Round Table Discussion

The Future of Avant-Garde Studies
A European Round Table

with Wolfgang Asholt, Peter Bürger, Éva Forgács, Benedikt Hjartarson and Piotr Piotrowski

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Abstract

A decade ago at a conference in Poznań, leading scholars of the avant-garde were asked to share their thoughts on the future of their discipline. Now we are launching the first Journal of Avant-Garde Studies it is time to reflect on these visions from scholars mainly based in Europe. Have we moved in different directions or have promises remained unfulfilled? Contemporary scholars of the avant-garde reflected on the round table discussion and offered their views on where we will go from here.

Keywords

avant-garde – modernism – art history – literary studies – Eastern Europe – Western Europe – Central Europe – Cold War – future

Transcript of a conversation between Wolfgang Asholt, Peter Bürger, Éva Forgács, Benedikt Hjartarson and Piotr Piotrowski, moderated by Hubert van den Berg in Poznań in 2010.
Preface—A Decade Later

1.1 A Round Table in Poznań in 2010

“The future of avant-garde studies” was the subject of a round-table discussion that took place at the second conference of the European Network for Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies (EAM) organised by the Institute of Art History of the Adam Mickiewicz University (UAM) in Poznań in the late summer of 2010. On 11 September 2010 the round-table discussion was a side-event of the conference in a filled grand auditorium of the Collegium Maius of the Adam Mickiewicz University, funded by the Fundacja UAM.

Participants in the debate were six European scholars, who played a major role in the advance of avant-garde studies in the preceding years and decades: the now deceased German literary and art theoretician Peter Bürger and Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski; the German literary scholar Wolfgang Asholt; the Hungarian art historian Éva Forgács; the Icelandic literary scholar Benedikt Hjartarson; and, as moderator, the Dutch literary scholar Hubert van den Berg. The round table was preceded, on request of Peter Bürger, by a preparatory exchange and circulation of some key articles authored by the participants (listed below under Dramatis personae—references to these texts are annotated in footnotes).

The conversation was intended as an exchange of thoughts and perspectives aimed at giving food for thought, rather than the formulation of one single, final position, and focused both on the achievements and desiderata of research, publications, and exhibitions dealing with the European avant-garde in the arts. In a Europe still divided by the Iron Curtain, Western studies and theoretical reflections, in particular, had stressed antagonistic and revolutionary aspects of the avant-garde as a formation in pursuit of a radical new art that aimed at a reunification of art and life, a new role of art in a new society, and an attempt to transcend its institutional framing. More recently, formal aesthetic changes and artistic innovations have tended to prevail in characterisations of the avant-garde (or, as in some languages and approaches common: avant-gardes—plural), conceiving the avant-garde as an aesthetic phenomenon without ambitions concerning institutional or social implications. Already this shift has caused some fundamental questions to arise: how should we approach the avant-garde? Which essentials are at stake in the avant-garde? What makes the avant-garde ‘avant-garde’? And—particularly in the EAM setting, in which ‘avant-garde’ and ‘modernism’ are often blurred as if they were, or are, identical, and, as notions, randomly exchangeable—is ‘avant-garde’ just a synonym for ‘modernism’?

Simultaneously, while early Western avant-garde research might have included, in particular, the Russian avant-garde, it focused predominantly on
developments in the West, and neglected developments and movements in
countries regarded as ‘Eastern’ Europe during the Cold-War period—countries
that are today labelled as ‘Central’ or ‘Eastern-Central’ Europe. Meanwhile,
many avant-garde initiatives in this—from a Cold-War, Western perspective—
‘other part’ of Europe had been mapped and retrieved from temporary oblivion,
not least in the period before the Second World War when the Iron Curtain did
not yet exist. While the Iron Curtain might have disappeared as a rigid bor-
der dividing Europe in two hemispheres, it nevertheless still remained (and
remains) present in the minds and mind maps of many scholars. Here the ques-
tion arises: whether a more integrated avant-garde history should be pursued
from a more unified European perspective.

1.2 Ten Years and Several Centenaries Later
A publication of the discussion was not intended. A publication now, a decade
after the round table, seems nevertheless sensible and relevant for several rea-
sons. The following account is not just a document of the way in which ‘avant-
garde’ was seen and discussed by a handful of scholars from different parts of
Europe a decade ago, but also a document of a far more optimistic European
 constellation in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Europe, and the
world as a whole, has become grimmer in many respects. Many issues might
not affect the field of avant-garde studies directly (though maybe they should),
yet they do give the notion ‘future’, in particular with the connotation ‘progress’,
a slightly gloomy dimension.

Meanwhile, any digital search portal research will show that the label ‘avant-
garde’ is still growing in popularity—globally, despite all pessimism regarding
an apparent death, failure, and impossibility of the concept ‘avant-garde’, as it
could be heard at the end of the previous century, and still echoed in the dis-
 cussion below. Moreover, writing on and exhibitions of art from the classical
avant-garde before the Second World War and movements after 1945 labelled
‘avant-garde’ did continue. The round table took place in the wake of the cente-
nary of the publication of the “Futurist Manifesto” in 1909. Several centenaries
followed, among others: the hundredth anniversary of the start of the Sturm
gallery in 1912, the hundredth birthday of Dada in the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916,
the centenary of De Stijl in 1917, and “the Polish avant-garde” with the first
issue of the journal Formiści in the same year, followed in the past year by
“bauhaus100” to commemorate the foundation of the Bauhaus in Weimar in
1919.

