an uphill battle and the very next sentence reveals the sad reason that prompted Kirby to this insight: “Several of the people we asked to contribute to our collection declined”. But hadn’t Kirby just said that his manifestos were not written especially for *TDR* and not solicited by him, the editor? The contradiction between solicitation and documentation reveals a tension within Kirby’s strategy caused by the desire to document a thriving avant-garde that apparently no longer exists.

The manifestos published in this special issue only confirm this tension. Besides Ludlam’s admittedly solicited manifesto, we have only three real manifestos, and they are difficult to characterise. The most compelling one is a “Third Manifesto” by Richard Foreman,

whose title suggests that Foreman had been writing manifestos willingly in the past. However, if Kirby had hoped that the historical manifestos would influence contemporary ones, this hope was not fulfilled; Foreman's text is much more meandering and allusive than the direct texts of the sixties or twenties. Only the third manifesto, written by the Japanese artist Shuji Terayama, presents provocative slogans and demands in a confident tone and with a polemical edge. Revealing, however, is the fourth and last of these manifestos, which is written by none other than Kirby himself. His *Manifesto of Structuralism* works well as a manifesto for his descriptive style, but as a manifesto it constitutes the most glaring violation of the descriptive doctrine it preaches. Kirby apparently had given up on the strict diet of the descriptive, documentary style and taken it upon himself to write the kind of manifesto no one else would write for him.

Kirby's special issue, despite this temporary sacrifice of the documentary style, did not fulfil its purpose of reviving avant-garde theatre. And so, in the early eighties, the whole thing had to start over again. For the 1983 anniversary, celebrating 100 issues of *TDR*, Kirby repeated his experiment from 1975 and initiated another special issue devoted to manifestos. This second issue had learned from some of the difficulties of the first one. We find none of the contortions about the agency of the editor; now Kirby admits that "we have asked a number of people to give us their dreams, proposals and manifestos for the future" (*TDR* 27, no. 4 [1983]: 2). Despite this changed strategy and the expanded category that now includes dreams and proposals in addition to manifestos, most of the texts collected do not embrace the genre of the manifesto (nor that of the dream or proposal, for that matter) and instead hesitate, resist, or reject outright the kind of writing "for the future" Kirby wants. There are only three texts that resemble manifestos. One presents a scary fantasy of a technologically updated Wagnerian total work of art; a second is an uninspired proposal for a feminist theatre without interest in the text's own form or style; only the third manifesto engages the genre, for it is a pastiche of the *Manifesto*, substituting the proletariat with a new vanguard of a "people's theatre" that will make "a new world" (73). Most of the other texts go out of their way to evade anything resembling the manifesto. This resistance, visible throughout, is particularly evident in a text called "Anti-Manifesto", which declares: "One could make a manifesto regarding a particular view of the future" (32). However, the author, Daryl Chin, all too soon decides against "making" such a

manifesto because of the “act of aggression” and the “indulgence” (35) this would entail. Unfortunately, what follows this pointed critique is not much better, namely a long-winded complaint that the author’s work has been most shamefully neglected. Instead of an aggressive manifesto, what we have is a passive-aggressive anti-manifesto.

From the perspective of the manifesto, things had thus come to an impasse: the documentary doctrine simply did not allow *TDR* to actively participate in and thus generate a new avant-garde; in order to counter-act the decline of the avant-garde throughout the seventies and early eighties, *TDR* had to take the writing of manifestos into its own hands. In a symptomatic and perhaps inevitable move, *TDR* responded to the decline of the avant-garde by asking Schechner to be its editor once more. However, times had changed and Schechner harboured no illusions about them, finding the present marred by a “sterile repetition of old experiments” (Schechner 1982: 17). After the demise of the Vietnam War protests, he noted, the seventies had indeed experienced a “deep freeze” of avant-garde activity. “There are young people working”, Schechner observed, adding woefully: “but they don’t cohere as a group, or a movement” (69). In particular, he diagnosed the fate of manifestos such as the ones written by Foreman and published in *TDR*: “Scholars file them [his manifestos] in a drawer marked ‘M’” (17). However, this decline is somehow less threatening, now, after Kirby’s insistence on pure documentation has been abolished; if *they* don’t write manifestos, Schechner would openly do it for them. This, after all, was what he had done all along, beginning with his first manifesto of 1963, which he had written for and on behalf of the new theatre that could not formulate a program on its own.

The only difference was that Schechner felt that in the eighties there were no new theatres on behalf of which one could write manifestos. As a consequence, *TDR* started to feature manifestos not only *by* itself but *for* itself. *TDR* no longer worked itself to death for a reluctant and vanishing avant-garde out there, but was going into the avant-garde business for itself. But how can a partially academic journal *be* the avant-garde? Schechner argued that the avant-garde was no longer located in the theatre, but had moved to the domain of theory. In other words, *TDR* itself was to become the avant-garde.

While the different avant-gardes in Europe defined themselves against the university, this was not always the case in the United States, although here too one can find arguments that as soon as an

avant-garde is integrated into the institutional structure of the university it has sold out. This argument, borrowed from the European avant-garde, never quite worked for the US, where universities have fulfilled the role of harbouring avant-garde artists with some frequency. Richard Schechner's own institutional affiliations are thus not the exception but the rule. From the beginning, he was employed by the university, especially New York University, which also funded *TDR* until it moved to MIT Press. Schechner kept his post and salary even when he engaged in radical theatre, with The Performance Group, in the late sixties and seventies. Rather than simply denouncing such affiliations as inherently "anti-avant-garde", we should recognise them and adopt our conception of the avant-garde accordingly.

Besides theory, the second new front of the avant-garde, interculturalism, points us toward the discipline of performance studies to which it eventually gave rise. Its principal ambition was to analyse ritual and theatre across cultures, recognising difference but also making these differences intelligible. Schechner had written a manifesto of interculturalism in the latter days of Kirby's editorship in the form of an introduction to a special issue called *Intercultural Performance* (1982). It is a text that nevertheless clearly outlines the claim that interculturalism was the legitimate heir to the historical avant-garde:

The world is learning to pass from its national phase to its cultural phase: the markers that are increasingly meaningful are not those that distinguish nations but those that distinguish cultures. [...] Thus, I am arguing for both an experiment and a return to traditional, even ancient, values. This argument has been implicit in experimental art for a long time: it is the root of that art's "primitivism". Interculturalism is a predictable, even inevitable, outcome of the avant-garde, its natural heir. (*TDR* 26, no 2 [1982]: 3-4).

Interculturalism is presented as the "inevitable" and "natural" heir to the avant-garde even as it signals a return to older, even "ancient", values. The word that holds these two, seemingly contradictory terms together is the one Schechner cautiously puts in quotation marks: "primitivism". Primitivism is indeed a good way of remembering the historical and European avant-garde, including the primitivist paintings of Gauguin, the "negro-" rhymes of dadaism and Artaud's fascination with the rituals of the Tarahumaras in Mexico. This term connects interculturalism to the European avant-garde, and in

particular to that aspect of the European avant-garde that has become the most suspect.

Looking back at the history of *TDR* through the lens of the manifesto reveals a meandering path that is nevertheless driven by a continued dedication to the idea of an avant-garde. After defining itself as a manifesto-driven, engaged journal in the sixties, *TDR* has had to find ways of sustaining that impetus in the face of a changing cultural and political environment. Kirby's combination of going back to the historical avant-garde while insisting on an a-historical formalism constitutes one rescue operation for saving the avant-garde; his attempt to revive the avant-garde through two manifesto issues demonstrated the limits of this formalism. Schechner gave up on Kirby's perennial avant-garde by declaring the sixties and twenties over, and shifted his focus to a theory and performance avant-garde whose realisation was to be found in the very pages of *TDR*.

The dedication to a theory avant-garde informs *TDR* still today. At a conference in July 2003 in New York City, Schechner argued vehemently against the idea, presented by a four volume anthology of performance studies, that performance studies had acquired a canon and was now based on a series of foundational texts. Instead of consolidating the past, Schechner pleaded, performance studies should adapt a quota system according to which the latest work would be privileged over the classics of the past thus actively making the formation of a canon impossible. At which point, a phrase came to my mind that might sum up the paradoxes of the neo-avant-garde: The Avant-Garde Is Dead; Long Live the Avant-Garde.

Notes

¹ Substantial portions of this article have been published in my book *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. They appear here with the kind permission of the publisher.

² For a more detailed history of *TDR*, beyond its relation to the manifesto and the question of the neo-avant-garde, see my article "Entanglements: The Histories of *TDR*" in *TDR* 50: 1 (T189): 13-27.

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THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

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TOWARDS A “RECONCILIATION OF MAN AND NATURE”. NATURE AND ECOLOGY IN THE AESTHETIC AVANT-GARDE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

HUBERT F. VAN DEN BERG

Avant-garde as “anti-nature”

There can be little doubt: mankind’s current treatment of nature is leading towards self-destruction. The undeniable climate changes due to pollution, the rapid extinction of species, the eradication of tropical forests – all this is rapidly turning the planet into an uninhabitable place. A more sustainable treatment of nature seems to be a necessity if earth is to have some future as a place for us to live. And since a different way of dealing with nature also implies a different attitude towards and understanding of our relation with nature, the question of sustainability cannot be reduced to different, more ecological modes of production, which do not exhaust natural resources (e.g. a reduction of automobilism), but must also imply a cultural change, a change in our conceptions of nature: nature has to be perceived not just as resource, but also as something with which we have to live; as something which is – in a way – part of us, and of which we are part as well.

If we can believe most assessments of the aesthetic avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, issues like these were not primary concerns of these movements. Indeed, ecology and environmental concerns are clearly not the most obvious topics in a discussion of the avant-garde. On the contrary, avant-garde movements are seldom related to environmental issues. One reason might be the fact that their main pursuit is of an aesthetic provenance. As such, they are preoccupied with issues which are not directly of an ecological nature. However, when the environmental dimension of the avant-gardes of the twentieth century is discussed, these movements are generally not just seen as cultural formations alien to ecological

considerations, but even considered as profoundly at odds with nature and environmental awareness. Since these movements are generally regarded as the most radical expressions of artistic and literary modernity, embracing urban life and technological progress, they are as a consequence also often regarded as movements which consciously turned their back on nature. Along these lines avant-garde art and in particular 'historical' avant-garde art is frequently defined as "anti-nature", a term proposed by the German literary historian Hans Robert Jauß (1989: 119-56) to label – as he and many others saw and see it – a basic rejection and dismissal of nature as a relevant or even acceptable orientation for the arts, or even an essential hostility towards nature. This could be observed, as authors like Jauß suggest, both in a turn away from or even against common mimesis and the 'realistic' representation of outer reality (with nature privileged among the popular painterly subjects in the European visual arts) in favour of abstraction and the non-figurative, and in a similar turn against (conceptions of) organic art and the organic character of the conventional work of art, involving an outright rejection of nature as something to be ignored, avoided and detested.

No reconciliation?

The assumption of a basic hostility towards nature in the avant-garde and in particular of the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century is commonly substantiated in three ways:

In the first place, one can find all kinds of statements, programmatic exposés and bon-mots by prominent avant-garde artists as well as by congenial critics, which seem to indicate that they were not really interested in external nature, to put it mildly. In addition to several frequently quoted one-liners, in which the Dutch Constructivist Piet Mondrian rejects the depiction of external nature as a pictorial fallacy, Mondrian expressed his dismissal of natural green in yet another way. In an anachronistic way, one might say that Mondrian created an anti-natural environment in the studio where he resided and worked in Paris in the 1920s. This studio was situated on the first floor, the entrance was somewhere in a courtyard, with a very small entrance hall on ground level. This entrance hall was painted completely white: so were the walls, the staircase, simply everything. Next to the staircase there was a small table, also white, with a vase, once more white, and in this vase there was one artificial tulip, a

wooden tulip, in principle a flower with a lot of green as well as a colourful flower on top, a flower typical of the Dutch coastal countryside in spring – like windmills and wooden shoes one of the clichés about Holland – so not inappropriate for a Dutch painter as a kind of visiting card, which Mondrian turned into a programmatic statement by also painting the tulip white to indicate his disgust for the pictorial representation of nature. Ironically Mondrian, who painted many natural landscapes before his abstract turn, did not find many buyers for the abstract paintings which made him famous in later years, so he was forced to create simultaneously – alongside his abstract work – naturalistic paintings of flowers, which did sell and probably boosted his disgust for this type of painting even more (Postma and Boekraad 1995).

Secondly, the avant-garde hostility towards nature is often substantiated by the observation that this assumed programmatic hostility of the avant-garde towards nature is – as it were – the other side of the obvious predilection in avant-garde imagery for the city, for urban, metropolitan life as well as for all kinds of technical and mechanical constructions or for a degree of abstraction in which nature is completely absent – in line with the commonly assumed opposition in cultural history between nature and technology. An example of the anti-natural praise of technology and the anti-ecological stance of the technologically pre-occupied avant-garde can be found in the preamble of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's first Futurist manifesto, which sketches a kind of anti-ecological dystopia, in which the meeting of the Futurists described in the opening section breaks up and the author gets involved in car racing. At full speed, Marinetti (or at least the subject of the preamble) has to get out of the way of two cyclists, loses control over the wheel of his car, and ends up in a ditch next to a road (Marinetti possessed such a car and had such an accident). After describing the car accident, Marinetti writes:

Damn! Ouch! [...] I stopped short and to my disgust rolled over into a ditch with my wheels in the air [...]

O maternal ditch, almost full of muddy water! Fair factory drain! I gulped down your nourishing sludge; and I remembered the blessed black breast of my Sudanese nurse [...] When I came up – torn, filthy, and stinking – from under the capsized car, I felt the white-hot iron of joy deliciously pass through my heart!

A crowd of fishermen with handlines and gouty naturalists were already swarming around the prodigy. [...]

They thought it was dead, my beautiful shark, but a caress from me was enough to revive it; and there it was, alive again, running on its powerful fins!

And so, faces smeared with good factory muck – plastered with metallic waste, with senseless sweat, with celestial soot – we, bruised, our arms in slings, but unafraid, declared our high intentions to all the living of the earth. (Marinetti 2005)

The actual manifesto follows after this. Noteworthy here is the qualification of the naturalists as gouty, alongside Marinetti's love for the factory drain, nourishing sludge and factory muck – obviously anything but natural, anything but ecological.

