The Time of the Avant-Gardes: the History of Art in the Age of Its Globalisation

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“Avant-gardes have only one time; and the best thing that can happen to them is to have enlivened their time without outliving it.”¹

Guy Debord

EDITOR'S NOTE

Translated from the French by Charles Penwarden

- 1 The avant-gardes have had their history. Since that time, their heroic past has been now relived in accounts in which the course of time is overturned and they re-emerge to “enliven their time” and accomplish history. The term “avant-garde” derives from military vocabulary and designates those groups that advance ahead of the main body of

troops – the vanguard. From the outset, the use of the term was thus linked to combat and to a radical strategy conceived with regard to an objective in battle. The idea of the avant-garde artist appears among the Fouriéristes. Rather than being considered in terms of professional skill, he is seen as a citizen contributing to the construction of the society of the future. Historically, the avant-gardes emerged in the context of modernism, reacting to modernity, to industrialisation, to urbanisation and the rationalisation of knowledge. Heterogeneous realities are wrongly placed under the same label, when in fact the avant-gardes did not form a coherent whole.

- 2 Avant-garde practices must be distinguished from the concept of the avant-garde, which was only constituted “after the event,”² in the time of reflection that occurred after the end of the so-called “historical” avant-gardes and with the publication of two theories of the avant-garde, by Renato Poggioli³ and Peter Bürger⁴ respectively. In Bürger’s theory, the concept of the avant-garde is the foundation of a historical theory of art viewed from a social and political perspective. In contrast, for Poggioli the social character of art is articulated through the prism of aesthetics and psychology, with emphasis on the specific features of avant-garde artistic expression. For Bürger, the avant-garde is to be viewed as the self-critique of art in a bourgeois society: “only when art enters the stage of self-criticism does the ‘objective understanding’ of past periods of the development of art become possible.”⁵ Art develops and its history is one with the transformation of the social conditions of its functioning, in relation, therefore, to the practical reconfiguration of institutional frameworks. This is how Bürger draws the frontier between so-called avant-garde art and art that is not avant-garde. This choice is determined by the way each of these artistic movements relates, as he sees it, to the “institution of art.” This term does not directly signify a museum institution or artistic association; rather, it involves a complex concept of social emancipation and “artistic autonomy.” At base, this concept is constituted by a reflection on the modes of production and dissemination of art, drawing on the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, and grounded in Marx’s critique of religion.⁶ In line with a new historical conception of art, modernist movements were distinguished from avant-garde ones and, later, from the neo-avant-garde, in accordance with their ability to attack the “institution of art.” Bürger’s classification marked an important stage in all discussion of the avant-garde, as is confirmed by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh in his first critical texts.⁷ Use of the term “avant-garde” now had to be justified.
- 3 Viewed in this context, the role of the avant-garde artwork was to reconfigure the “institution of art.” It was constructed on the basis of fragmentary elements of “life” (the *non-organic* artwork), in a constant will to self-transcendence on the part of art itself. In this sense, it was conceived according to a historical dialectic of changes in life practices and was doomed to failure when this challenge to society itself ended up in the institutional framework of the museum, digested by the “institution of art.” The practices of the neo-avant-gardes manifesting a return to the practice of fragmentation in collage reverse this avant-gardist gesture within the institution itself, and are therefore doomed to failure.
- 4 The critique of artistic autonomy necessarily negotiates the frontier between art and society. Today, it is a touchstone in the practice of contemporary artists who cannot conceive of artistic practice without social engagement. Founded on the concepts of the “institution of art” and the avant-garde work, Bürger’s theory updates the historical avant-gardes. His concepts are now widely cited. If, to use Bürger’s thesis, we consider

that the imitative gesture of the neo-avant-garde “institutionalises” the determination to transcend art, then why are the artists working in the communist bloc after World War II considered as belonging to the “avant-garde” in *L’Internationale: Post-War Avant-Gardes Between 1957 and 1986*? This transposes the time of the (historical) avant-gardes into another period and creates a parallel to the history already established in relation to the re-institutionalisation or, more precisely, recontextualisation of artistic practices between 1957 and 1986 according to the *micropolitics* of their social intentions. This term *micropolitics*, as used by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (*Mille plateaux*) illustrates in a complex way situations of specific resistance, and the tools available to Czech, Slovenian, Polish or Russian artists faced with the dominant power and ideology in that geopolitical zone. The museum here is supposed to embody *macropolitics*, to share the knowledge of *micropolitics* with the public in Europe and beyond. To do this, five contemporary art museums have formed a network: the Moderna Galerija Ljubljana, the Museu d’Art Contemporani in Barcelona, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst in Antwerp, and the Július Koller Society in Bratislava/Vienna. The volume contains over thirty articles and many of the authors (Zdenka Badovinac, Bart De Baere, Charles Esche, Bartomeu Mari, Georg Schöllhammer, Viktor Misiano, Teresa Grandas, Immanuel Wallerstein, among others) are well known as curators on the museum circuit. In this regard, the institution includes an artistic self-description as museum in which the intention to officialise art is distanced and becomes an instrument for critiquing the stagnation of social relations under ideological pressure. In this *micropolitics*, artists distance themselves from their own practice. They elaborate fictional archives and their historiography (Július Koller, KwieKulik), proceeding from the observation that there is no established frame of reference for constituting a history of art in Eastern Europe. This history is therefore constituted through a process of self-narration, as a way of effecting the critique of the artistic institution. The museum in Ljubljana was the first to collect art from Eastern Europe and to gather the archives of this parallel history. This works to counter the art world mainstream with a new vocabulary and chronology. The periodisation they put forward questions the years of 1957–1986, covering most of the cold war period. Among the authors, Immanuel Wallerstein questions this periodisation and posits a more complex chronological breakdown. He considers the period from 1945 to 1970 as a time of division and power games between the two sides in the cold war, and the years from 1970 to 2000 as the time of an orchestrated if speculative reassessment of the history of this confrontation. Paradoxically, the museumification of the critical practices from this period which aimed at moving beyond art serves to reinstate the term “avant-garde,” even if horizontal stratification runs counter to Bürger’s theory, since an artist who goes beyond art but does not reach another stage of art, goes back to the same thing. This period corresponds to the end of the meta-narratives and the second period of Wallerstein’s chronology.