Centenaries might be ideal occasions to refocus on historical movements,
but also to reframe them. As such, they raise many questions in their design,
since they signal not just consecration, but also appropriation. This is obvi-
ous in the case of “the Polish avant-garde”, but no less characterising in “bau-
It might not be accidental that under the patronage of the current conservative-nationalist Polish president Andrzej Duda, and with considerable state funding, including obligatory stamps by the Polish postal services, “100 lat awangardy w Polsce” (100 years avant-garde in Poland) celebrated “the Polish avant-garde” as a national movement in 2017, with the launch of the journal Formiści and the start of the group Formiści Polscy as a decisive nationalist formation that allows the share of Polish artists in the historical and neo-avant-garde to become part of conservative-nationalist cultural policies. Last year, the Bauhaus centenary served as a template for German internal as well as foreign cultural politics with a formidable budget of 17 million euro as in Poland under the patronage of the head of state, Bundespräsident Frank-Walter Steinmeier. So one may ask here as well: does the (cultural-)political instrumentalisation provide an adequate understanding of artistic movements and institutions labelled ‘avant-garde’?

1.3 Absorption and Resistance
A fundamental issue here is the appropriation of the heritage of the ‘avant-garde’, ‘avant-garde’ practices and techniques, and their (either still or once) revolutionary or—at least—rebellious aura in other social, political, and institutional settings that might dissolve and annihilate the antagonistic character and subversive impact the ‘avant-garde(s)’ once had (and possibly still have). When recently a new generation of hypersonic missiles was announced by the Russian military, which were officially baptised “Авангард” (Awangard), the obvious reference was not to Vladimir Mayakovsky, Kazimir Malevich, or Mikhail Matyushin, but to the old military notion ‘avant-garde’. Still, it might give the general understanding of ‘avant-garde’ a new twist, somehow similar to the way in which Dior appropriated the notion ‘avant-garde’ in the presentation of its new Haute Couture collection a few months earlier in the summer of 2018. This new fashion collection was shown under the title “Avant-garde” with a quote from Alison Bancroft’s book Fashion and Psychoanalysis as its motto: “Curiously, perhaps, it is the inherent disorderliness of desire and subjectivity that makes both Lacanian psychoanalysis and the avant-garde so remarkably radical, and renders them both ideal for an negotiation of the bizarre creations of couture.”

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1 Cf. the Bauhaus centenary webpages: “100 Jahre Bauhaus – Das Gründungsjubiläum einer historischen Institution zum Gegenstand gegenwärtiger Kulturpolitik. Rund 17 Millionen Euro fließen in globale Ausstellungsprojekte und Veranstaltungen in ganz Deutschland”, at: https://www.bauhaus100.de/magazin/verstehe-das-bauhaus/ [consulted 31.01.2019].

Striking here is the absorption of former objectives of the aesthetic avant-garde and their political purport by a society of spectacle that strives for profit maximisation, both perverting and reducing the former artistic ‘avant-garde’ ambitions to a burlesque of bizarre fashion. Here, the question is not just: “What is an avant-garde?” (the leading question of a special issue of the journal *New Literary History*, published briefly after the Poznań round table in Fall 20103), but also: what could be an artistic avant-garde today? Which place and what role remain for an artistic avant-garde in a cultural field and society dominated by spectacle aiming at profit maximisation? And, if resistance to hegemonic cultural practices is still possible in the footsteps of the avant-garde(s) of the past century, does such a subversion still have a chance of success (if indeed resistance to the actual capital-dominated artistic and literary field is still existent)?

1.4 Asbestos, Human Happiness and Other Questions

In a way, yet from another perspective, Frank-Walter Steinmeier addressed the same questions in his speech at the opening ceremony of the Bauhaus centenary in the Berlin Academy of Arts and Sciences in January 2019: “We ask [...] in this year of birth: what was? And self-evidently we ask as well: what remains?”4 These questions were also asked at the round table in Poznań in 2010—they are questions to be asked again and again, not just in a hagiographic way, not just at moments of consecrating celebration, but also to be used critically, maybe in the sense of Walter Benjamin in his famous line (also referred to by Peter Bürger in the conversation): “Articulating the past historically does not mean recognising it ‘the way it really was’. It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger”5—in a period marked by recurrent strain caused by

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successive moments of danger, not just in the form of a further institutionalisation of art that might be labelled ‘avant-garde’.

In this respect, the following conversation can also give food for thought on the future of avant-garde studies, not only by the questions addressed, but also by the salient absence of some obvious issues. For example: the question of to what extent aesthetic ‘avant-garde(s)’ should be seen as a specifically twentieth-century phenomenon, or rather as a phenomenon to be observed already earlier, in the mid- or late-nineteenth century, as suggested again recently by Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel; the actual correlation between different ‘avant-garde’ artists and movements with nationalism and/or inter- and transnationalism (as discussed by Thomas Hunkeler in his excellent monograph on nationalism in the Parisian avant-garde published two years ago); the presence and practices of ‘avant-garde’ artists and movements in other parts of the world besides the ‘usual suspects’ in Europe and the United States who still dominate avant-garde discourse and historiography; the relation of these movements and artistic practices in Europe and beyond with other cultural practices from all corners of the world; the reproduction of patriarchal structures in the avant-garde; the role of women in the avant-garde and other gender issues; or ecological-environmental dimensions (what about the futurists’ love for cars and airplanes? What about asbestos as a favourite building material of many architects of the Bauhaus and so-called Neues Bauen?). All these issues and several more still remain on the table, not least as part of a more comprehensive and profound reflection of Steinmeier’s “what remains?” The question is: in which way did the artistic practices of the avant-garde(s) of the past century (or centuries) contribute not only to artistic practices as we have them now (art for art’s sake?), but also to change culture and society on a wider scale? And, if so, did they make the world more pleasant and liveable, not to speak of human happiness?