A third argument to substantiate the avant-garde hostility towards nature can be found on a more abstract, theoretical meta-level, postulated in aesthetic-philosophical terms, for example by Peter Bürger in his discussion of the avant-garde work of art (with a particular focus on collage). In his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger (1984: 78) argues that the avant-garde work of art is basically non-organic, as it breaks with “the man-made organic work of art that pretends to be like nature and projects an image of the reconciliation of man and nature”. It is remarkable here that Bürger implicitly assumes that nature should not be seen as part of life, at least not as part of that life with which art has to be reconciled according to his central hypothesis that the avant-garde on the whole pursues a return of art to or reconciliation of art with life. Bürger is not the only theorist who has made suggestions like these. Similar assessments can be found in reflections by the previously mentioned Jauß and, for example, in Silvio Vietta's *Die vollendete Speculation führt zur Natur zurück. Natur und Ästhetik* (1995). As in the case of some of his other hypotheses, Bürger's assertions are frequently quoted by others and not so much as hypothetical claims, but rather as the undisputed general line on the avant-garde.

Natura naturans and natura naturata

All in all, it seems possible to assert that the early avant-garde was indeed hostile to nature. There is, however, a basic problem, both with the examples given and with Bürger's general claims. As Hal Foster (1994), among others, has remarked in response to Bürger's theoretical assessments, it is highly problematic to assume that ‘the’ avant-garde was a homogeneous bloc, a singular, uniform phenomenon. It is, thus, quite unlikely that one can produce a single

theory in a one-size-fits-all way. This also holds true in regard to the assumed avant-garde hostility towards nature. The previously given examples might indicate that some representatives and movements of the aesthetic avant-gardes were indeed marked by an anti-natural stance. They are, however, certainly not indicative of the avant-garde as a whole, if one considers, for example, the quite forceful nature imagery in the work of painters of the Expressionist Dresden based group *Die Brücke* like Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Max Pechstein, Erich Heckel, Otto Müller and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, who frequently went 'into' nature, to the so-called Moritzburg ponds, in the near vicinity of Dresden, but also to the Baltic coast for drawing and painting in 'free nature' (Hülseweg-Johnen and Kellein 2000). Whereas *Die Brücke* is denied by some the qualification 'avant-garde' (Bürger 2005), one finds a similar natural imagery in the oeuvre of painters of another undisputed avant-garde group of Expressionist provenance, *Der Blaue Reiter*, for example in the work of Franz Marc and August Macke. And whereas Marc and Macke were still by and large working in a figurative manner, nature constituted an important orientation for artists working along abstract lines like the Dadaist Hans Arp, whose sculptural and painterly work was marked by an unmistakably biomorphic idiom, like that of later Constructivists such as Constantin Brancusi, Naum Gabo, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore (Franke 1996). Along the same lines, Dada was according to Arp (1948: 48) "senseless like nature". Another example is Max Ernst and his so-called frottages, which are produced with a brass rubbing technique, but applied to wooden floors, collected in an artists' book called *Histoire naturelle* – natural history (Orchard/Zimmermann 1994). And there are in fact many more examples of artists who did not only use natural forms, but also claimed to recuperate nature in their art.

Nature not only served as supplier for imagery and forms to be imitated or recreated in art, but also supplied – on a more theoretical level – parameters for the interpretation of art and the programmatic rationale of numerous avant-garde artists. To take Arp once more as an example: Hans Arp leaves no doubt that his version of a reunification of art and life is actually a reunification of art and nature. Just a few quotations from Arp:

Dada is for nature and against art. Dada is direct like nature.
(Arp 1948: 48)

[Man] has broken away from nature. He thinks that he dominates nature. He thinks he is the measure of all things.

[...] Since the days of the caves, man has glorified and deified himself, and has brought about human catastrophes by his monstrous vanity. Art has collaborated in his false development. To me the conception of art that has upheld the vanity of man is sickening. (Arp 1948: 49-50)

concrete art aims to transform the world. it aims to make existence more bearable. it aims to save man from the most dangerous folly: vanity. it aims to simplify man's life. it aims to identify him with nature. (Arp 1948: 71-2)

we do not want to copy nature. we do not want to reproduce, we want to produce. we want to produce like a plant that produces a fruit and not to reproduce. we want to produce directly and not through interpretation. as there is not the slightest trace of abstraction in this art, we call it: concrete art. the works of concrete art should not be signed by their creators. these paintings, these sculptures, these objects, should remain anonymous in the great studio of nature like clouds, mountains, seas, animals, men. yes, men should return to nature, artists should work in community like the artists of the middle ages. (Arp 1948: 70)

Apart from the general problem of whether a single theory of the avant-garde viewed as a single entity is possible, a more specific problem should be noted concerning Bürger's assumption that the avant-garde broke with the man-made organic work of art that pretends to be like nature and projects an image of the reconciliation of man and nature. In contrast to Bürger's theoretical claim that the avant-garde work of art is basically non-organic, a substantial number of artists and critics, even within certain formations of the avant-garde, at least in the so-called 'historical' avant-garde, where urban life and technological progress were held in high esteem, considered their art to be organic. And this does not only hold true for avant-garde artists whose work possessed a clear-cut natural orientation, like Arp, Brancusi, Gabo, Hepworth and Moore, who also used biomorphic forms. Many avant-garde artists can be named who did not resort to a biomorphic idiom or the depiction of natural phenomena, but instead addressed in their work modern urban society, for example in the form of collages or seemingly fragmented poetry, which are regarded by Bürger as the quintessence and ultimate proof of the non-organic character of genuine avant-garde art, whereas many of these artists actually presented their work as essentially organic.

To give just one example: in the programmatic and (explicit) aesthetics of his *Merzzeichnungen* – collages, which are regarded by

Bürger as prime examples of the anti-organic tendency in the 'historical' avant-garde – Kurt Schwitters explicitly characterised these collages, made with waste material, litter, found objects, be they industrial, urban or natural, as organic works of art (van den Berg 2000).

Whereas these collages are presented by Bürger as proof of the assumption that the avant-garde broke with the organic work of art, in which all parts must be seen as essential elements of a whole, and instead privileged the fragmentary as guiding principle of the new avant-garde art in collage form, Schwitters himself claimed again and again that one should see the seemingly random material not as random, but as components of works of art which had to be in themselves balanced, harmonious or – to use another term – 'organic' in Bürger's sense.

Schwitters is, moreover, also interesting for another project, which he realised together with the Russian Suprematist El Lissitzky: a special issue of Schwitters' magazine *Merz*, entitled '*Nasci-Heft*'. This *Nasci* issue was devoted to the relation between avant-garde art and nature. It opens with a manifesto-like statement by Lissitzky and Schwitters, beginning thus: "It is ENOUGH always MACHINE, MACHINE, MACHINE". Schwitters and Lissitzky argue further: "The machine has not separated us from nature. Through the machine, we have discovered a new, previously unexpected nature". They conclude with the claim: "Our work is neither philosophy nor a system of insight into nature, it is a member, a part of nature and can as such be an object of insight itself" (Lissitzky and Schwitters 1924: [II]).¹

The *Nasci* manifesto is interesting for several reasons. Firstly, it transcends the false binary opposition nature versus technology. Secondly, if one considers that the manifesto is followed by examples of works of art by artists who are normally seen as the epitome of avant-garde hostility towards nature – Mondrian, Malevich and many more, combined with quotations in which they relate their work in a positive way to nature – the *Nasci* issue of *Merz* questions the validity of at least some of the examples nowadays often given to substantiate the dismissal of nature by these artists. And thirdly, it points at a different understanding of nature, or, rather, at two divergent ways of understanding nature. Although nature has been defined in numerous different ways, in order to simplify, one might distinguish between two radically different tendencies in the (philosophical) understanding of nature. On the one hand, 'nature' is the label for all organic and

inorganic phenomena that exist without human interference (plants, animals, trees, landscapes etc.), as it were: as objects. On the other hand, ‘nature’ serves as umbrella term for the existence (in a diachronic sense), for the development, the emergence, transformation, birth, growth, decay etc. of these objects, the aspects of their lives, and all the ontogenetic processes involved. In Latin terms the first is often referred to as *natura naturata* and the second as *natura naturans*. As indicated by the definition of nature on the front page of the *Nasci*-issue (borrowed from the entry on nature in the German encyclopaedia *Brockhaus*), Lissitzky and Schwitters used the second meaning: “Nature, from Latin: *Nasci*, i.e. becoming, means everything, which by itself through it’s own power develops, assumes shapes and moves” (Lissitzky and Schwitters 1924: [I]).²

Nature for them is primarily the *natura naturans*, as might be obvious. Like Hans Arp, Lissitzky and Schwitters present a general claim concerning modern, avant-garde art in their opening statement, capitalised in the original:

EVERY FORM IS THE SOLIDIFIED, FIXED
INSTANTANEOUS EXPOSURE, THE PICTURE AT A
GIVEN MOMENT, THE FIXED MOMENTUM OF A
PROCESS, OF AN EVOLUTION. THE WORK OF ART IS
THE STOP, STATION OF BECOMING, OF
DEVELOPMENT, AND NOT THE SOLIDIFIED, FIXED,
CONGEALED AIM, DESTINATION, GOAL. (Lissitzky and
Schwitters 1924: [II])³

And finally, the opening statement by Lissitzky and Schwitters signals the apparent intention to create like *natura naturans*. However, one might ask, and Bürger might have a case here, is this intention also realised in the works of art which are presented in the *Nasci* issue as being in tune with the *natura naturans*? As long as an artist works, any of his works might be seen as snapshots, fixed images in an ongoing creative process, but – if we take for example a collage by Schwitters – is such a collage indeed a “station of becoming”, as the manifesto suggests? And does the same hold true for a painting by Mondrian or, for example, Malevich’s *Black square*?

Schwitters’ and Lissitzky’s intention is obvious, but did this intention also materialise in a *Merzzeichnung* by Schwitters for instance? The fact that Bürger and many others misinterpret Schwitters’ collages as a turn away from nature, a turn towards the urban and the industrial, could be taken as proof for the contrary. And: are these collages or ‘drawings’ with other materials, glued and nailed

on paper or wood, indeed visualised *natura naturans* and not basically *natura naturata*? Aren't they fixed and fixated and thus not quite the visualised snapshots of the floating, changing and developing, which the *natura naturans* apparently is? What is more, Schwitters' collages might possess an ecological edge, since waste material, scrap and litter is used anew, and is thus recycled. Recycling might be an expression of environmental awareness nowadays, but was it back then? And recycling may be seen as an essential natural process, but was this intended by Schwitters? Probably not, since it took several more decades before waste management became an environmental issue. If related to the distinction between the *natura naturans* and the *natura naturata*, there seems little doubt possible that the collages of Schwitters or Malevich's *Black square* are examples of the latter, which in itself might also be seen as a fixed expression of the former – notwithstanding all good intentions. Schwitters and Lissitzky probably saw the problem themselves, as one might conclude from a note in the *Nasci* issue accompanying their opening statement: "Here is an attempt to show the collective will, collective intention, that starts to rule, to give direction to contemporary international art production" (Lissitzky and Schwitters 1924: [II]).⁴ In other words: the rationale of the *Nasci* issue is presented as a program for the future. Nonetheless, the *Nasci* issue – as a collective enterprise of the Constructivist strata of the 'historical' avant-garde – indicates once again that the qualification "anti-nature" does not cover the whole early avant-garde of the twentieth century. Instead, it seems more appropriate to assume that, as far as the early avant-garde's perspective on nature is concerned, at least two trends can be discerned: one is a turn towards the urban, metropolitan, industrial, technical and mechanical, and the other is a turn towards nature in the shared ambition to create a radically different art, different from the then dominant art.

Ecological Land Art and the *natura naturans*

Peter Bürger might be right to some extent when he describes the so-called 'neo-'avant-garde as an institutionalised repetition of the so-called 'historical' avant-garde. Indeed, frequently the revolutionary impetus, which marked at least the early phase of the 'historical' avant-garde, is missing or simply not an issue. (However, this already happened in the later 'historical' avant-garde, when for instance in the thirties in the context of the CIAM or in the anthology *Circle*

[Nicholson, Gabo and Martin 1937], practical urban planning and the design of overpasses for highways became a serious concern in Constructivism.) As far as the intention by some sections of the so-called 'historical' avant-garde is concerned to arrive at a reconciliation of art and nature and humankind and nature, Hal Foster is certainly right in his suggestion that the 'neo-'avant-garde may be regarded as a continuation and realisation of the aims of the 'historical' avant-garde. Again, generalisations should be avoided. There were many artists and critics of the 'neo-'avant-garde in the past sixty years who considered their work as completely detached from or even in opposition to nature. One might argue that this even holds true for many representatives of what seems to be the ecological branch of the 'neo-'avant-garde par excellence, so-called 'Land Art'. If one considers projects by Robert Smithson such as *Asphalt Rundown* and *Concrete Pour* (1969), which implied the dumping of tons of asphalt and concrete in the environment, the *Paracutin Volcano Project* (1970) by Peter Huchinson, which involved the placing of 300 kilos of wet bread wrapped in plastic on a crater edge, thus, according to the artist, "permitting it to await the reaction of the volcanic stones and heat of the sun and rocks", *Three downward blows* (1977) by Dennis Oppenheim, which comprised three explosions leaving intentionally deep scars in the earth surface or the wrapping of coastline in polyethylene by Christo and Jean-Claude (1969, 1974), these Land Art enterprises are from an ecological perspective rather questionable operations (in spite of the fact that some of them were realised in already cultivated or distorted landscapes) (Tiberghien 1995: 21, 30-1, 170-3 and 184). The label 'Land Art' may express some concern with land, countryside and nature, but – as the cases of these Land Art artists may illustrate – not necessarily in an ecological way. On the whole, Land Art is rather an aesthetic phenomenon on the intersection of 'neo-'avant-garde developments like Concrete Art and Concrete Poetry, Minimalism, Conceptual Art, the practice of 'environments', 'installations' etc., which can be, but not necessarily always is, an expression of some environmental awareness in a modern ecological sense. Yet, for certain reasons – namely its preoccupation with the natural environment as artistic locus – in the 1970s and after, Land Art became also a preferred format for artists who tried to relate their art to ecological challenges that were posed by the environmental crisis that became obvious in the last decades of the previous century. In line with the rationale of the *Nasci* issue and Hans Arp's reflections, these artists tried and try to create and develop an art which is not only

organic in itself, for instance by using organic materials, but also try to adopt and include the principles of the *natura naturans*, by including natural transformation, growth, decay and the like as calculated elements in their works. In this respect the application of natural materials in the open leads to the paradoxical constellation that in pursuit of a more sustainable relationship with nature the sustainability (or should one say: durability?) of their 'real' works is frequently quite limited. What remains, though, is the apparent ambition to develop and create art which is marked by a considerable degree of harmony with nature and often explicitly presented as a contribution to a different relationship, in Bürger's terms: a reconciliation between man and nature. This is a clear-cut objective in the art of Land Art artists like the British Andy Goldsworthy (1990) and Richard Long (1991) and many artists, who are represented, among others, in the Danish Land Art parks of Krakamarken⁵ and Tickon.⁶ These artists work with nature, in nature, using natural processes in their work (such as natural decay) – all of this in a way which is anything but hostile to nature. This is most obvious in works of art involving sand, water, snow and ice, or leaves and branches turned into fragile, short-lived constructions by the artists.