- 5 What conclusions can we draw from such periodisations of art? In *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, by the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski, the implications are studied once again within the horizontal perspective of art history, in which the discrepancy between the geographical zones of European art makes *spatial time* manifest. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the two opposing sides found themselves inhabiting a common area. We need to find a way to open up the frame of the globalised landscape, but also to find a narrative process reflecting the past within a new historical perspective. Richly supplied with specific examples and descriptions of artists’ actions and works, Piotrowski’s book includes an analysis of two events that occurred during *Interpol*, an

exhibition put on in Stockholm in 1996 where Oleg Kulik gave a performance as a rabid dog and as such bit several viewers, while Alexander Brener destroyed a work by an American artist. Piotrowski focuses mainly on the reactions in the western press, whose perception of the limits of art are based on a strong general tendency. According to him, *avant-garde*-style artists do not abide by this distinction and attack the institution of art within the context of a horizontal history. Piotrowski thus identifies a tendency to go from a geographical distribution of culture to a topology marked by the extension of urban conglomerations and the increasing development of cities. This is expressed in the multiplication of contemporary art biennials (Moscow, Berlin, Prague, etc.)

- 6 Which contemporary art movements are politically and socially engaged with the tools of art? This question brings us back to the concept of artistic autonomy, which Piotrowski approaches analytically and historically with reference to the theses of Louis Althusser⁸ and the work of Artur Żmijewski on the concept of autonomy, or *the autonomy of the political*: “The word autonomy would therefore mean the right to choose a sphere of freedom, rather than extreme isolation.”⁹
- 7 It is this sphere of freedom that Stephen Eric Bronner invites us to enter in his book *Modernism at the Barricades: Aesthetics, Politics, Utopia*, the title of which clearly indicates the political nature of his analysis. The author founds his forward-looking thesis on coming political changes and the cultural response thereto on the specific utopian contents of modernism (creating the man of the future, transforming everyday life, promoting education and renewal). The oppositions here are cultural and not economic. Considerable prominence is given to painting, notably by Emil Nolde, Wassily Kandinsky, and Umberto Boccioni. Bronner elucidates the modernist spirit, imagery and logic at work in their art. Here, most of the ideas of subjective emancipation involve personal histories, some of which are still little known, such as those of the directors and agents of the Bavarian Soviet Republic (1917–19). The study of these revolutionary and literary figures affords a better understanding of the way in which individual emancipation transfers into political action. The most revolutionary art is seen as the art which achieves a unique form of expression. In his analysis, the author moves away from standard academic references to Peter Bürger’s book. In this cultural and political panorama, the avant-garde artist is seen as erasing in his imagination all frontiers between art and life, which would have an impact in real life.
- 8 We might ask how the concept of the avant-garde should be approached today, at a time when cultural and economic contexts have changed so radically. To do so, we would need to come back to the chapter on the ambiguous heritage of the avant-garde in Bürger’s book. In this recent text, he asks how one can create an “ambiguous” space between avant-garde and modernism, without taking into consideration the already established conceptual distinction. “The avant-gardes” designate practices whereas “the avant-garde” in the singular belongs to theory alone. This, Peter Bürger points out, was elaborated in the intellectual aftermath of the revolutionary events of 1968. Historical theory rethinks a present situation and proposes a logic of artistic action (a social function of art). The renewed interest in the historical concept of art and that of the avant-garde refers more to theoretical key moments than to the prototypes of artistic movements. The “avant-gardes” of today’s Eastern Europe are attacking the “institution of art” and reinstrumentalising the concept of artistic autonomy, permanently erasing the frontier between art and life. Nevertheless, the period of the avant-gardes belongs to the past. It is difficult to apply Bürger’s argument to analysis of contemporary practices

and to the contemporary viewpoint. “The avant-garde artwork” no longer appears in historiographic novelties, above all because there is nothing to be gained from discussing it in terms of failure. As for the historical transition from the avant-garde to the neo-avant-garde, it too belongs to a horizontal broadening of history which at the time configured the contemporaneity of American art, with the emergence of the national art on the *international* scene. Might it not be possible now to make a number of connections between the use of the term “avant-garde” by historians of the neo-avant-garde and by those of Eastern European art, where art, it would seem, belongs to the recent concept of an avant-garde under-construction?

- 9 Those today who want to serve or *make* their time must adjust the framework of the “institution of art” in accordance with recent practices. There is not one time frame here but several. Without the work of distinction and construction, *avant-gardes*, *modernisms* and, above all, *totalitarianisms*, all remain empty terms.

NOTES

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