2 Editorial Note

A publication of the following discussion was not originally intended, mainly to allow for a free-flowing exchange of ideas and views unrestricted from the worries that single wordings might not be flawless, in particular since none of the

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participants was a native speaker of the agreed lingua franca, English. Indeed, the English spoken was marked by idiosyncrasies common to Dutch, German, Hungarian, Icelandic, and Polish speakers of English as a foreign language, but did what a lingua franca should do: allowing a vivid intellectual exchange of ideas and perspectives.

As it turned out at the end of the round table, someone from the audience did make a recording, covering most of the discussion (starting after the introductory words by Agata Jakubowska, the coordinator of the conference, and ending at the point when the panel discussion was concluded, after which a few questions from the audience followed). The recording was used for a first transcript made by Nathalie Crombée, secretary of the Department of Romance Studies of the University of Osnabrück.

Together with some existing notes, the recording and the transcript served as a basis for the following account of the discussion. To allow for a readable text and avoid unnecessary confusion, small corrections were made to erase minor oddities and sometimes misleading errors in the English wordings, notably due to false friends.

Whereas Peter Bürger’s contributions to the round table could be transcribed almost completely without any major unintelligible gaps from the recording (since the used mp3 device was situated in front of him), the recording of the contributions of the other participants, in particular those sitting further away from the recording device, contained some words and sentences which were not understandable. They were added later by each of them; for Peter Bürger, we are very grateful indeed that his life-long companion Christa checked his wordings to eliminate minor errors.

For a better understanding and readability of the text, broken sentences, as common in spoken language, were completed, and repetitions of words reduced. Brief practical remarks by the moderator as well as interruptions without content were deleted. Moments of laughter and applause are not mentioned either.

In the contributions, first names have been added to author and artist names when mentioned for the first time as far as they were missing. Footnotes have been added by the editors when quotes and references to publications were made. In as far as this edition had the intention to create a readable text that might not meet all standards of a critical text edition, the original recording can be consulted in the Deutsches Literaturarchiv in Marbach am Neckar, where a copy of the mp3 file is kept. Last but not least, we would like to express our gratitude to Brill’s managing editor Rebecca Evans for her corrections of the text. (WA/HvdB)
3 Dramatis Personae

Wolfgang Asholt (*1944), then Professor of Romance Literature at the University of Osnabrück, now Honorary Professor at the Department of Romance Literatures and Linguistics of the Humboldt University in Berlin.


Circulated essay in the preparatory exchange of texts before the round table: Wolfgang Asholt, “Projekt Avantgarde und avantgardistische Selbstkritik”. In Wolfgang Asholt/Walter Fähnders (eds), Der Blick vom Wolkenkratzer. Avantgarde—Avantgardkritik—Avantgardeforschung. (Amsterdam/Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), 97–120.

Peter Bürger (1936–2017), then emeritus Professor of Romance Literature at the University of Bremen.


Éva Forgács (*1947), Adjunct Professor of Art History at the ArtCenter College of Design, Pasadena/California.


Benedikt Hjartarson (*1972), then Lecturer in Comparative Literature, now Professor in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Iceland, Reykjavík.


Piotr Piotrowski (1952–2015), then Professor of Art History in the Institute of Art History at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and Director of the National Gallery in Warsaw.

Round Table Discussion

Hubert van den Berg (*1963), then Adiunkt in Literary Studies in the Department of Dutch and South-African Studies of the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, now Professor in Literary Studies in the Department of Dutch Studies of the Palacký University in Olomouc.


4 Round Table

Hubert van den Berg: Some issues to start with. To begin, since in recent years the apparent ‘death’, ‘outdatedness’, and ‘disappearance’ of ‘the avant-garde’ has been claimed frequently, and since the phenomena characterised as ‘avant-garde’ in the past seem to be relabelled to a growing extent by the wider notion ‘modernism’, some reflection on the contemporary status and future of both the term and concept ‘avant-garde’ as well as of the historical and/or contemporary phenomena in the cultural field that might be labelled as ‘avant-garde’, a first basic question comes up: does it still make sense to distinguish an ‘avant-garde’—historical or contemporary—at the start of the second decade of the twenty-first century, a century after the emergence of movements like cubism, futurism, and expressionism, as ‘avant-garde’ agencies?
Assuming it still makes sense, indeed, the category ‘avant-garde’ should have some surplus value, in particular to articulate insights offered by using the distinction avant-garde for certain phenomena (and not for certain other phenomena). If not, one could drop the notion. Thus, the previous question might also be rephrased as: What does the category ‘avant-garde’ bring us today? What can it bring us (still)? Which insights does it facilitate as distinction (or is the notion ‘avant-garde’ rather an outmoded category of the past)?

A sub-question here, closely related to the one just posed: ‘avant-garde’ is often used with the epithet ‘European’. If we talk about a ‘European avant-garde’ the implication seems to be that this ‘avant-garde’ was or is throughout Europe (or even beyond) a single phenomenon, marked by basic features that can be found everywhere in Europe. This figure of speech attributes, in other words, a universal character to ‘(the) avant-garde’, at least in a European context. Yet, one may ask here: does ‘(the) avant-garde’ indeed have a universal character? Is there a set of specific yet universal traits that can be distinguished for ‘(the) avant-garde’ as a whole, put differently: for ‘(the) avant-garde’, as such? To what extent is ‘avant-garde’ a homogenous phenomenon throughout Central, Eastern, Western, Northern, Southern Europe (or even beyond)? Or do we have to assume that—already geographically spoken—two or more avant-gardes should be distinguished on the basis of (which?) historical and/or contemporary contextual and/or generic differences of cultural, political, social, and/or economical provenance?