These works, alongside more robust creations like stone circles and rows, which do not constitute an aggressive intervention in the landscape with bulldozers, concrete, asphalt, garbage and explosives, can be regarded as the ultimate realisations of the proposition in the *Nasci*-manifesto: not only in tune with the *natura naturans*, but also "*erstarrte Momentbilder eines Prozesses*" / "*moments concrets d'une evolution*" (Lissitzky and Schwitters 1924: [II]), fixed stations of becoming, fixed instantaneous exposures, as Schwitters and Lissitzky call them, or, to take another translation of the word *Momentbild*: snapshots. For what is it which is the actual work of art here? One might say: the stone circles, walking lines, the fragile constructions with leaves and twigs. To some extent they are indeed the 'real' work of art. However, since they are subjected to natural processes, which 'destroy' these works, and give them different shapes in the course of time, when the snow melts, leaves decay and fall apart, water dries up or sand is blown away by the wind, one might argue that the 'real' works of art are actually not the constructions shown, but rather the snapshots, even if these are not of snapshot quality, made by the artists as documentation. An exhibition of work by, for example, Long or Goldsworthy may display some work in a traditional sense, but quite a number of pictures, drawings and photographs reveal the work-as-

process through fixed instantaneous exposure (and, crucially: by means of high-quality photography – with considerable technical sophistication).

The question as to where the actual work of art is to be found can be left open here. It is important that these Land Art artists stand in a tradition of avant-garde artists trying to relate their work in a more harmonious way to nature, resorting in this context to natural materials and biomorphic forms. The fact that this is combined with a conscious ecological dimension is evident in statements by and on Richard Long. As Anne Seymour writes in the catalogue *Walking in Circles*:

One of Long's primary achievements has been to bring the [human] body back into balance with nature in the most literal sense. Through the medium of his body – fit but not super fit – he presents the moving, changing body of nature in all its tangibility and intangibility, visibility and invisibility, virtually unaltered and within the real space-time continuum we see as life. [...] Long interacts with nature and nature with him and the results are eddies and vortices in its vast river. He uses nature 'with respect and freedom', making work 'for the land, not against it.' Unlike certain American 'land artists', he does not shift great quantities of earth or make permanent monumental works. He is the first to acknowledge that 'nature has more effect on me than I on it.' In respecting and following the disciplines of nature he gains insight into the meanings of its processes. [...]

Aside from the energizing space and beauty of the world, the landscape is primarily a wide and open arena for Long's ideas. Invention is an important part of this, the fact that he is putting something into the world which was expressly not there before and is doing so without manipulation or influence. [...] His sculptures are created in the likeness of nature, from its materials and using its scales of movement and time; they highlight the sense in which all works of art are a kind of flowering of human nature [...]. (Seymour 1990: 15-7)

In the same catalogue, Long argues in an interview that

nature is universal. It is no coincidence that there are parallels between my work and work from certain people of other cultures and societies, as nature, which is the source of my work, is universal. We all live in different cultures but we all share the same nature of the world. We all share the same air, the same water and everything. (Long 1990: 251)

Although one could almost believe that Long, and Seymour on Long, are rephrasing and recycling reflections by Arp, they might not be aware of these previous statements by Arp. At least Arp is not among the artists mentioned in this catalogue as forerunners and sources of inspiration for Long. Long and Arp draw nevertheless on the same tradition of ecological thought and pursuit of a sustainable relation between man/art/culture and nature. Whereas the issue of 'the environment' and current-day green environmentalism might (have) be(en) motivated by more recent apocalyptic concerns, environmentalism was already well established in Germany around the previous turn of the century, albeit under different labels – e.g. *Naturschutz* and a *Zurück zur Natur*, a back-to-nature tendency in a plethora of alternative and youth movements in the early twentieth century. In particular in the case of *Die Brücke*, painters who sought refuge on the shores of the Moritzburg ponds (similar to alternative and youth movements like the *Freikörperkultur* movement, the *Wandervögel* and *Naturfreunde*), as well as in the writings of Hans Arp, (reflection on) avant-garde art is interspersed with elements from the reflections on nature in these movements. Arp might not have been active in these movements himself, but he was a frequent visitor of the alternative community of Ascona, a bulwark of these alternative movements in the early twentieth century, in which Eastern spirituality and philosophy – another important intertext of the contemporary ecological dimension of Land Art – were also well represented (Borsano 1980).

An ecological aesthetics of nature

To return in conclusion to my initial remarks, I hope to have outlined that the avant-garde cannot be regarded en bloc as being "anti-nature", and that, on the contrary, an ecological tendency in the avant-garde can be distinguished, reaching from the ambitions and intentions postulated by prominent representatives of the early avant-garde like Schwitters, Lissitzky and Arp in the *Nasci* issue of *Merz* and other programmatic statements, to Land Art artists in recent decades. In so far as art offers the possibility of reflection, works by these artists can even be regarded as lessons, as exercises in a different way of dealing and living with nature, more or less in line with the propositions of the contemporary German philosopher Gernot Böhme and his brother Hartmut Böhme (1983). Gernot Böhme published a small collection of

essays entitled *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* in 1989, which translates as “For an ecological aesthetics of nature”, or maybe rather “Towards an ecological aesthetics of nature”. His main argument and proposition can be summarised in three steps. Firstly, a basic problem and – in Böhme’s vision – the essential problem of our current Western/European attitude or relationship to nature is rooted in a conception of nature in which nature is defined as non-human, as something alien, which is detached from humanity. The human sphere is defined as culture, and nature is regarded as the non-cultural. This dichotomy of man and nature, of culture and nature, which Böhme notably traces back to Immanuel Kant, who defined nature – according to Böhme, or rather a study he wrote together with his brother, Hartmut – as *Das Andere der Vernunft*, as “the other of reason”.

This creation of a fundamental division between an assumedly human culture and a non-human nature leads secondly, as the Böhme brothers suggest, to an instrumental, exploitative relation with nature and a culture which simply ignores and denies the existence of nature. The Böhme brothers suggest a different understanding of our relation with nature. Following their proposition, we should regard ourselves as part of nature. According to them, our bodies, our bodily functions and desires should not be detached from *Vernunft*, from reason, from our mind, our spirit, in contrast to what Kant had suggested.

As part of this rethinking and redefinition of the relation between man and ‘outer nature’ (or rather: the rest of nature), Gernot Böhme (1989) thirdly suggests the necessity of the aforementioned ecological aesthetics of nature, which should be based on alliance, a term Böhme borrows from Ernst Bloch, instead of domination. Böhme comes up with several examples in which this practice of aesthetic alliance is realised. In the context of garden architecture, for example, Böhme believes that the French garden can be seen as an example of a treatment of nature which follows the rules of reason only, whereas the English garden is an example of the alliance aesthetics. This might be true to some extent. However, Böhme was either not informed or simply ignored the fact that while English gardens often successfully create the illusion of authentic nature, they are also quite often created through drastic interferences in the local eco-systems and biotopes, not to speak of the eradication of farming communities which did not fit into the garden design, as Raymond Williams (1973: 120-6) has pointed out. According to Böhme, the other current-day artistic

realisation of his ecological aesthetics is the reappraisal of kitsch, in particular realistic kitsch in contemporary art.

Clement Greenberg (1939) and his distinction between avant-garde and kitsch in his famous article in the *Partisan Review* spring to mind. Crucially, one of the main reasons why Böhme turns to this type of 'art' is the assumption that the avant-garde is at odds with, is hostile to nature – Böhme bases himself notably on Jauß and Bürger and their assumption of the fundamental anti-natural character of the avant-garde. One could argue, though, that the avant-garde tradition from Arp and Schwitters to Goldsworthy and Long engages in a quite congenial manner with the proposition by Böhme for an ecological aesthetics of nature, in which nature is not defined as something marked by complete difference and non-human otherness. This is a difference which the avant-garde – old and new – tried and tries to overcome. For both the historical and neo-avant-garde the engagement with nature constitutes an attempt to cross and eliminate the gap between art and life, the latter also including nature. This amounts to an attempt to reunify art, which in the nineteenth century had represented nature in an illusionist, hence distanced way, and life – not only in general, but also in the specific form of a reconciliation of man and nature through man-made art in accordance with natural principles.

Notes

¹ My translation, HvdB.

² My translation, HvdB.

³ My translation, HvdB.

⁴ My translation, HvdB.

⁵ Cf. <http://www.museetfordanskunst.dk/krakamarken/DefaultDK.htm>.

⁶ Cf. <http://www.info-langeland.dk/Tranekar/TickonSkulpturpark.htm>.

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**“BLACKBIRDS RISE FROM A FIELD...”:
PRODUCTION, STRUCTURE AND OBEDIENCE IN
JOHN CAGE'S *LECTURE ON NOTHING***

MARTIN J. C. DIXON

This essay explores and develops an observation which appears – albeit in passing – at the beginning of Peter Bürger’s seminal *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. In order to grasp the full import of the observation, which concerns the question of how artistic “means” and “procedures” are treated within the historical avant-garde, it will first be necessary to outline the dialectical model of historical understanding – a critical hermeneutics – which generates Bürger’s interpretative insight.

In the early stages of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger seeks a critical theory of aesthetic thought. His methodology develops from the need to historicise aesthetics and the theoretical categories that will illuminate avant-garde works of art but in such a way that two widespread conceptions of historical thought are resisted: on the one hand there is the historicist conception that would understand earlier theoretical categories of art “wholly as expressions of that period” (Bürger 1984: 15), on the other there is what might be called the “Whig” conception of history, that takes it that previous theories are merely “steps leading up to one’s own” (1984: 15). Reflection on the historicity of aesthetic theory cannot be tied to either the presupposition of a *Zeitgeist* or the arrogant belief that the past is merely the prehistory of the present; rather, what Bürger calls “adequate cognition” of the historicity of aesthetic theory is achieved only once a tenet of dialectical materialism is acknowledged: namely that the historicity of a theory is bound up with the history of its domain of application. All efforts to theorise art (and notwithstanding the meta-historical tone of these theories) are always bound to the state of their objects – the artworks and practices themselves – objects which are also unfolding historically.

A theory or theoretical concept, for example “material”, “form”, or “genius”, while possessing a degree of abstractness and general validity, and thus potentially transcending any given circumstance, is, nevertheless, bound up with and is a product of a historically specific network of relations, and it is only in the light of these relations that the theory has its full validity. What is decisive, however, is the *perceptibility* of this validity. The theoretical import or range of a concept is not always clear; the domain upon which the concept is operative may have itself to radically change before the concept’s theoretical validity can be fully perceived. Theoretical insight into an object, and the wider projects that insight might contribute to (and there is no mistaking Bürger’s emancipatory ambitions) is, therefore, necessarily linked to the historical unfolding of that object. Bürger explains this model of understanding through Marx’s reading of economic theories of labour. Adam Smith’s insights into labour and the generation of wealth could only come about in a society that was itself economically advanced. As the forces of production in society progressed so different dimensions of the concept of labour became perceptible. The theory of labour can only then be seen as a generality such that it can genuinely illuminate less developed economies. Bürger believes that the same understanding can be applied to the aesthetic domain:

It is my thesis that the connection between the insight into the general validity of a category and the actual historical development of the field to which this category pertains and which Marx demonstrated through the example of the category of labour also applies to objectifications in the arts. Here also, the full unfolding of the constituent elements of a field is the condition for the possibility of an adequate cognition of that field. (Bürger 1984: 17)

It is not my place here to question Bürger’s commitments to the Marxist model of history, or question the dialectic as such, but I do want to entertain the notion that this dialectical method can inform an interpretation of some aspects of John Cage’s oeuvre and practice. It is with Bürger’s subsequent point that this interpretation can begin. He continues:

The central category of “artistic means” or “procedures” can serve to illuminate this thesis. Through it, the artistic process of creation can be reconstructed as a process of rational choice between various techniques, the choice being made with reference to the effect that is to be attained. Such a

reconstruction of artistic production not only presupposes a relatively high degree of rationality in artistic production, it also presupposes that means are freely available, i.e., no longer part of a system of stylistic norms where, albeit in mediated form, social norms express themselves. [...] Artistic means is undoubtedly the most general category by which works of art can be described. But that the various techniques and procedures can be recognised as artistic means has been possible only since the historical avant-garde movements. (Bürger 1984: 17)

Following through this argument we can say that a thesis with a seemingly universal validity is that all works of art have been made according to certain procedures and with certain means, all of which have particular effects and consequences. The artistic task is to make judgments as to the appropriateness of a given means for a given end (which might, variously, be the impact made on an audience, or as a solution to a formal problem). However, if the history of art is understood as one of stylistic innovation (or as Adorno's "inherent tendency of the material") what is *not* universal is the availability of these means or the desirability of their ultimate effect. Routinely we can say that at a given point in time a particular artistic procedure can be seen as radically new and appropriately effective. Only later, once its effects have been assimilated and understood by a culture, can it be relegated to the hackneyed and the clichéd (perhaps, at some later juncture, to be quoted ironically or displayed as kitsch). It is with such judgements that stylistic norms are asserted and policed in various ways. But what, Bürger argues, transpired with the emergence of the avant-garde artwork is the recognition of the *generality* of the notion of "artistic means": only with the avant-garde are aesthetic means *recognised as such*. The avant-garde did not concern itself with a particular technique as it related to stylistic norms, but exploited the notion of technique in general.¹ Stripped of stylistic mores, all artistic means become available simply as means which results in the liquidation of the concept of style.² Indeed, Bürger states that the historical avant-garde had no style.

In developing his critical methodology, Bürger has thrown up a fascinating problem: if the development of the historical avant-garde uncovered the generality of the category of technique can the neo-avant-garde also be analysed through and in the dialectic of the category of technique? And could the focal point of the concept of technique mediate between the neo- and the historical avant-garde?

Whether or not this is the case, at the very least it seems to me that Bürger's account establishes a means to intensify the significance of a gesture prominent in John Cage's *Lecture on Nothing* – and widespread throughout Cage's work and much neo-avant-garde work besides – a gesture which *discloses the means of production of the work as its own content*. Speculating, my proposal is that this formal change – perhaps one could call it the “involution” of the concept of technique – is a distinctive, perhaps even defining feature of the neo-avant-garde. I have the following passage in mind:

That music is cept simple measured accepted, rare moments train us	simple to make the limitations be-cause . in return of ecstasy, to make what we make	comes from of structure. it can be thought out, It is a discipline accepts whatever which, .	one's willingness to ac- Structure is figured out, which, even those , as sugar loaves train horses, How could I
better tell tell contained forty minutes	what structure about this, within long	is this talk a space of time ?	than simply to which is approximately
That forty minutes each unit volving permits which I find so As you see, It makes very little	has been divided into is divided a square root this micro-macrocosmic acceptable I can say anything difference	five likewise. is the only rhythmic structure and accepting . I can say anything what I say	large parts, and Subdivision in- possible subdivision which , . or even how I say it.

Fig. 1: John Cage, *Silence*, 1968: 111-12³

The surface interpretations of this passage are not especially controversial. Given that the lecture form is itself pedagogic, that it should explain itself, or use itself as an example is not especially remarkable. Besides, Cage was known to be a hugely generous teacher and it would be uncharacteristic of him to withhold information of this sort if it might be deemed helpful to our understanding. Or perhaps, since lectures are not usually “composed” like pieces of music, a defamiliarisation technique is at work here? It might also be construed as something of an aesthetic indiscretion, reducible to an avant-gardist technique of shock (there may be a shock value associated with the disillusionment this revelation brings about). Or is it a raid on aesthetic aura? Perhaps such a gesture, the making plain what was done, is the final blow to a residual auratic moment that lurks in

artworks, regardless of their crudity or simplicity, because "how" they were made is often difficult to discern and while this dimension remains perplexing, they recede from us. We note also the pragmatic breakthrough here in Cage's realisation that his hierarchical time frame technique, already a blatant separation of form and content, can be extended to include another medium (that of language). The rhythmic structure which, notoriously, established itself as an independent technique in *4'33"*, joyfully accepts all and any sound occurrence; it is of little consequence that the content of the time frames are now no longer the un-silent silences of the concert hall but the intoning of Cage's own theories and reminiscence. Pragmatically, Cage's lecture also does what it says. In the foreword to his book *Silence* Cage writes: "My intention has been, often, to say what I had to say in a way that would exemplify it; that would, conceivably, permit the listener to experience what I had to say rather than just hear about it" (Cage 1968: ix). The *Lecture on Nothing* does exactly this. The question of how we read and interpret a text that affords an experience of the methods it describes and explains may not be as pressing as the question of what has happened to aesthetic form such that this involution is possible. What has happened to the category of technique now that works of art will admit their own description, their own theorisation, as their content? Have aesthetic means become so generalised and so inclusive that they absorb themselves?

Following this critical hermeneutic model, the remainder of this paper will explore the ramifications within the category of production (and certain related aesthetic categories, createdness, particularity, discipline and inwardness) once Cage's work has taken this direction. I wish, then, to think again about the category of production. Certain ambiguities congregate around the meaning of the word but they all point to a single notion:

- (i) Take the extravagant gestures of the conjurer who, from thin air, *produces* the handkerchief, the missing card, the rabbit from the hat. The production is sudden, dramatic; without interval or explanation. At the behest of a magic word, there is something where previously there was not. This is production as *miracle*; a miracle that occasions astonishment.
- (ii) We are forced, perhaps in a legalistic context, to *produce* the results, produce the evidence, produce the argument; set out, posit, make manifest, put on show and make available for

inspection. This is production as *positing*, a positing which occasions reasoning and disquisition.⁴

(iii) We ask: “does the well *produce* water, the vine *produce* fruit?”, this is production as yielding, a biblical “bringing forth”, yielding occasioning thanks.

(iv) One produces consumer goods, works of art, sentences, critical essays. This is production as manufacture, making, as *work*, work occasioning choice, evaluation or judgment.

Miracle is not work, positing is not yielding, yielding is not making; and yet they are all production. Astonishment is not thanking, thanking is not reasoning, reasoning is not judging; and yet all are legitimate responses to production. The sense that all these understandings share and sustain is that production is a coming, or a “bringing forth”, into *being*; and what, by way of affect or action, production produces in us, are all fitting responses to the manifestation of a being. We notice that production always concerns *being*.

As was already made clear, ineluctably, all works of art stand in a peculiar relationship to their own making. Moreover, what conditions their very being is their createdness. This is not the case with non-art objects. Both Adorno and Heidegger, who had little enough occasion to agree on any philosophical matter, at least agree on this. For Adorno the metaphysics of art begins with the problem of how something made can also be true, that a work of art can be more than what it consists of, more than its empiria. For art this “more”, *das Mehr*, is decisive since art does not therefore coincide with what it is. For Heidegger, the createdness of art is part of its being and it is differentiated from other created things (his example is “equipment”) in that while equipment is a thing that is made and “is”, the fact that it *is* disappears in its usefulness. By contrast, the work of art constantly carries with itself and before itself the fact that it *is as a work*:

In general, of everything present to us, we can note that it is; but this also, if it is noted at all, is noted only soon to fall into oblivion, as is the wont of everything commonplace. And what is more commonplace than this, that a being is? In a work, by contrast, this fact, that it is as a work, is just what is unusual. The event of its being created does not simply reverberate through the work; rather, the work casts before itself the eventful fact that the work is as this work, and it has constantly this fact about itself. (Heidegger 1978: 190)

Perhaps Heidegger illuminates and profoundly explains such avant-garde practices as collage and the found object: something that manifestly *is* – a bus ticket, a bottle dryer – is, nevertheless, perfectly unexceptional; it is rescued from the oblivion of its being by the creative selection and presentation by an artist. Henceforth, the redeemed object enjoys a new life which reverberates with the event of its "creation". This goes a long way towards explaining why the drama of the redemption of the being of the thing (one might also say "miracle") is best enacted on the lowly and the commonplace.

In describing its own structure – one might say producing it, revealing it – within that structure as content, Cage's *Lecture* seems to complicate, perhaps transcend or perhaps decline, what is informational in it, what is useful. Though the *Lecture* is indeed "informative", it has "use" and use-value as knowledge, it does not disappear into its use-value, it is not consumed or incorporated into knowledge. As soon as the apparent use-value of the *Lecture* is suspended, a use-value that threatens being, it deserves the name of *poetry*. As poetry the lecture is not now to be taken possession of; poetry is a language which is sonified, temporalised; the experiential moment of the word as a sonorous entity, the word as an enunciative act, as rhythmically marked is surely the need to both respect and take pleasure in the *particular*. This is Cage's understanding of "poetry", and poetry is something that we "need", a need which the *Lecture on Nothing* expressly answers.⁵ What is needed is a return to the lived experience of a thing as an *individual*.

Consider the elegant drawing by the Fluxus artist George Brecht "*DRAW (or GLUE) SOMETHING HERE YOURSELF*", which consists of no more than this hand written statement extending from which is a hand-drawn circle into which anything can be drawn or glued. The importance of the empty space is in its enabling an event; it occasions a choice and a performance on the part of the recipient. How generous the work is since anyone can do what they please and anything that is placed inside this circle is privileged, it takes on a new sense of being. Glue a book of matches into the space and something extraordinary happens: they are no longer merely matches; their equipmentality vanishes, and now they reverberate with the creative act that set them there. The blank space of the circle is therefore remarkable. It is a stage, a clearing, upon which anything is miraculously produced as a work of art. In this one looks right into the eye of aesthetic truth as unconcealing.

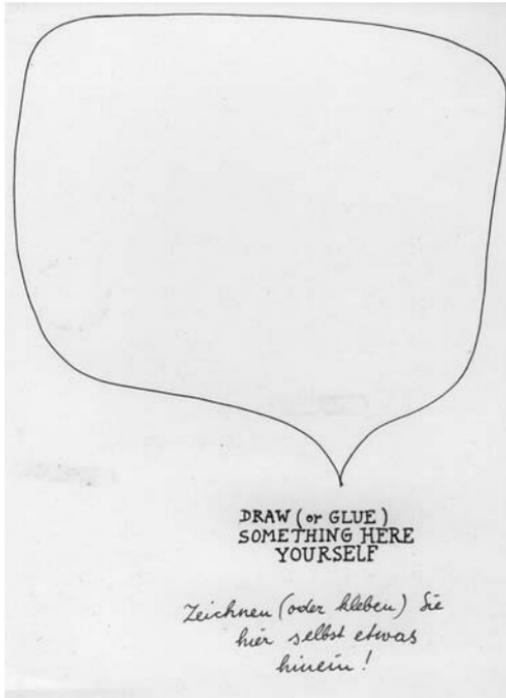


Fig. 2: George Brecht, *DRAW (or GLUE) SOMETHING HERE YOURSELF*, 1982

Incidentally, Heidegger is no accidental apologist of the avant-garde: there is a proviso which might be contained in this remark: “Precisely where the artist and the process and the circumstances of the genesis of the work remain unknown, this thrust, this ‘that it is’ of createdness, emerges into view most purely from the work” (Heidegger 1978: 190). If the process and the genesis of his work is made known, might this send a tremor through this notion of the *being* of the work of art? What was or is done by way of production can be brought alongside the work, or even manifested as part of the content of the work itself. If ignorance of the genesis of the work lends purity to the “that it is” of the work, then avant-gardism’s parading of its methods might be recognised as sullyng that purity without destroying the “that it is” of its creations.

Perhaps, however, Brecht’s work is simply a piece of “equipment”, simply “means” and nothing more, and therefore regarding it as a work of art is a category error. If it is an anti-art work then its capacity to dignify the objects or drawings that might appear inside the circle, and the tacit authorisation of the deed by Brecht, come to nothing.

Rather than calling it “anti-art” and reading it as a challenge to the institution of art, my reading supposes that we are witnessing the advance of the concept of technique to the extent that the inherent equipmentality of the technique, which would normally suppress the being of the object, is foregrounded as a being itself. Technique need not disappear behind the object created, it need not be concealed or maintain anonymity; what the artist makes, what the composer composes, are not this or that work, but the techniques and the means themselves.

This simple work of Brecht’s is a paradigm of the neo-avant-gardist work’s capacity to produce an aesthetic being through a technique, and Cage’s rhythmic structures and time frames are no different: anything – sound, tone, noise, words – can appear within the framework and its being will be manifested.⁶ This technique presupposes the historical separation of form and content, but here I want to rename this relationship as being one between the *individual* and a *structure*. Artworks are never-before-seen, they are unique, they are *individuals*, they are *singular*. But this singularity is the common property of all things, all events, of all instants, all nows. But just as the being of a thing becomes inconspicuous in its use, so the singularity of a thing or an event becomes inconspicuous without the ground, a stage upon which it plays and can be seen. (Were we to apprehend in an uninterrupted fashion the singularity of all things, at the very least one might suppose this to be cognitively exorbitant or a state of grace.) But care must be taken here, both philosophically and interpretatively, since Cage’s claim, and to reiterate, a claim performatively posed by the *Lecture*, is that a structure is required so as to allow individuals (individual moments or events) to emerge *qua* individuals:

Structure	without life	is dead.	But Life	without
structure	is un-seen	.	Pure life	
expresses itself		within	and through structure	
.	Each moment	is absolute,	alive and sig-	
nificant.	Blackbirds	rise	from a field making	a
sound	de-licious	be-yond	com-pare	
.			I heard them	
because	I ac-cepted	the limitations	of an arts	
conference	in a Virginia	girls’ finishing school,	which limitations	
allowed me	quite by accident		to hear the blackbirds	
as they flew up and	overhead	.		

Fig. 3: John Cage, *Silence*, 1968: 113

Cage's claim is that that which produces the visibility of life, what, one might say, discloses life to the living, or to those that would live life, is a structure. This is not as speculative as it might appear, philosophically speaking, it is surprisingly robust. The philosopher Manfred Frank, in his study on the question of style in philosophy, writes the following:

Universal certainty, as postulated by scientific knowledge, demands the exclusion of individuality, of singular perceptions and experiences. Conversely, the individual can be defined only in opposition to any structuration. However, we cannot conclude from this that the redundancies or the overdeterminations, which characterize the language of lived experience, can ever reveal themselves outside the grids of some structure. [...] The individual is what the structure *is not*. (Frank 1999: 265)

For Frank, it is style that performs the work of mediating between individual and the structure; for Cage there is an ethical and aesthetic need to retrieve the singular perception (the rise of the blackbirds) as a singularity, and both insist that this cannot happen without a structure. As is clear in these examples structure is not all that is required for pure life to appear. There must be an acceptance of the limitations imposed by a structure. There is, though, a close and devastating link between acceptance and production, the result of which is "inwardness". In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno writes:

The category of inwardness, according to Max Weber's thesis, is to be dated back to Protestantism, which subordinated works to faith. Although inwardness, even in Kant, implied a protest against a social order heteronomously imposed on its subjects, it was from the beginning marked by an indifference toward this order, a readiness to leave things as they are and to obey. This accorded with the origin of inwardness in the labour process: Inwardness served to cultivate an anthropological type that would dutifully, quasi-voluntarily, perform what wage labour required by the new mode of production necessitated by the relations of production. With the growing powerlessness of the autonomous subject, inwardness consequently became completely ideological, the mirage of an inner kingdom where the silent majority are indemnified for what is denied them socially; inwardness thus becomes increasingly shadowy and empty, indeed contentless in itself. (Adorno 1997: 116)

The concept of inwardness has religious, economic and aesthetic aspects. If art concerns itself with inwardness – and Adorno insists that it invariably does – it must reckon with the fact that the "space" of inwardness, the interiority of the subject, a subjectivity turned inwards, lost in itself, in contemplation, memory and private sensation, has been constructed as compensation for what is "denied [...] socially". The incident of the blackbirds rising from the field is recalled as being delicious beyond compare; it is a private experience something to be savoured, and this points towards inwardness.⁷ (It is also a private recollection and, as such, though it is not immediately available to others, the poetic charge of the phrase *blackbirds rise from a field*, appeals to our own remembrances, our own interiority.) But this inner experience is only made possible by accepting the restrictions of the exterior circumstances. To accept the structure is a turning inwards of oneself. The rhythmic structure produces the "individual", but the structure requires obedience on our part, that we accept its productive power, its granting, and for which we give thanks. Furthermore, this obedience has the advantage of occasioning – or forcing – not only our perception of the individual, the singular event, but the fact that we are perceiving. We apprehend *and* apprehend our apprehending. This not only turns us to the phenomenon, but drives us inwards. This is the production of inwardness, and is the individualisation of the apperception. Even Brecht's modest work is an imperative: I must follow what is asked of me or there will be no work. There can be no technique without the obedience to follow. If the avant-garde raised technique to a generality, obedience and acceptance are also generalised.