Some heterogeneity is self-evidently given, since ‘avant-garde(s)’ serves as an umbrella term of a diversity of movements, currents, groups. Here, another sub-question comes up: Since avant-garde concepts, as they circulate in criticism today, are basically modelled on a corpus of phenomena situated in ‘the West’ in Cold-War terms (Western Europe and the United States; pars pro toto in Paris before the Second World War and after 1945 in New York as well), one may ask: can these Western-based concept(s) serve as the basic or essential measure of all European avant-garde things? And what about ‘avant-garde’ in other parts of the world? Put differently: does a universal category ‘avant-garde’ have a surplus value in the understanding of the phenomena which it pretends to cover? Does it bring relevant insights or does it rather obscure a pluriformity which cannot be covered properly by a singular, universal, homogeneous ‘avant-garde’ concept, notion, or category?

Self-evidently, this question might be posed on a different level as well, given apparent differences between the arts—literature, visual art, architecture, music, theatre, etc. Yet, more importantly, given the framework of this round table and the biographical background of the participants, a major
aspect here is the East-West division of Europe in the period of the Cold War, which ended in 1989, but left its traces in several respects—culturally, politically and economically—until today. And in this divided setting, the role attributed to the so-called ‘neo-avant-garde’ in this period.

Here, an obvious question is: does it make sense to address, describe, and reflect on ‘historical’ as well as ‘neo-avant-garde’ developments in Central and Eastern Europe on the basis of reflections, interpretations and theoretical concepts, categories, and gridding that (might) offer insights in Western Europe and the United States (where they were coined)?

When the Western ‘neo-avant-garde’ was, or is, assumedly marked by being integrated in and operating within the institution of art, without an attempt to overcome or discard this institutional binding before the background of an assumed failure of the historical avant-garde to overcome these boundaries, turning the avant-garde pretensions of this neo-avant-garde in a dubious light (as Peter Bürger has suggested time after time), one might ask: Do we find the same ‘neo-avant-garde’ in Central and Eastern Europe? Or did the ‘neo-avant-garde’ in the Eastern hemisphere, for example, in Samizdat publications and cultural underground movements that manifested themselves in the so-called socialist countries, rather have an anti-institutional character compatible to the ‘historical avant-garde’ movements in terms of Bürger? To make the picture more complex: this is not just different from ‘neo-avant-garde’ in the Western hemisphere during the Cold War, but also different from the Russian avant-garde that joined the post-1917 new bolshevist ruling elite in an institutionalised way.

Assuming hypothetically that two ‘neo-avant-gardes’, a Western- and a Central/Eastern-European one, can be distinguished, some more questions are apparent: Which potential of insights offers the Central/Eastern-European ‘neo-avant-garde’ regarding its Western counterpart? Are those ‘neo-avant-garde’ artists, who operated in the West in the institution of art like the Nouveaux Réalistes, Pop Art, and so-called minimalism, maybe not to be regarded as the essential ‘neo-avant-garde’? But is this ‘neo-avant-garde’—as in the Eastern hemisphere—in the West rather to found in configurations of sub- and counter-cultural, underground initiatives? In other words, could the situation in Central and Eastern Europe be used as a basis for defining and situating the ‘(neo-)avant-garde’ in general after 1945? And what happened after 1989? Did the Central-/Eastern-European ‘neo-avant-garde’ assume more similarity with the Western ‘neo-avant-garde’ after 1989, when capitalism also absorbed the cultural field in Central and Eastern Europe? Which connections already existed before 1989, and which grew since then? These questions might be asked, of course, not just regarding ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ developments that
might be labelled ‘(neo-)avant-garde’, but also Northern or Western developments versus Southern, not just in a European, but also in a global setting.

**Peter Bürger:** In an article by Piotr Piotrowski, I found an important remark, which I would like to take as a motto here: “We have to reveal the speaking subject.” This remark articulates exactly what I intend to do: to make the speaker/theoretician distinguishable. Hubert asked: “What does the category ‘avant-garde’ bring us today?” I will take up both notions, ‘avant-garde’ and ‘avant-garde today’, yet question Hubert’s question, as we know it from Heidegger.

As for ‘today’—do we mean the same when we say ‘today’? Can we attribute to this notion a somehow fixed meaning? When I speak here, I do so as a West-German intellectual from the generation of the *Kriegsundführerkinder,* the kids of the war and the Führer. And that is self-evidently a limited perspective, even if one is aware of this limitation and reflects upon it.

Now, I would like to take a remark by John Berger in a recent interview published in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* as a starting point. In the interview, Berger says: “Today, the past is something that we left behind us. The present does not contain the past any longer. It’s only a moment snapping at the future.” And Berger continues, “this future is for the stock-broker the next afternoon, for the politician the next election day.” And one may add, although I feel some inner

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8 In its original phrasing and context: “A horizontal art history should begin with the deconstruction of vertical art history, that is, the history of Western art. A critical analysis should reveal the speaking subject: who speaks, on whose behalf, and for whom? This is not to cancel Western art history, but to call this type of narrative by its proper name, precisely as a “Western” narrative.” In: Piotr Piotrowski: Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde. In Sascha Bru et al. (eds); *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent.* Berlin: De Gruyter 2009: 49–58, here: 54.


resistance here: and for us the next avant-garde conference. This implies, however, that ‘avant-garde today’ has no future, though the avant-garde had a vision of the future. We can criticise this vision, but there was a vision. What can be concluded here? Our ‘today’ is marked by the disappearance of a comprehension of the past as something that does concern us. And here our task should consist in reconquering such an understanding. This mission should be contained in our conception of ‘today’.

This brings me to the notion ‘avant-garde’. Already in 1974, in the Theory of the Avant-Garde, I made a distinction between—in the first place—avant-garde as historical movement, through which the social subsystem art entered the stage of self-criticism (i.e. as an attack on the autonomous status of art in bourgeois society), and—in the second place—as an unspecified fashionable notion.