In summary, the technique of the rhythmic structure has been analysed to yield the following effects:

- (i) The rhythmic structure produces the epiphany of being through createdness (and the corresponding denuding of equipmentality).
- (ii) Rhythmic structure produces the *visibility/audibility* of a phenomenon in its singularity.
- (iii) The creative task is no longer the production of individualised works but a generalisable means of production.
- (iv) When the technique itself, a generality, is laid bare *as* the work of art (this would conform to the Brecht example) or when the technique (as means) is given as content (thus poeticised) the structure/individual, form/content dialectics

become concentrated in one another. While these moments – the form or the content – may be distinguishable from one another as different aspects of the same object (like Wittgenstein’s “duck-rabbit”), it might also be that these works are defined by the *undifferentiability* of form and content.

(v) We note also that this technique requires of the creative subject genuine obedience; an obedience that, while yielding the individual and the inward (and therefore bearing all the marks of an aesthetic act) might also be the mark of a passivity with respect to the external conditions of the world.

Is it possible, then, to hear something else in the rising of the blackbirds? Cage hears something “delicious beyond compare”; Adorno, in his *Aesthetic Theory*, reflecting dialectically on the ideology of the beauty of nature, hears something quite otherwise:

The song of birds is found beautiful by everyone; no feeling person in whom something of the European tradition survives fails to be moved by the sound of a robin after a rain shower. Yet something frightening lurks in the song of birds precisely because it is not a song but obeys the spell in which it is enmeshed. The fright appears as well in the threat of migratory flocks, which bespeak ancient divinations, forever presaging ill fortune. (Adorno 1997: 66)

It is easy to rail against the tone of acceptance and obedience and the advocacy of “training” in Cage’s *Lecture* and in his wider work, just as it is easy to be beguiled by the generosity and the gentleness of this aesthetic attitude. All I attempted here was to wonder if that, for better or for worse, both the aesthetic theory and the works themselves were bound up in the actuality of aesthetic production and the being of art as they stood at this particular historical moment.

Notes

¹ However one interprets Duchamp’s *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, it is easy to see this work as an essay in artistic procedure.

² The discovery of the generality of means itself emerged from the preceding historical phase whereby form came to dominate over content. Bürger adds: “It is important to see the unity of the process: means became available as the category of ‘content’ withers” (Bürger 1984: 20).

³ See Cage 1968: 111-12. The formatting of the text in columns is designed so as to facilitate a “rhythmic” reading.

⁴ “Produce your cause, saith the LORD; bring forth your strong reasons, saith the King of Jacob” (Isiah, ch. 41, v. 21).

⁵ Cage’s “poetry” has ethical, political and aesthetic moments: poetry is ethical because it concerns love, love of words, life, others; poetry is political because it concerns non-possession and freedom; poetry is aesthetic because it concerns pleasure and ecstasy of sensation. The lecture, as poetry, testifies to love, dispossession and pleasure just as it loves, dispossesses, takes pleasure.

⁶ And once the subject has learnt this skill, the time frame that produces the heightened sense of the Being of the object can be dispensed with (or extended to include all things). This is the beginning of Cage’s politics.

⁷ We can add that the epiphany of the encounter with Nature is one of the deepest sources of aesthetic experience. Cf. Adorno: “The substantiality of the experience of natural beauty, however, reaches deep into modern art: In Proust, whose *Recherche* is an artwork and a metaphysics of art, the experience of a hawthorn hedge figures as a fundamental phenomenon of aesthetic comportment” (1997: 63).

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“JEDER KANN DADA”: THE REPETITION, TRAUMA AND DEFERRED COMPLETION OF THE AVANT-GARDE

DAFYDD JONES

The situationist principle states how my knowledge of the world has no value except when I act to transform it. The deliberate attempt at such transformation now positions itself as foundational to the present engagement with the viability – cultural, structural and political – of the idea of the avant-garde and its ligatured (so distinct) concept of the neo-avant-garde. Signalled here is the move towards the “initial outlines of alternative approaches and [...] first proposals of a revised practice of interpretation” (Scheunemann 2000: 10) which, it is hoped, will resist the undermining of the avant-garde/neo-avant-garde project by its very own discourse, and all of the resulting unqualified yet persistent appeals to avant-garde “oppositonality” and “emancipation”. It may make the declamators of the avant-garde slightly uncomfortable up on their podia, but unless the project amounts practically to anything more than heroic words, noble ideals and ultimately empty gestures, we ought seriously to reconsider what continued use or relevance there can now possibly be to the category of the avant-garde. When the red flag of emancipation is yanked up high, for instance, there are two often detoured questions that should be among the first we ask: emancipation *from* what, and *to* what? What, beyond the lure of surface appearances, can “revolution” actually change when one order is supplanted by another (diametrically opposed though it may be to the former) order? If the structural logic is inverted as a result of “revolutionary” action, its very inversion fuels its repetition, and “oppositonality” rapidly gains strategic redundancy.

In Marxist thought, the reactionary nature of “free thinkers”, or “muddled idealists” as Lenin once called them, compromises any emancipatory project from the outset, and “revolution” is nothing of the sort when it condemns one system only then to ask that same

system for acceptance. More than once during the twentieth century, it was forcefully and sometimes violently demonstrated that people involved in what amounted to *effective* revolution (as opposed to its *ineffective* form) did not become part of systems, but that they *destroyed* systems. The compromised nature of what we sometimes too casually invoke as the “avant-garde” means that the case for its destructive effect is far from convincing. Mann, for instance, has already made us uneasily but necessarily aware that

[t]he avant-garde is one mechanism of a general organisation of social forces that operates in large part by means of the careful distribution of differences, imbalances, oppositions, and negations, and that regulates them through a variety of more or less effective discursive agencies in the so-called public sphere and along the margin itself. (Mann 1991: 113)

The containment, though painful, would appear complete. Now, theoretical self-destruction manifests itself as a consistent principle in western thought and cultural activity – certainly from the enlightenment’s critically enlightened self-interrogation to the “radical evil” of emancipatory politics, and to postmodernism’s evolution into a cultural dominant and its undoing by its own methods; the pastiche, for instance, is dissolved by using the instruments of pastiche itself, or alternatively some genuine historical sense is reconquered by using the instruments of what have been called substitutes for history. When thought systems would then collapse in upon themselves, instigate their own dissolution through anti-logic, or invert and thereby reproduce the flawed logic that was ostensibly the object of their critique at the outset, the principle is one that, evidently, impacts even upon the anarchic impulse itself.

The problematic of the avant-garde, as a concept and in terms of the ongoing viability of the project, is familiar and well rehearsed – certainly since Bürger’s classic text entered into the wider discourse in the mid-1980s – with the historical avant-garde itself (as characterised by Dada) certainly not being immune to the breakdowns and faults that Bürger theoretically, and that some old Dada stagers dogmatically (and without any hint of Dada irony), identified in subsequent cultural formations and manifestations, specifically in neo-dada and in the neo-avant-garde of the 1950s and ’60s. That the earlier manifestation of the 1920s actually fails consistently to uphold Bürger’s later “theory” (that is to say Bürger’s later *hypothesising*, which has been somewhat misrepresented as a “theory” over the past two decades)

suggests that we might begin to make constructive use of the historical instance in our engagement of the neo, and as we potentially work towards a theory (or more accurately a *concept*) of the neo-avant-garde. Such a concept, critically, would have to admit to inherent problems and contradictions (its own, as well as those of its historical precedent), and in so doing either to work *with* them – conceding in the process some degree of complicity if not culpability – or somehow to *overcome* them. The degree to which the latter is actually an option, however, might now be so heavily disputed that the only viable if not available option would actually be the former, despite its contrariness within a sense of oppositionality as conventionally brokered.¹ If we are to move away from the rigidity which pits the historical and the neo against one another, we very quickly recognise that the anticipated oppositionality of the historical avant-garde presents us with the anything-but-unproblematic notion that Bürger makes foundational for his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Bürger is well aware of the contradictory nature of the opposition in question, which uses its apparent withdrawal from the cultural order to conceal its affirmation of it, and he is equally well aware of how the whole debate initiates the expanding complexity of a sense of the avant-garde that ultimately embraces rather than rejects what it opposes. Here, indeed, lies the structural problematic, the point at which the entire concept of the historical and oppositional avant-garde can literally seize up.

Seizure, however, is one but not the only possible consequence at this point. By the radical subject’s adoption, modification and revision of cultural strategies, this essay submits that the avant-garde/neo-avant-garde has, through its manifestations, historically demonstrated a deliberate resistance to and counter engagement with its own condition; specifically, in reaction against the everyday life of coexistent individuals who are, despite their coexistence, “separated from one another, separated from what they are in others, and separated from themselves” (Vaneigem 1967: 87). Sensory separation and alienation as a condition in the technologised west was recognised a whole generation before the situationist writings of the ’60s dispersed, and it is famously of the art of the avant-garde that Walter Benjamin demanded the restoration of “*the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity’s self-preservation [...]* not by avoiding the new technologies, but by *passing through* them” (Buck-Morss 1997: 377). The appeal of 1936 was as pressing thirty years and one world war later, when avant-garde recoil from, or opposition to, technology would itself have been as self-deluding as

the muddled idealism of the free thinkers that once so irked Lenin. For the structuralist Marxist, if a radicalism is not a *Marxist* radicalism, its direction in the service of the revolution is not necessarily bound to the destruction of state apparatuses, but rather defaults as anything but revolutionary, and duly relegates itself to self-indulgence on the part of the “radical” protagonist.

How we subsequently invoke the idea of revolution requires a deliberate revision of readings that have hitherto dominated art historically, prescriptive (and predictable) readings of Dada, for instance, which characterise it as anarchic, a nihilist gesture, a negative act of cultural destruction offering nothing to replace what it set about destroying (and therefore, strictly speaking, *not* revolution). According to the binary schema of revolution that accompanies this characterisation, the task of instituting a new order in place of what Dada laid waste, that is to say a new order *opposed* to the old, fell to the movement’s supersedent (in Paris at least), the Surrealist Revolution of 1924. If, however, we read revolution as committed to breaking down systems in all their forms, the revolutionary increasingly assumes the recognisably destructive, anarchic and nihilist traits previously ascribed to the Dadaist, abandoning binary schemata and engaging cultural logic itself – revolution, therefore, that does not define itself by preemptive conclusions. Such, potentially, becomes revolution *without* a goal, but revolution *with* effect; revolution revised practically and theoretically throughout the twentieth century in reflection upon the sobering aftermath and ultimate failure of October 1917.

The idea of what amounts to effective revolution despite the absence of any stated goal productively allows us to begin to interrogate the operation of the avant-garde/neo-avant-garde in modern experience. Benjamin’s concern in his analysis of the latter (in 1936, yes, but still apposite in later contexts) was its neurological condition, the emotionally neutered and numbed state of daily repeated shock which, through repetition, ceases to have any real impact or effect. The redundancy of repeated albeit strategic deployment of shock became woefully apparent (to Marcel Janco at least) just weeks into the activities at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich in 1916 as Dada was only just beginning to flex its critical muscles, making shock ineffective if not inadmissible as a mode of critical cultural engagement for the Dadaists themselves. “Repetition” has in turn consistently accrued negative connotations and has been all-too-

easily invoked critically (or perhaps really not *so* critically) in subsequent contestation of the neo-avant-garde:

The anti-aesthetic gesture of the “readymade” [...] now reappear[s] in Neo-Dada [...] as comic strips or as crushed automobile bodies. [...] Uncompromising revolt has been replaced by unconditional adjustment. (Richter 1966: 205)

The damage is easily done (but not easily undone), as the authority of historical Dada condemns its neo-type as compromised and implicitly – decidedly – *not* revolutionary. Repetition, it has been argued, is the most culturally, socially and politically compromising dimension of neo-avant-gardism in the 1950s and ’60s. Hans Richter’s swipe, however, concedes perhaps far more than it ever deliberately intended with its new characterisation of the neo’s *unconditional adjustment*.

From the foregoing, we ought now to relate back to our own position implicitly as participants (or not, of course, as the case may be) in avant-garde/neo-avant-garde activity by the very attempt to situate for ourselves a degree of conceptual orientation. It has been suggested that “under conditions of modern shock – the daily shocks of the modern world – response to stimuli *without* thinking has become necessary for survival” (Buck-Morss 1997: 388) – a strategy of “absorbing” shock and of coping therefore; heads down and pay the mortgage. What is intimated is the activity of thought, as it perpetually falls short of achieving its potential unless it deliberately turns on its own structured operation, occasioning the suspension of its habitual operational mode and as it in turn makes its direct address to the containing structure. When (if) that structure is made visible, we can begin to *think* our relation to it, and the cautionary note is that if we cease to think that relation, the structure will recede again into invisibility and resume its unchallenged and effectively uninterrupted repressive exercise. Thinking takes the specific instance to construct a generalisation, but the general proves of little consequence unless, as Joseph Dietzgen once cautioned, it is “conceived in its relation to its special [specific] forms” (1906: 357). Thus read, thinking is a contradictory process, necessarily struggling between generalisation and specialisation, but *not* necessarily working towards synthesis and resolution (although Dietzgen does suggest that it is in the nature of the mind to seek to “harmonise” the contradictions of the world, to relativise and equate them) – the opposite might indeed be the case, to capitalise on contradiction and conflict, and actively to counter any potential synthesis or resolution. It becomes instructive, especially

when we attempt to work through the bluffs and counter-bluffs of twentieth-century avant-garde strategies, to return to Dietzgen's early observation that reason develops its understanding out of contradictions,² an observation which, though central to his dialectical thought, can help us move away from too close and strict a conformity with the standard version of dialectical materialism (which, for Tristan Tzara, amounted to little more than "an amusing mechanism which guides us [...] to the opinions we had in the first place" (1989: 79). Presented as a way of understanding reality, dialectical materialism is flawed by its privileging of synthetic resolution above antithetic irreconcilability; its more productive potential resides perhaps in capitalising upon the latter, and certainly in its declared resistance to a sense of the eternal, the final, the sacred, with insistence on relative (but absence of absolute) boundaries. What enters into the discussion at this point is a practical suspension of the activity of a certain way of thinking, both deliberate and irreconcilable with, and potentially *oppositional* to, our present pursuit *to think about the avant-garde*.

The contradiction of avant-garde oppositionality culminates, for Bürger, in the so-called "failures" of the neo-avant-garde, and the apparent denegation of the possibility of transgression or rupturing of the social fabric – a position further complicated, as Hal Foster notes, by the fact that what Bürger credits as the *successes* of the historical avant-garde are not always easily distinguishable from what he cites as the *failures* of the neo-avant-garde: the successes of one become the failures of the other. Indeed, in working towards "righting" Bürger's concept of the dialectic, it is Foster's hypothesis that rather than cancelling the project of the historical avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde *acts* on the historical instance, arguably demonstrating for the first time a full and traumatic comprehension (but, critically, not *completion*) of the project (1994: 16). Historically, in a time of disintegrating totality, and as a component of its revolutionary impulse to change the world, the politics of modernism saw art reneging upon itself and undermining its own auratic presence, resisting transcendent autonomy and embracing lived-in everyday social and political conditions. A past heroism, however, caught up in the avant-garde's own utopian programme, defaulted in its failure to transcend itself, and,

instead of being subsumed in a transcendent ideality, art [...] dissolved within a general aestheticisation of everyday life, giving way to a pure circulation of images, a trans-aestheticisation of banality. (Baudrillard 1993b: 11)

It is Jean Baudrillard who makes this observation, before going on to specify and name the point of default:

the crucial moment for art was undoubtedly that of Dada [...] that moment when art, by renouncing its own aesthetic rules of the game, debouched into the transaesthetic era of the banality of the image. (1993b: 11)

Dada, it is suggested, marks the point of renunciation historically (still not uniquely or exclusively so), though for Baudrillard, once repetition of such renunciation commences, art becomes caught up in this “pure circulation of images” (as appropriated or re-appropriated, vulgarised or simulated). The primary concern, as Baudrillard outlines it, is the identification on our part of the right, affirmative response to such new forms. The declared interest in “the balance between the extreme banality of objects and their enigmacity” is, rather than being an interest in resolving or resisting conflict between them, always a concern “not to integrate them, but to challenge one with another – the intimacy and strangeness of objects” (Baudrillard, quoted in Zurbrugg 1997: 4), in a response that engages conflict as an integrating principle (1993a: 61).

Moving to instantiate inevitably complicates the discussion; it is instructive to a point, but stifles theoretical scope as it concretises certain principles, though at the same time conversely insisting upon the necessary practicality of what is being outlined theoretically (and which would otherwise remain abstract, remote and, quite frankly, of little use as far as discussing the viability of the avant-garde is concerned). Locating the extreme banality and strangeness of objects within our own western cultural context places us firmly in the realm of mass electronic media and its generation of sensory alienation; it is from this position, conceding to the media saturation of our environment, that any sense of oppositionality or any kind of anti-stance fails, and critical engagement responds with an admission that it must assume some (not insignificant) degree of complicity with the object of critique. Nam June Paik, for instance, made the concession to “use technology in order to hate it better” (1970:25), mercenary in his pursuit of an effective and critical role for art within the broader realms of neo-avant-gardism. Paik, for one, was attuned to the rapidly expanding though one-way imposition of thought and behaviour by the seductive means of contemporary electronic media – and seduction, Baudrillard reminds us, is what simulation does.³ Inherently *visible*, it is precisely its *invisibility* and the passive state of reception

generated which together underlie the cool efficiency of mass electronic media as among the most sophisticated manifestations of Althusser's infamous ISAs.⁴ Resulting critical engagement appropriately is forced to mimic its environment, to imitate the forms and modes of production and reception embedded in late twentieth century technology and, as one consequence, notions of oppositionality necessarily undergo change and are reconfigured through anti-logic, for example, according to Gilles Deleuze's consistent operative mode of subverting rather than opposing the object.

Subversion, then, supplants opposition, and its means assume forms that are sometimes difficult to reconcile with stated avant-garde intention, critical strategies and cultural resistance, but it is precisely they which operate as the most incisive of cultural forms in affirmation of the continued viability of the project:

rather than false, circular, and otherwise affirmative, avant-garde practice at its best is contradictory, mobile, and dialectical, even rhizomatic. The same is true of neo-avant-garde practice at its best. (Foster 1994: 19)

And at its best, among the most contradictory characteristics of neo-avant-gardism is, arguably, its widely criticised "repetition" – repetition of earlier historical avant-garde gestures and strategies, to be sure, but specifically repetition of the form of the object of critique. Repetition in this latter guise must bring with it certain constraints upon the formal possibilities available to the avant-garde artist, yet though conceptually resistant to constraints, in conceding both to their necessity and their enabling potential, Deleuze duly cautions against destroying them completely:

You have to keep small supplies of signifiante and subjectification, if only to turn them against their own systems when the circumstances demand it [...] and you have to keep small rations of subjectivity in sufficient quantity to enable you to respond to the dominant reality. (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 160)

Thus a conceptual mode that permits the occurrence of the constitution of the subject whilst simultaneously allowing the subject to exceed itself, to get *outside* itself, to defer the fixity and stability of that figure of absolute interiority. For the subject exercising the enabling constraints which allow it to test and to exceed its own limits

(the “enabling constraints” so named by Judith Butler), the idea that revolution without a goal can still be revolution with effect becomes a socially viable and immediate proposition, specifically with the invocation of Dada and its instigation of what now proves to be ongoing radicalised cultural practice. The deliberate attempt at transformation of the world and the individual’s knowledge of the world was, and continues to be, a spontaneous act which necessarily locates itself in the immediate extension of lived experience, and in the event struggles with a theoretical pessimism that rounds on and relocates the contest that once took place at the edges of discourse to the very heart of the culture and social order that the avant-garde would reject.

The outside/inside or object/subject distinction is now rendered invalid in thinking through avant-garde transgression and rupture. The effective nature of the movement of avant-garde transgression, as Michel Foucault’s inspired theorising of exteriority puts it, “takes the form of a spiral which no simple infraction can exhaust” (Foucault 1998: 28). The spiral gives us a simultaneity of outside and inside: Jacques Lacan elsewhere invokes the Möbius strip as his metaphor; Alain Badiou elsewhere again invokes a transtemporality that makes us *really* the contemporaries of the great scientific, political, amorous and artistic figures of history, “which means that we think with – and in – them, without the least need of a temporal synthesis” (2000: 60). This simultaneity allows the one to inscribe in the process of erasing the other, and vice versa, forcing the question of the idea of a limit separating outside and inside, and to rethink it, in Deleuze’s words, as “the common limit that links one to the other, a limit with two irregular faces, a blind word and a mute vision” (1988: 65). Simultaneity delineates limit, therefore, as a traced line determined at the surface – the fold that Badiou describes:

If you fold a sheet of paper, you determine a traced line where the folding takes place, which, although it certainly constitutes the common limit of the two subregions of the sheet, is not, however, a tracing *on* the sheet, black on white. For what the fold presents as a limit on the sheet as pure outside is, in its being, a movement of the sheet *itself*. (2000: 89)

The folding of outside into inside is an effect of reversal, indeed of doubling if not repetition, that Deleuze recognises as a doubling of “the outside with a coextensive inside” (1988: 118), a potentially multiple folding that takes it beyond the double, in the folds of the fan

(fold upon fold) or the leaves of the book (folds of thought). Though it may be folded, the outside can still be apprehended precisely *as outside*, however many times it is folded, in “unity that creates being, a multiplicity that makes for inclusion, a collectivity having become consistent” (Deleuze 1993: 31).

The status of this equivocity bears upon any attempt we might subsequently make constructively to proceed from Deleuze’s opposition to a philosophy of the subject. We might make use of the potential of the existence of multiple forms of beings, beings that “are always produced by a disjunctive synthesis [...] [and that are themselves] disjointed and divergent” (Deleuze 1990: 179). This disjointedness and divergence is instanced in Deleuze’s notion of the assemblage – or body-assemblage – the assemblage that can be recognised in the manufactured “artificial problem” which functions as reflexive, pointing towards a solution that is generated outside thought and the process of knowledge. Conceptualised as an open totality, no single component of the body-assemblage can be changed without affecting and changing the whole, though it remains always the sum of an infinitely variable and mutable set of relations between relations. The effect is not closure or completion, but rather the opening up of the body-assemblage and the subsequent intermingling of reactions to other body-assemblages, “of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies”, within the context of the event site that is the territorial or re-territorialised plane against which the body-assemblage is thought and thinks itself.

As it moves, acts and speaks, the body-assemblage is always collective even though its form may be that of the singularity, the “One-all” as elucidated by Deleuze; what makes its statement collective, even as it is emitted by the singularity, is that it does not refer back to a subject and neither does it refer back to a double: “there isn’t a subject who emits the statement or a subject about which the statement would be emitted” (Deleuze and Guattari 1986: 83). To this extent, what is proposed is the collective statement that reneges on the subject category, that in a sense erases the subject, and that is, as such, a paradoxical entity whose emission “shines with a singular brilliance” (Badiou 2000: 37). Badiou concedes this much to the paradoxical entity:

it is like a line of flight, an evasion, or an errant liberty, by which one escapes the positivism of legalised beings. In the sombre opacity of the combinatory ensemble, it is like a

window. The paradoxical entity is a clear singularity. (2000: 37)

The singularity, then, is recognisable in the body-assemblage; further, however, to Deleuze’s collective statement, the concept of difference would, initially at least, appear to drive against completion and unifying forces, and it is precisely in thinking about systems in terms of compositions of series, with each series defined on the basis of difference, that Deleuze employs the term “singularity”, relying partly on the image of the actor who plays a role, which, Deleuze suggests, is in fact beyond and greater than the personal:

What is neither individual nor personal are, on the contrary, emissions of singularities insofar as they occur on an unconscious surface and possess a mobile, immanent principle of auto-unification through a *nomadic distribution*, radically distinct from fixed and sedentary distributions as conditions of the syntheses of consciousness. (1990: 102-3)

Difference, in this sense, is instructive and constitutive, seemingly confounding any unifying force which would preclude difference; indeed, it further seems to confound any theoretically guiding principle that might itself militate as a unifying force. To think in terms of difference, Deleuze reasons, becomes affirmative of surfaces and surface phenomena, philosophically to abandon thoughts about surfaces as secondary to something that resides beneath or outside of them: “the philosopher is no longer [...] Plato’s soul or bird, but rather the animal that is on a level with the surface – a tick or louse” (1990: 133).

What is preserved with Deleuze’s philosophy of surfaces and differences is the integrity of surfaces of difference, argued as irreducible therefore to any unifying principle. Still, what obviously fails consistently to be iterated by Deleuze is any open hostility towards unifying principles – evidently there is resistance to such principles, resistance to permitting the reduction of thought in such terms, but unifying principles are never ruled out as conceptual options, no more, for example, than Deleuze rules out the strategic use of binaries in thought. If, as Badiou states, the unique object of philosophy is the thinking of thought, then Deleuze will mobilise any available option in working towards that object. The admission of any conceptual strategy in the process of thinking thought does permit Deleuze’s philosophy freely to operate as “the capture of a life that is both total and divergent” (Badiou 1994: 55) by virtue of what is

described as his “positive ambivalence” emanating from the total repudiation of negation, and embrace of chaotic difference in the “true throw of the dice” (Deleuze 1994: 304). As the body is argued to be the arbitrary relation of force with force, existence too is an effect of chance – radically innocent because of its necessity, and purely just because of its release of all things from having a purpose. Necessity transforms the game of chance into a serious game indeed, as it is positively identified “with multiplicity, with fragments, with parts, with chaos: the chaos of the dice that are shaken and then thrown” (Deleuze 1983: 25-7). In affirmation of innocence, necessity and multiplicity, Deleuze, we read, is emphatic in his criticism:

To abolish chance by holding it in the grip of causality and finality, to count on the repetition of throws rather than affirming chance, to anticipate a result instead of affirming necessity – these are all the operations of a bad player. (Deleuze 1983: 27)

The revolutionary who acts without a goal then appears as a supreme player, affirming chance, as unimpeded by causal motives as by the idea of a goal, and revolutionary movement from one relay point to the next inscribes in the process a ludic principle of engagement.

Paik’s affirmation of the medium, submitting to its innocence, necessity and multiplicity in the mass technologised west, resisted the mere acceptance of instruments as given in order to insist upon their creative manipulation and capacity for the simultaneous perception of “the parallel flows of many independent movements” (Paik 1964) and layers of reality. In appropriation of the cultural medium itself, it might be argued that Paik constructed

a simulacrum of a double-negation, denying the validity of individual and original production, yet denying equally the relevance of the specific context and function of the work’s own practice. (Buchloh 2000: 349)

The denial is to insist upon disunity, or rather *non*-unity, which is critical if Dada/neo-dada and the historical avant-garde/neo-avant-garde are to break their cultural accommodation and containment. Revolution in the terms being argued here moves the emphasis away from actions themselves to the effect of actions upon their public. The effect of Dada action, as Benjamin still felt it some twenty years after the event, was akin to that of a missile or an instrument of ballistics, “it jolted the viewer, taking on a tactile [*taktisch*] quality” (Benjamin

2003: 267). What quite literally “happened” left the spectator, the reader, the listener dazed and confused, the shocked victim reeling at the sustained intensity of the visual arrays or Tzara’s manifesto writing:

I write a manifesto and I want nothing, yet I say certain things, and in principle I am against manifestos, as I am also against principles [...] I am against action; for continuous contradiction, for affirmation too, I am neither for nor against and I do not explain because I hate common sense. [...] *Order = disorder; ego = non-ego; affirmation = negation*: [...] I proclaim bitter destruction with all the weapons of DADAIST DISGUST. (Tzara 1989: 76-81)

The manifesto writer disembodies the critique of its history and content, yet deliberately retains the myth of cultural critique among those privileged concepts of the culture that he rejects, in order to interrogate dominant practices of production and reception.

The alternative and manipulated use of familiar media becomes incisive when the people become aware of what they are watching and of what they are seeing. Richard Huelsenbeck once cautioned in the historical moment that “to sit in a chair for a single moment is to risk one’s life”, and so might Paik in the neo moment warn us that to sit in a chair watching television for a single moment is, similarly, to risk one’s life, for “to be a Dadaist means to let oneself be thrown by things, to oppose all sedimentation” (Huelsenbeck 1989: 246). The late twentieth-century theoretical expansion on structural Marxism has constructed a logic of consumption around the sign, and under such conditions we move and operate within the intricacy of relations between sometimes replaceable if not interchangeable signs – what Baudrillard would call objects of consumption – that struggle with and problematise the systematicity of object-subject relations. Problematizing what would otherwise uncritically be described as the “natural” order of things demonstrably makes the object-subject relation a most unstable, indeed unviable and unworkable proposition, leading to one response (call it dramatic or melodramatic) that has demanded a complete reconstruction of social logic. Again, it is Baudrillard in characteristic style who declaims, arguing that if we deal with the object as sign then there is no such thing as the object, that the object does not exist – a position that he further complicates by arguing that there is indeed no such thing as the individual, and that the individual subject is merely an effect of the social system *that*

precedes it: it is precisely the social systems preceding them that give individual subjects their identities.