When, for example, Éva Forgács labels Georg Lukács as an ‘avant-gardist’, her understanding of ‘avant-garde’ has nothing to do with the conception of avant-garde developed in the Theory of the Avant-Garde. It is only related

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to the avant-garde notion of the Saint-Simonists.\textsuperscript{13} Forgács’s qualification of Lukács makes sense, since ‘avant-garde’ in Saint-Simonism appears as a kind of vanguard of a new philosophy and a new society. It is well known that Lukács took a resolutely dismissive stand against the avant-garde movements of the 1920s and 1930s.

It might be sensible to use the term ‘avant-garde’ in plural, as long as it does not refer—as happens so often in everyday criticism in newspapers and weeklies—to the last and most radical movement of modernity at the time.

In this circle, I don’t need to repeat the theses of the \textit{Theory of the Avant-Garde}. They are familiar to everyone here. I only would like to recall one motive, the aim of the avant-garde, using the Hegelian term \textit{Aufhebung}: the sublation of the separation of art and life.

Probably, you will argue, as Benedikt did in the paper he sent us,\textsuperscript{14} that we need to get past the discussions we had for thirty years and should open up a new perspective, new ways to address the problem of the avant-garde. Here, I think, however: be careful! We should take John Berger’s critique seriously. To qualify something as historical should not imply in my view that it’s over and done with. \textit{Es ist historisch, heißt für mich nicht: Es ist erledigt}.\textsuperscript{15} It’s not that simple to get rid of the past. To argue this way seems to me naive and perilous.

Indeed, I would like to plead here to maintain the avant-garde notion of the \textit{Theory of the Avant-Garde}. I would even vigorously advocate the view that we \textit{have} to maintain it, not despite, but \textit{given} its historicity. To explain to you

\begin{footnotes}
\item[14] Benedikt Hjartarson: At historisere den historiske avantgarde. In: Tania Ørum, Charlotte Engberg and Marianne Ping Huang (eds): \textit{En tradition af opbrud. Avantgardernes tradition og politik}. Hellerup: Spring, 2005: 44–61. Bürger refers here to the original English version of the text, “Historicizing the Historical Avant-Garde”, circulated as manuscript, in particular the passage: “[T]he central function which social reality and praxis occupies in Bürger’s work can only be articulated within the aesthetic paradigm of the neo-avant-garde which his theory rejects. His theory of the epignality of the neo-avant-garde is based on the projection of its aesthetic praxis into the past, where it is used as a model to define the project of the historical avant-garde. In other words: the reason why Bürger sees in the aesthetic practices of the neo-avant-garde mere repetition, is that he defines the neo-avant-garde as the repetition of itself. Reconstructed in its historical context, Bürger’s theory is still able to give a significant insight into the project of the neo-avant-garde. As a theoretical model meant to describe the project of the historical avant-garde it has become obsolete. At the beginning of a new century, Bürger’s theory finally seems to have shared the fate that itself awarded to the European avant-garde movements in the early 20th century: It has become historical.” For the whole text in English, cf. https://hi.academia.edu/BenediktHjartarson/Analytics/activity/documents.
\item[15] In translation: “‘It’s historical’ does not mean that it is over and done with.”
\end{footnotes}
why, I would like to outline the specific sociopolitical context in which the notion emerged.

The avant-garde concept developed in the *Theory of the Avant-Garde* could only be formulated in the ‘historical moment’ of May ’68 when surrealist slogans appeared on the walls of Paris. This was the precondition of my work. In fact, an apparent correspondence was obvious between the objectives and ambitions of the students—in May ’68 and in the following years—and the aspirations of the historical avant-gardes. Walter Benjamin’s pathos, when he speaks of redemption of the past, was alien to me. However, his conception of history was close to me, in particular, in his remark probably well known to you as well: ‘Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was’. It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.’\(^{16}\) And we made the experience that this opportunity can be missed.

In West Germany in the first decades after the Second World War, the avant-gardes were inexistent, both in public perception and in academic studies. This can be explained, obviously, as consequence of the war situation and the impact of national-socialist and cultural politics. So, although the first *documenta* of 1955,\(^{17}\) the large exposition of modern art in the Federal Republic, showed actually works by Hans Arp, Umberto Boccioni, and Max Ernst, movements like futurism, dadaism and surrealism, to which these works belonged, were not just absent in conversations in those days, they were simply non-existent—apart maybe from some biographical footnotes. There wasn't any concept of ‘avant-garde’.

If we now try to put together the two notions ‘today’ and ‘avant-garde’, we have to admit that we live in an epoch miles away from the historical avant-gardes, not only from a temporal point of view, but also in total contrast to the movement of ’68. This implies obviously that the *Augenblick der Erkennbarkeit* (moment of recognisability)\(^{18}\) has passed irrevocably. Hence, the question should be: how do we want to acknowledge this insight?


\(^{17}\) The exhibition *documenta. kunst des XX. jahrhunderts. malerei plastik architektur von 1905–1955* took place in Kassel from 17 July until 18 September 1955, curated by Arnold Bode and Werner Haftmann.

Piotr Piotrowski: I definitely agree with Peter Bürger, and would like to recollect that his book *Theory of the Avant-Garde* was highly important here in Poznań in the Art History Department, where Andrzej Turowski was teaching for years. For him both the book and the rebellion of May ’68 were crucial. The book was immediately recognised here not only as a historical study, but also, if not first of all, as part of this particular political process of 1968. This may indicate that we entered both the scholarly debate of the historical avant-garde and the ongoing contemporary political debate of 1968 simultaneously. It was, hence, obvious for us that the avant-garde should be seen at the same time as part of both historical and contemporary processes. In one word: the theory and the study of the avant-garde should be seen in the context of the historical processes of the period when these studies were done—namely in and after the 1960s.

This should be the point of departure of a general discussion on the avant-garde right now. And if we ask whether the avant-garde is still an important phenomenon, I would say: yes, not only because of its historical significance, but also because of the historical significance of the avant-garde studies developing along the lines of the broader critical discussion around 1968, which definitely changed a lot in culture, politics, ideology, etc. Thus, my point is that it is this double heritage of the avant-garde which is crucial for us today. Today, however, the contemporary situation is, of course, not defined by 1968, but 1989 and after. So, the question would be: what can we learn from this double heritage of 1989?

I am sure that some questions, posed both by the avant-garde itself as well as by avant-garde scholars from 1968 onwards, being here in this room, notably Peter Bürger and Andrzej Turowski, are still very important if not crucial...
today. These are questions concerning political emancipation, social utopia, democracy, etc. Of course, we are facing these questions now on a global scale—much broader than before.

For a better understanding, let me briefly develop what I mean here. I would say that the post-1989 world is basically global. This means that the question of democracy and emancipation should be discussed in much a broader context than forty or fifty years ago. The post-1989, post-Cold-War world is also a sort of crisis of the binary way of thinking. The Cold-War intellectual structure urged us to think in this binary way of thinking. That was: the East and the West, communism and capitalism, totalitarianism and democracy, women and men. Now this way of thinking is over. We are confronted with a much more complicated situation due to a completely different perspective—global indeed.

Thus, the most important challenge we are facing right now in the framework of avant-garde studies is the question: how can we re-read the avant-garde in the new, post-1989 world? I guess that one of the answers to this question comes from Krzysztof Wodiczko who was already mentioned here by Andrzej Turowski in his plenary opening speech. Wodiczko is a well-known artist who is dealing with the tradition of the avant-garde in terms of both its social and political agenda. He is also an intellectual, who tries to refocus this tradition on contemporary, global problems. Illustrative is an essay he wrote recently, published here in Poznań in our journal *Artium Quaestiones* (originally written and also available in English), on New York City as city of refuge, and a contribution to the discussion on the 9/11 monument in New York. The notion of the city of refuge was taken from the Bible, of course. Wodiczko says that we have to face the new world with an avant-garde approach for new emancipation on a global scale: a new utopia. Simultaneously, Wodiczko argues that criticism—as typical in a post-modern approach—is not sufficient right now in order to change the world. We have to take responsibility for the world. And we need something more, namely the utopia of emancipation. And this is exactly the heritage of the avant-garde.

Of course, taking responsibility right now cannot follow the same pattern as the avant-garde did, particularly the Russian avant-garde, creating a totalitarian

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21 Published as: Andrzej Turowski: “... éblouissement ...”. In: *Teksty Drugie. Teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja* 6 (132) 2011: 75–89.

idea of the world. But both the avant-garde tradition as well as studies focused
on this tradition around 1968 and after, could help us to do this now, in the post-
1989 world, or maybe meanwhile in the post-9/11 world. This is the point that I
would like to stress, and this is my answer to Hubert’s question posed to us at
the beginning of this panel.

Éva Forgács: I would like to raise a few fundamental issues regarding our
present state of knowledge and that of the avant-garde. In the first place, one
of the things that probably needs to be remembered is the origin of the notion
‘avant-garde’, as it was conceived by Count Henri de Saint-Simon, a utopian
socialist. He did not imagine the avant-garde art as a critical kind of art in politi-
cal opposition, but imagined it as the official art of a coming socialist world. He
realised that when a government would assume power in his utopian socialist
state, there would be a time lag between assuming political power and deliver-
ing on the promises made. And what he explicitly assigned the avant-garde to
do was to fill up this time lag, this gap, by assuring the population: yes, you are
going to be happy, everything is going to be all right, there will be social justice,
equality, and wellbeing. I just want to stress here, that the power issue is entan-
gled in the DNA of the avant-garde. This is why it should never be a surprise
to see certain things happen time and again in the historical avant-garde. The
avant-garde, full of good intentions, meant to become mainstream and dictate.

On the other hand, when we talk later about the neo-avant-garde, I think we
will understand a bit, why those new trends differed ostentatiously both from
the previous avant-garde and establishment art, as they rejected the whole sys-
tem and—at the same time—bypassed it. In the 1970s and 1980s, mail art, for
example, demonstrated that alternative route saying: you can’t put your finger
on it, but we are doing it, we are absolutely bypassing the system and we are
totally independent. Then, of course, the system got over it, because other ini-
tiatives like performance art or conceptual art started to be absorbed by the
market, the galleries and the entire system.

The second issue, I would like to stress, is that we should revise our view
of the avant-gardes and should notice and understand, how politically under-
informed the historical avant-garde of the 1920s was, when they thought they
were going international and creating a whole new international culture. They
had no idea of the actual reality of European history in the interwar years, when
nations were at least as nationalist as they had been when they had been led
right into World War I. And it was exactly the time of World War I when the
constructivists and other groups came up with the idea of internationalism.

The third issue, I think, we have to reckon with, is how thin-spread the avant-
garde groups actually were. When we are talking about the avant-garde as the
essential history of modernist art, we should keep in mind that they were and—for many people—simply invisible. As Wolfgang Asholt said in his essay, putting the avant-garde in the centre of discourse means the death of it: it was, in point of fact, not in the centre. We have to see that the avant-garde created a very thin network over mainstream establishment art, but mainstream establishment art remained in place and killed the avant-garde. So, the so-called death or failure of the avant-garde is rather the result of this weakness: the very small number of involved artists.