The subject, then, comes into being as a signifier active within and identified *by* the system, and we are faced with suspension of the categories “object” and “subject” as art dissolves within the aestheticisation of everyday life and the extreme banality of the images that saturate it. The circulation of signs under these conditions of suspension begins, in turn, to describe formally the structural terrain of their interchangeability. The serial nature of the banks of screens that provide us with a mapping of the surface delineate one such landscape, “a transfer in which nothing changes place” because one thing is always interchangeable with its correlate, and so enables that oscillation between surface and suggested depth, the physical and the aesthetic planes together made coextensive and coordinate (Krauss 1985: 10). We are reminded how the experience of seriality engendered by the readymade, for instance, “factors into this discourse the issue of [...] the multiple without original” (De Duve 1991: 179, 36), or the copy of an original that has long since been lost. Baudrillard’s progressive stages in the precession of simulacra famously charts the severing of the simulacrum and its original referent through a theoretical, virtual, space, wherein becoming virtual “tends toward the perfect illusion [...] [but] it isn’t the same creative illusion as that of the image” – that is to say, the “perfect illusion” is the perfection in reproduction of the illusion, rendering the real (the illusion) virtual (the “perfect reproduction”) and in the process so extinguishing the game of illusion as “we witness the extermination of the real by its double” (Baudrillard 1997: 9).

As mass electronic media bear down upon us, the double gains in the ascendancy and renders the real redundant; implicit in this, for Baudrillard certainly, is the negativity of such redundancy, but a redundancy which the neo-avant-gardist can potentially exploit (inevitably to some extent redressing such redundancy itself). The proposition is to say that the double, which will potentially ultimately bear no relation to its original, will consequently become the object of art *that isn’t an object any more*. . Still, as Baudrillard reminds us, “an object that isn’t an object is not nothing” (1997: 9), and its imposing presence is precisely its immanence and immateriality. The object that isn’t an object occupies – and the neo-avant-gardist moves in – the interstices that remain, the neo-avant-gardist therefore as *entre-gardist*.⁵ Conceptually, truth demands a certain integrity of the surface – the very surface that achieved primacy under late modernism, and

modernity exercised artistic engagement with, and breakdown of, the analytical truth of the object, the world and the social sphere by deconstructing surfaces and appearances. Deconstructive arrest then becomes the condition for reconfiguring the object, the world and the social sphere, to constitute in the process new “truths” in new *appearances*. This confirms Baudrillard’s conclusion to his own initial critical observation, that it is now precisely the opposite to a deconstruction of appearances that is required, and recognising the bad conscience of the sign is to recognise “a bad conscience that had eaten away at all painting since the Renaissance” (1990: 64). In Paik’s work, I would suggest, as the medium exposes a bad conscience, we witness the revolution televised.

The impulse for us now in terms of situating a concept of the neo-avant-garde is not to find alignment with object or subject, outside or inside, but somehow to find alignment with one *and* the other, that is to say both. This does not necessarily demand the unity of both, and it is precisely the deferred completion of a sense of unity that punctures any perceived limits in order legitimately and critically to rupture, to transgress and to exceed them. As concept, of course, we admit its functionality:

A concept is a brick. It can be used to build the courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window. What is the subject of the brick? The arm that throws it? The body connected to the arm? The brain encased in the body? The situation that brought the brain and body to such a juncture? All and none of the above. What is its object? The window? The edifice? The laws the edifice shelters? The class and other power relations encrusted in the laws? All and none of the above: “What interests us are the circumstances”. (Massumi 1992: 5)

Faced with always changing circumstances, our motive ought always to be resistance to the closure and containment of an oppressive all-encompassing theory as we think in terms of a *concept of the neo-avant-garde* which allows for the demarcation of limits that offer us opportunity to test and to exceed them through deliberate and strategic unconditional adjustment, and posing a practical theoretical *stability* understood not as fixity but as *variation within limits*, conceding at all times that the “concept has no subject or object other than itself. It is an act” (Massumi 1992: 57, 5).

Notes

¹ I would suggest that overcoming isn't actually an option in the conventional sense, and that we delude ourselves if we think that it is; as Habermas argues and as Hal Foster reminds us, "Not only did the [historical] avant-garde fail [but] it was always already false". (Foster 1994: 17)

² Pannakoek, in his introduction to Dietzgen's *The Positive Outcome of Philosophy*, observes how for Dietzgen "contradiction is the true nature of everything" (1906: 22). This, however, comes before conceding to the dialectic: "contradiction is understood and reconciled by the insight into the nature of the faculty of understanding" (1906: 88).

³ Berghaus notes, however, that Paik "hardly ever dwelled on the political causes behind the media structures he condemned, and rarely focused his attention on social and economic matters unless they impinged directly on the realms of art and media" (2005: 205).

⁴ See Louis Althusser 1971.

⁵ Frances Tracey introduces the provocative position of the *entre-garde*, among others, in her Edinburgh conference paper "*Destruction-RSG-6: Towards a Situationist Avant-Garde Today*" (see her essay in this volume).

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ABSTRACTS

KEITH ASPLEY

The Avant-Garde, Neo-Avant-Garde and Radio: Robert Desnos and Philippe Soupault

The role played by radio in the progression from the historical avant-garde to the post-war neo-avant-garde is studied here through the particular cases of two members of the surrealist movement, Robert Desnos and Philippe Soupault, and involves consideration of the osmosis between high and low culture.

Desnos was recruited by Paul Deharme, one of the pioneers in France of "l'art radiophonique", to work for his company Information et Publicité. One of his most famous early commissions was the promotion of a radio programme featuring the pulp fiction arch-criminal Fantômas, which became a serious creative work, *La Grande Complainte de Fantômas*. Another of his important cultural projects was the "Cantate pour l'inauguration du Musée de l'Homme", for which his libretto was set to music by Darius Milhaud. However, some of Desnos's most "cutting edge" work in radio was found in the adverts he devised, e.g. for the Vermifuge Lune.

After the war Soupault "came back from the dead" (*Journal d'un fantôme*) and re-invented himself, not so much in programmes designed to make poetry more accessible to the public as in a series of radio plays which display his ability to translate theory into practice in a new genre. Boundaries between highbrow and lowbrow were re-drawn, and the national institution, radio, that was generally hostile to the avant-garde in France between the wars, was brought on board in a neo-avant-garde mode.

HUBERT F. VAN DEN BERG

Towards a "Reconciliation of Man and Nature". Nature and Ecology in the Aesthetic Avant-Garde of the Twentieth Century

Avant-garde art is often regarded as a turn away from nature, due both to the rejection of conventional mimesis and to the special predilection of the avant-garde for technology and metropolitan life. Whereas some sections of the avant-garde might indeed have been "anti-nature", one can also observe a line of tradition in the avant-garde movements of the twentieth century reaching from the early twentieth century avant-garde (e.g. Die Brücke, Arp, Schwitters, Lissitzky) to developments after the Second World War, notably in Land Art. In regard to a more harmonious stance towards nature, Land Art artists like Goldsworthy and Long realise in many respects what some protagonists of the early avant-garde formulated as their main pursuits.

GÜNTER BERGHAUS

Neo-Dada Performance Art

Neo-Dada was a term used in the late 1950s, usually pejoratively, to characterise creations that fell outside the domains of abstract art, absurd theatre, and surrealism. By the early 1960s, the works focussing on the quotidian aspects of late-capitalist, urban culture increased in number. Their exuberant energy, their critical focus on the emerging media society, and their novel forms of production and presentation revealed that they were much more than just a rehash of an earlier phase of the avant-garde.

Many of the American artists to whom the term Neo-Dada was applied worked in the performance medium and preferred the term Happening for their time-based creations. In Continental Europe, artists working in a similar vein called themselves New Realists. In Japan, the term chosen for this concept was Concretism, or the Japanese word for it, Gutai. In 1962, a second generation of artists continued this trend under the banner of Fluxus (but its first public performance in Düsseldorf again carried in its title the word “Neo-Dada”). Starting off in Germany with close ties to the Happening movement, Fluxus grew into a world-wide phenomenon and a well-organised network held together until the mid-1960s by George Maciunas. This contribution defines some of the characteristic traits of Neo-Dada performance art, discusses its relation to the Dada experiments of the period 1916-22, and establishes to what degree the Happening and Fluxus movement was an original and innovative feature of the post-war avant-garde. It uses some exemplary Neo-Dada performances to examine Bürger’s claim that the neo-avant-garde repeated the mistakes and failures of its predecessor and that as a movement it accommodated to the prevailing system of alienation rather than attempted to overcome it.

FRIEDRICH W. BLOCK

“movens” or The Aesthetics of Movement as a Programmatic Perspective

In 1960 the German poet Franz Mon edited a book with the title “movens”, which was to become a milestone in the aesthetic re-orientation of Central Europe following the catastrophic events of the 1930s/40s. The “documents and analyses of poetry, visual arts, music, architecture” were contrived as program, analysis and record of contemporary art. The key term “movement” was conceived not only as ‘motion’ or ‘kinetics’ but also, crucially, as the processual nature of art and information. These aesthetics qualify the experimental poetics program as it has developed since then.

This essay concentrates on the programmatic aspect of this project and reflects on its network of categories and arguments. They are related to the example of a unique artist, whose impressive work appeared on an international scale for the first time in “movens”: Carlfriedrich Claus (1930-1998) was a rare artistic character who realised the “movens” poetics in the context of a totalitarian communist system (GDR). Above all, Claus pursued aesthetic experiments as a profound exploration of sign processes and self.

The discussion of these phenomena is critically confronted with the concept of *neo-avant-garde*. Whether this concept can theoretically be more than a pejorative attribution is questioned. However, the aesthetics of movement as realisation of the experimental poetics program are analysed in respect to aspects of the avant-garde discourse such as the relation to the historical avant-garde movements, to the development of information technologies, to the self-referentiality of art and its overlap with science, and to the distinction between art and life.

GAVIN BUTT

Joe Brainard's Queer Seriousness, or, How to Make Fun out of the Avant-Garde

This essay focuses upon the work of U.S. artist Joe Brainard and his association with the New York School of Poetry, most notably Frank O'Hara. The discussion of this work is undertaken in order to consider what might constitute a 'queerly serious' address to questions of meaning and value. The work of the New York School poets and of selected second generation New York artists has often been taken as falling short of an avowedly 'serious' model of poetic and artistic practice; one which is heavily identified with the values of conventional heterosexual masculinity. But rather than simply falling in line with such criticism – and dismissing such work as effete, if not homosexual – this essay asks how work such as Brainard's might make us rethink such a 'straight' judgemental attitude by presenting us with a decidedly queer approach to serious subject matter and earnest forms of expression. What might constitute a perverse valorisation of the deeply serious? And how might it be possible to make fun out of the serious business of avant-garde art production?

CLAUS CLÜVER

The “Ruptura” Proclaimed by Brazil's Self-Styled “Vanguardas” of the Fifties

Brazil's *modernismo*, its avant-garde of the 1920s involving primarily literature and the visual arts, “cannibalistically” adapted European avant-garde models to Brazilian contexts, often in search of a Brazilian cultural identity and independence from European hegemony. Still working under post-colonial conditions after the hiatus of World War II, the visual artists, writers and composers who formed the avant-garde movements of the 1950s broke again with the then dominant norms in Brazil, opting for non-figurative constructivist art, creating a new “Concrete” poetry and composing experimental scores, again adapting international models but in order to participate in the artistic revolutions of the time.

MICHAEL CORRIS

The Dialogical Imagination: The Conversational Aesthetic of Conceptual Art

It is a commonplace that the practices associated with Conceptual Art undermined the interpretive competencies of the spectator by presenting in the place of art a linguistic framework that aimed to reflect critically on the conditions of art's consumption and production. By substituting a kind of reading for looking, the expectations of the spectator were frustrated and challenged. Conceptual artists had assumed that late modernist art – typically, painting and sculpture – presented the spectator with few options to engage with the work of art as other than a highly refined entertainment that effectively confirmed the cultural standing of the spectator and the superiority of the enterprise of modernist art as the pre-eminent aesthetic experience. The most radical of the Conceptual artists sought to render redundant the competencies of the spectator by quite literally removing the art object from view. In place of an art object whose media identity was secure and of sufficient external complexity and detail, Conceptual Art substituted text, ephemeral performances, banal photography and installations virtually indistinguishable from the environment in which they were sited. In this essay I discuss those practices of Conceptual Art that sought to dispense with the spectator entirely through artistic strategies that foreground the act of conversation, interactivity and a radical application of intellectual resources associated with the task of indexing and information retrieval. What, then, might we plausibly say about such an encounter where the knowledge, memory and cultural values of the spectator become constitutive elements of the artwork? Under such conditions of engagement, can one sensibly speak of a work of art at all? If so, what might the work be that a work of art of this sort aims to do? This question has been raised in various forms and in diverse contexts by those seeking to understand the social dimension of the practices of Conceptual Art of the 1960s and 1970s. It is considered here anew in the context of selected practices of Art & Language.

ANNA DEZEUZE

'Neo-Dada', 'Junk Aesthetic' and Spectator Participation

In order to address Hal Foster's description of the "first neo-avant-garde" as a "hysterical" re-enactment of the past, this essay discusses specific themes in the works of 'Neo-dada' artists in New York in the early 1960s, focusing in particular on the reception, practice and concerns of American artists George Brecht, Robert Rauschenberg and Allan Kaprow. The widespread use of so-called 'junk' materials by Neo-dada artists is analysed according to the ways in which different kinds of assemblages articulated oppositions between recognisable objects and trash. Drawing on theoretical reflections about garbage, I suggest that both Rauschenberg and Kaprow were less interested in these oppositions than in the processes of consumption and disposal themselves. Brecht is shown to have explored, for his part, similar notions of mobility and change through a very specific kind of spectator participation. Finally, it is suggested that the use of everyday and throwaway materials, the focus on

change and mobility, and the desire to invite a greater involvement on the part of the viewer are all aspects of a common endeavour to explore what Brecht called “the structure of experience”. References to popular books about Zen Buddhism of the time shed light on Neo-dada’s radical investigations of the relations between art and everyday life in capitalist society.