My last point is whether we somehow have to choose between the various narratives we have, or, rather, should try to synthesise them. We have a philosophical narrative, we have a psychoanalytical narrative, a poststructuralist narrative, an aesthetic narrative, and each is relevant in its own way, of course, but they run parallel and independently from one another. There is French theory, there is American theory, and there is the German discourse. They are parallel discourses, but they have not yet been synthesised. I think this is what will need to be done—critically—in the future.

Wolfgang Asholt: Maybe some remarks to what has been said, and what I appreciated very much. Next to your approaches to deconstruct avant-garde history and theory, I could add my consideration regarding the apparent death of the avant-garde, that some afterlife might exist after this death, as it were as a ghost of the avant-garde that is still present today and might be more stimulating than the assumption of a still-given topicality of the avant-garde today. I will come back here to the questions Hubert posed. Does it still make sense to distinguish an avant-garde, in particular from modernism, different from the practice in the setting of the EAM conferences that tends rather to fuse and blend instead of differentiate between the two and discern the contrasting dimensions of the underlying concepts? And we have heard already much about it. But we may ask: do we still need an avant-garde? That’s another thing.

A bit more modest, I would like to make some remarks, whether it still makes sense to speak about ‘avant-garde(s)’ today. I quite agree with Peter Bürger in what he said in the beginning about modernism. And I would say that in a time when histories of avant-garde are written, as they are written today, we can only admit that there is an apparent necessity for an avant-garde. It is just a negative proof, but it is a proof. And to distinguish here between modernism and avant-garde, I think the not very new idea of the fundamental role and

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importance of the issue of autonomy is decisive. We should be aware that a basic divide between the two conceptions ‘modernism’ and ‘avant-garde(s)’—or at least between conceptions of ‘modernism’, in which aesthetic autonomy is essential, and conceptions of ‘avant-garde(s)’, which tried to overcome this aesthetic concept that characterised both nineteenth- and twentieth-century ‘modernism’ to a considerable extent. When we discuss the question of the project of the avant-garde until today, we should keep this fundamental difference in mind.

For me, the project of the avant-garde would still be today, at least for some of the avant-gardes, the ambition to reconduct art into life—or, if you don’t want a Bürgerian expression, I could formulate it in terms of Niklas Luhmann: I would say, then, that the avant-garde introduced non-art into art.24 And we have to see now how this aim was pursued and how this introduction of life into art, as Peter Bürger called it, can be pursued. Initially, that meant a new constellation, and this constellation didn’t really change for nearly century.

To return now to avant-garde criticism and avant-garde theory, I think it would make sense to resume, in some way, the study of manifestoes and ‘manifestantism’, in which we were engaged almost twenty years ago.25 As we observed then, a closer look at the avant-garde practice of publishing manifestoes permits a more adequate understanding of the historical avant-garde and gives also an important impulse to theoretical reflection on the avant-garde. When we will speak a little bit later about the neo-avant-garde, it would make sense to have a look at the role of manifestoes for the neo-avant-garde and we might observe a profound difference between the self-perception of the avant-gardes we call historical and the self-perception of avant-gardes that should be labelled neo-avant-garde. And, of course, one might ask, how it is today, and which artists and what art would qualify as ‘avant-garde’ today.


Benedikt Hjartarson: I would like to start by taking up a point that Peter Bürger made about his theory and what I wrote about it. I emphasised in my essay “Historicizing the Historical Avant-Garde”, and would like to stress again here, the distinction Bürger was making actually. When I wrote about the situation of avant-garde studies and the need to move ahead, that we have been discussing ‘avant-garde’ within the same theoretical framework for thirty years and it might be time to move ahead, it was not in the sense that this theory was erledigt, as you would say in German—that it was over and done, but precisely because it had become historical.

That was the polemical position I took in my essay, arguing that Bürger’s Theory of the Avant-Garde had actually shared the fate that he ascribed to the historical avant-garde: it had become historical. This doesn’t mean that it’s not relevant anymore. But it means in a certain way—distancing ourselves from the theory and also working in a novel and productive way, looking at that theory as part of a theoretical debate about the avant-garde that belongs to a specific historical and theoretical context—to achieve a clearer understanding of the avant-garde and its theoretical framing. Such a critical reappraisal of both theories on the avant-garde and avant-garde practices in the period after World War II, in the 1960s and 1970s, may allow us a clearer understanding of the avant-garde and what the avant-garde was about.

Maybe the most important aspect in this context is the historical view on the avant-garde in the post-war period, in particular in the 1960s and 1970s (in a way as a legacy of the post-war era), with its substantial focus on the link between art and politics. Crucial here, I think, are other aspects of the avant-garde that simply cannot be articulated or reflected from this kind of perspective. I’m thinking in this context about the legacy of, for example, vitalism, occultism, and so forth in the early twentieth century. The aesthetics of the avant-garde was genuinely marked by difference and we need to discuss it and look at it in its historical alterity.

Important here, I think, is to understand that when the historical avant-garde is talking about some idea of revolution or spiritual revolution, it was not in terms of politics on the one hand, vitalism or spiritual trends on the other hand; these were interconnected in the project of the avant-garde. This is a highly significant dimension when we are talking about the idea of bringing together art and life. In particular the notion of life in the context of the histor-

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ical avant-garde was highly complex. Here, I think, historicizing the historical avant-garde and reassessing its theoretical assessment, as it was done in the 1960s and 1970s, is a way to open up our perspective on the avant-garde. And, I think, this may also be relevant for reconceptualizing the neo-avant-garde as well as the theoretical debate about the avant-garde, because, in the end, we are dealing with a paradox which we all are familiar with: when we talk about the avant-garde, we are talking about a tradition.