MARTIN J. C. DIXON

“Blackbirds Rise From a Field...”: Production, Structure and Obedience in John Cage's *Lecture on Nothing*

This essay presents a philosophical analysis of Cage’s technique of rhythmic structure. It advances the notion that the form/content dialectic progresses in neo-avant-garde works to such an extent that the “content” of these works becomes their own “means”. This I term the “involution” of artistic technique.

R. BRUCE ELDER

The Structural Film: Ruptures and Continuities in Avant-Garde Art

In 1969, P. Adams Sitney, a precocious film critic of exceptional acuity, issued the most famous and frequently quoted essay ever written on avant-garde cinema, “Structural Film”. Sitney’s article announced the appearance of a new approach to making avant-garde films. This essay deals with the controversy that the article provoked, by exploring the relationship between Sitney’s conception of the structural film and the nature of Minimalist painting, sculpture, and music – roughly contemporaneous practices. This exploration enables one to discern the radical challenge that all these practices offered to the traditional compositional ideal expounded by Immanuel Kant in his *Kritik der Urteilskraft*.

BEN HIGHMORE

Home Furnishings: Richard Hamilton, Domesticity and ‘Post-Avant-Gardism’

In this essay I use Richard Hamilton as an example of an artist who seems to fit all too readily into the category of neo-avant-garde. I argue, though, that Hamilton (and other artists who might be classified as part of the neo-avant-garde) might be more productively looked at in terms of ‘post-avant-gardism’. I focus on Hamilton’s interior paintings and collages produced between 1956 and 1964 and suggest that a ‘post-avant-gardism’ perspective wouldn’t try and measure their power of

intervention or their criticality, but would instead attend to their analytic descriptions of the contradictory environments of the post-war world.

DAVID HOPKINS

‘Art’ and ‘Life’... and Death: Marcel Duchamp, Robert Morris and Neo-Avant-Garde Irony

This essay addresses the utopian rhetoric concerning crossovers or mergers between ‘art’ and ‘life’ in neo-avant-garde art production of the late 1950s and 60s. Taking the American artist Robert Morris’ 1963 sculpture ‘Metered Bulb’ as a central focus of attention, it argues that there is a peculiarly ironic treatment of the art/life theme in certain aspects of neo-avant-garde art, such that the measurability of life’s admission into art is often parodically examined. This concern is indexed to certain aspects of Marcel Duchamp’s thought, and his presence in the United States after World War II is seen as crucial for the dissemination of ideas of this kind. The theme of the quantifiability of art/life relations is further extended in the work of European artists such as Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni to include a more explicit socio-political reflection on art-life discourse as determined by the logic of exchange.

As well as engaging with Duchamp, Morris is shown to have replicated the self-referring formalist aesthetics of Clement Greenberg’s Modernism, so that his work appears to bring about a collision of art-life and art-for-art’s sake positions (both of these amounting to assertions of artistic autonomy with different inflections). All of this means that Morris produces a much more ironic response to the legacy of Jackson Pollock than the blithe reading of Pollock as a proto-performative figure presented by Allan Kaprow.

In the final stages of the argument, a further instance of a merging of notions of life and art, in a statement by the American Sculptor Tony Smith, is shown to have strong iconographic connections to certain works by Man Ray/Marcel Duchamp and Robert Rauschenberg which can be shown to engage, at a submerged level, with mortality. The essay concludes by asserting that such dark themes more frequently underlie art-life rhetoric than might be supposed, indicating that a very different, ironic approach to the principle of sublation separates the neo-avant-garde from the ‘heroic’ historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century.

DAFYDD JONES

“Jeder Kann Dada”: The Repetition, Trauma and Deferred Completion of the Avant-Garde

My knowledge of the world, it has been said, has no value except when I act to transform it. The deliberate attempt at transformation carried through the avant-garde project and into the neo-avant-garde was, and continues to be, a spontaneous act which necessarily locates itself in the immediate extensions of lived experience, and in the event struggles with a theoretical pessimism that rounds on and relocates the contest from the edges of discourse to the very heart of the mechanism of

authoritarianism. The problematic of the avant-garde (neo or otherwise) is well rehearsed. Mann, for instance, writes:

[t]he avant-garde is one mechanism of a general organisation of social forces that operates in large part by means of the careful distribution of differences, imbalances, oppositions, and negations, and that regulates them through a variety of more or less effective discursive agencies in the so-called public sphere and along the margin itself.

The question of the viability of avant-garde/neo-avant-garde practice from a position of apparent marginality, then, must be taken as a point of departure. Responding to it necessitates revised readings of the neo-avant-garde, addressing its widely touted and heavily criticised (Bürger, Duchamp, Huelsenbeck et al.) “repetition”, for instance, which by its deliberate and strategic deployment arguably functions as integral to the entire project. The repetition of avant-garde strategies from the 1920s, through their subsequent traumatic impact, is no longer posed as the fatal error of the neo-avant-garde but rather as its most penetrating device (Foster). Further, the same repetition indicates that not only is the closure placed upon the avant-garde theoretically pre-emptive (in the assumption that the project is complete and secured in history, evidenced by the term “neo-avant-garde” itself), but that by its successive continuation of the project it is equally pre-emptive to impose the closure of the ’50s and ’60s upon the neo-avant-garde. The viability and “radicalism” of radicalised cultural practice, I submit, critically resists such closure and demands the continually deferred completion of the dada/avant-garde/neo-avant-garde project.

TANIA ØRUM

Minimal Requirements of the Post-War Avant-Garde of the 1960s

This essay draws attention to minimalism as an important current in the post-war (or so-called neo-) avant-garde. Minimalism forms a bridge from post-war modernism to the avant-garde movements of the 1960s, and also picks up the tradition from the pre-war or so-called “historical” avant-garde movements. It opens the door to cross-aesthetic experiments and to the physical and/or social context. Taking the example of the Danish Experimental School of Art, the essay argues that the history of the post-war avant-gardes cannot be written from a national perspective, but should adopt a multilinear and transnational view.

MARTIN PUCHNER

The Avant-Garde is Dead; Long Live the Avant-Garde!

This paper investigates the fate of the neo-avant-gardes in New York City during and after the sixties. The particular perspective I offer is that of the manifesto. Since the manifesto was one of the paradigmatic genres of the historical avant-garde, it can

serve as an index of the repetitions, differences, and new forms invented by various avant-garde groups and individuals during the sixties. The further course of this new manifesto-driven avant-garde of the 60s is reflected in the foundational journal of performance studies, TDR, which participated in the manifesto-craze of the sixties and which tried to preserve this craze during the seventies and eighties, a time that witnessed a decline in manifestos. TDR's meandering path through this cultural terrain can thus indicate the transformations of the 60s avant-gardes in New York City up to the present.

ANNA KATHARINA SCHAFFNER

Inheriting the Avant-Garde: On the Reconciliation of Tradition and Invention in Concrete Poetry

This essay explores the modes in which the relationship between historical avant-garde and concrete poetry is conceptualised by different factions and the ways in which concrete poets position themselves in relation to their literary and artistic ancestors. It investigates selected critical perspectives on the issue as well as declarations put forth by Eugen Gomringer, the *Noigandres* group, the *Wiener Gruppe* and Franz Mon, in which the poets situate themselves within and simultaneously position themselves against their chosen literary and artistic tradition. While all of them explicitly designate historical avant-garde poets and artists as their predecessors and acknowledge that they recuperate and draw upon techniques, strategies and concepts retrieved from this past tradition, they also emphasise their originality, claiming that they develop them further and thereby transform and amend the original quest. The tension between tradition and invention and their reconciliation is thus a constitutive factor in the works of the concrete poets.

The concrete poets operate in a radically altered cultural field, against the backdrop of a different historical, technological and theoretical horizon, and draw upon an expanded body of knowledge about signs, the signifying process and communicative structures. It will be suggested that, rather than just repeating and re-staging techniques and strategies developed by the poets of the historical avant-garde, as Peter Bürger claims, the concrete poets instead adapt, modify and extend them further to express and fit their own times, sensibilities and purposes, thereby both continuing and transcending the project of the historical avant-garde.

MARK SILVERBERG

Working in the Gap between Art and Life: Frank O'Hara's Process Poems

This essay looks at the concept of "process art" as a trend within various neo-avant-garde movements of the 1950s and 60s. It suggests that the aesthetic of process provides a useful way of re-thinking Bürger's problematic central idea of the reintegration of "art" and "life" as a goal of the avant-garde. Process art calls for a re-ordering and re-thinking of these categories in that the stability of "life" (as action)

and “art” (as object) is challenged or put into play. The paper reads Frank O’Hara’s poetry as self-consciously working in “the gap” between art and life (as Robert Rauschenberg once put it), and thus complicating Bürger’s oversimplified theory.

FRANCES STRACEY

Destruktion RSG-6: Towards a Situationist Avant-Garde Today

This essay critically analyses the Situationist International’s concept of a renewed model of avant-garde praxis, as developed in their 1963 exhibition called *Destruktion-RSG-6*, held at the Galerie Exi in Denmark. In a crucial, yet much overlooked, catalogue essay, ‘Towards New Forms of Action in Politics and Art’, Guy Debord presented a distillation of earlier Situationist writings on the avant-garde that, I argue, still generates productive conclusions. This includes a ‘constructive’ model of avant-garde practice that rejects the ‘nihilistic’ tendencies of 1920s Dadaism and Surrealism, as well as the ‘spectacle of negation’ associated with the so-called neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s, such as Happenings. It also provides a novel avant-garde temporality, one that takes place immanently, in the ‘now’ of time, but which involves a complex overlapping of past and present revolutionary moments. Debord calls this process the ‘reversible connecting factor’ whereby past, outmoded and forgotten avant-garde actions are salvaged through connections with current acts of cultural negation – but without recall to any lost originary avant-garde moment, contra Peter Bürger.

In order to explain and develop the SI’s model of immanent critique, and to show how their avant-garde theory takes practical form, I focus on the following exhibited works: Debord’s series of painted ‘Directives’; J.V. Martin’s ‘Thermonuclear Cartographs’ and Michele Bernstein’s ‘Alternative Victory’ series. These are analysed as practical instantiations of the concepts of ‘positive negation’, ‘denial’, ‘black humour’ and ‘the false document’, all of which play an important part in Debord’s elaboration of the SI as the ‘latest’ avant-garde.

KATHARINE SWARBRICK

Gender Trouble? Body Trouble? Reinvestigating the Work of Marisol Escobar

This contribution proposes a reinterpretation of selected 1960s sculptures by Marisol in order to illustrate the manner in which examples from the post-war neo-avant-garde represent a return to historical avant-garde projects which comprehend and reinvigorate avant-garde concerns. My perspective aims to probe the level at which Marisol can be analysed as presenting the body as a social construct and to ask whether Marisol’s bodies display mainly gender trouble or a more critical level of body trouble. Key concepts used to reread Marisol’s work include gender theory, encompassing the concept of masquerade, and psychoanalytic approaches to the body as a psycho-somatic construction. Freud, Lacan, Žižek, Hal Foster and Judith Butler constitute major points of critical reference.

RICHARD J. WILLIAMS

Towards an Aesthetics of Poverty: Architecture and the Neo-Avant-Garde in 1960s Brazil

This essay is a comparison between the neo-avant-garde, as it appears in Peter Bürger's writing, and the Brazilian architectural group, *Arquitetura Nova*, between the years 1960 and 1970. Its members, Sérgio Ferro, Flávio Império, and Rodrigo Lefèvre, were not engaged in any major dialogue with European artists at the time, but their ideas have much in common with the Italian tendency *Arte Povera*. In each case, what I will term an 'aesthetics of poverty' is in operation. They employed remarkably similar ideas (albeit in different contexts) and shared similar prejudices. However, they enjoyed quite different fates. Put crudely, *Arte Povera* was quickly recuperated by the category of 'art', and illustrates Bürger's thesis about the ineffectiveness of the neo-avant-garde (Bürger 1984: 58). The architects, by contrast, increasingly eschewed art in favour of social action, and paid the price. The comparison is worth making in the context of this volume, because it shows that ostensibly similar neo-avant-garde practices can have quite different outcomes or effects. Once the concept of the neo-avant-garde moves beyond New York, or Paris, or Cologne, it arguably ceases to make much sense. But equally, it might be said that away from these centres, neo-avant-garde type *activity* can have real political effect.

CONTRIBUTORS

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KEITH ASPLEY is an Honorary Fellow in the School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of *André Breton the Poet* (Glasgow, 1989) and *The Life and Works of Surrealist Philippe Soupault 1897-1990* (Lewiston, Queenston and Lampeter, 2001). He is the co-editor of *Myth and Legend in French Literature; Essays in honour of A.J. Steele* (with David Bellos and Peter Sharratt) (London, 1982), *Poetry in France* (with Peter France) (Edinburgh, 1992) and *From Rodin to Giacometti: Sculpture and Literature in France 1880-1950* (with Elizabeth Cowling and Peter Sharratt) (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA, 2000). He is currently working on a historical dictionary/encyclopedia of Surrealism.

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Günter Berghaus

GÜNTER BERGHAUS is a Senior Research Fellow at the University of Bristol and a leading expert on Italian Futurism and twentieth century avant-garde performance. He has published some fifteen books on various aspects of theatre history, theatre anthropology, and theatre politics, amongst others *Theatre and Film in Exile* (1989), *Fascism and Theatre* (1996), *Futurism and Politics* (1996), *Italian Futurist Theatre* (1998), *On Ritual* (1998), *International Futurism in the Arts and Literature* (1999), *Avant-garde Performance: Live Events and Electronic Technologies* (2005), *Theatre, Performance and the Historical Avant-garde* (2005). He has directed numerous plays from the classical and modern repertoire and devised many productions of an experimental nature. He has been principal organiser of several international conferences and held research awards from the Polish Academy of Sciences, the German Research Foundation, the Italian Ministry of Culture, the British Academy, and the Brazilian Ministry of Education.

Friedrich W. Block

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Selected publications: *Komik - Medien - Gender* (ed.). Bielefeld: Aisthesis 2006 (in print). *p0es1s. The Aesthetics of Digital Poetry* (co-ed). Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz 2004. *Beobachtung des 'ICH'*. Bielefeld: Aisthesis 1999. *IO. poesis digitalis*. Linz: Blattwerk 1997. *neue poesie und - als tradition* (ed.). Passauer Pegasus 15 (1997), no. 29/30 *Kunst - Sprache - Vermittlung* (ed). München: Goethe-Institut 1995.

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