Now, does it still make sense to talk about the avant-garde in our current times? I would say that it only makes sense if we think of it in terms of a tradition—in terms of a certain dialogue with the historical avant-garde movements. This dialogue is always linked to those movements in the early twentieth century. I believe that it is simply a premise for talking about contemporary art or artistic practices in the post-war period in terms of an avant-garde in a useful way.

What does this dialogue include? It includes mainly a notion of difference. When we talk about the avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde, the history of the avant-garde, we need to try to step out of a historical narrative formulated in terms of a continuity or a linear progress, also in terms of a process of decline. It’s about articulating the difference. As to the project of the avant-garde, or the avant-garde as a project, I am not sure whether it is really possible to talk of a project of the avant-garde that would include the project of the historical avant-garde, as well as the avant-garde in the post-war period. There are certain aspects that are common, but it is a very different situation; we are dealing with aesthetic programs and projects that are articulated in very different social, cultural, and epistemological settings. These aspects need to be reflected.

If we come again to the issue of the end of the avant-garde or the death of the avant-garde, we are all familiar with this discussion and this debate. First of all, it should be noted that this is not a recent debate. Claims about the end of the avant-garde and the death of the avant-garde have accompanied the avant-garde since its emergence. It is always imperative to ask: what are the interests at stake? And who is claiming the death of the avant-garde and to what purpose? Important here is the conception of the avant-garde as a tradition. In our contemporary cultural situation, claims about the end or the death of the avant-garde are often a product of some critical attitude towards the avant-garde that sees the avant-garde just as a tradition from a bygone period, as a legacy that we need to factor out as a phenomenon from some past—neither necessary nor relevant in the contemporary period. This is one part of the criticism proclaiming the end or death of the avant-garde.

Simultaneously, one should observe that such statements proclaiming the end of the avant-garde are part of a recurrent discursive strategy as it comes to
the avant-garde, also among scholars: the end of a certain conception of avant-garde is declared just in order to step oneself into the role of avant-garde and continue its legacy. I think this is a substantial aspect of what is going on. Yet, in the end, I think the legacy of the avant-garde is part of our revolutionary culture, a European revolutionary culture, worthy and necessary to keep and foster, fulfilling an important function in our critique of society and culture, be it in contemporary terms or in historical terms. Here, I think talking about contemporary art in terms of the avant-garde will always lead to a precarious situation, since somehow the avant-garde is always something of a past.

**Peter Bürger**: I have noted down so many questions, that it’s impossible to answer to them all. But let me take up at least some points.

A remark made by Éva that we should clearly keep in mind, how small and how marginal avant-garde groups have been in reality, is very important. It’s true indeed, and holds true as well, for example, in the case of German Romanticism. The Jena group around Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, and Caroline Schlegel-Schelling kept together for hardly a year. Yet, for us it’s the Romantic movement.

Friedrich Schlegel understood his own age as an epoch of prose. His famous definition of Romantic poetry as “progressive universal poetry” implied that he saw this poetry as a project oriented toward the future. This explains also the surrealists’ fascination with Romanticism. Between the contemporary notion of Romanticism and its afterlife exists an almost irreconcilable contrast. We have to be aware of that. Words like ‘romantic’ or ‘romanticism’ are applied today to everything possible in a mostly thoughtless way, but they can also be filled anew and stimulate a new creative approach of modernity.

Several times, the question of the apparent death of avant-garde came up. I did speak myself of the failure of the avant-garde—in the way developed in the *Theory of the Avant-Garde*—and its “ambiguous heritage”, since in its afterlife this failure of the avant-garde assumed the guise of an overwhelming success. The sublation of art in a different praxis of life—as pursued by the avant-garde—did not occur. Its presence within the institution of art did become increasingly obvious. Marcel Duchamp’s urinal was a provocation. Nowadays,


it’s an object of sophisticated aesthetic interpretations by art theoreticians. Whenever we read in some art journal about an exhibition of Duchamp’s work, reviewers speak of subversion, the destruction of our Erwartungshorizont (expectation horizon), the artistic modifications of our perception of reality, etc. All this has entered into colloquial discourse on art. And this problem—the relationship of failure and success in the institution of art—was not yet visible when I wrote the Theory of the Avant-Garde and, hence, could not yet be discussed in the book.

Therefore, Benedikt, I liked your contribution very much. But I saw a kind of reversal in your thinking, a remarkable turn in your argumentation. You started with a historical critique, in which you come with another notion of history, different from mine. I refer to Walter Benjamin, as I pointed out. Your notion of history draws on the idea of a correspondence of epochs. Thus, you emphasise in the first place a distance from the avant-garde. Yet, in a second movement of thought, you do exactly the opposite. That should be acknowledged as well. We should not focus solely on either yes or no, on ‘it’s like this’ or completely different. Instead, we are often sliding from one position to another. However, we should be aware of this.

Éva Forgács: The very fact that we are still talking about the avant-garde indicates that we have made a choice. The dramatic history of the avant-garde seems to be our choice of cultural narrative. Clearly, we stick to that. And this means that we need a participatory model. We want intellectuals and artists to participate actively in political and daily life as well. To embed art into daily life is very problematic. Surely, you analysed this very much in detail. The Duchamp example demonstrated that not only art becomes part of everyday life, but actually everyday life can become art, when you put it on a white cube.

The only way out of this dilemma may be to refuse the whole system and declare the avant-garde to be history—over. But on the other hand, as a participatory model, it is indeed having an afterlife and we are contributing and inventing this afterlife as well. And it is quite likely that participatory art and art-like activities will happen on the internet too.

Wolfgang Asholt: I would like to stay for a moment with this success story of the avant-garde—you pointed at it in the first instance, Peter, and Éva did so again. Here, the question is, whether that should be all. So, it is clear that the institution has accepted the avant-garde, has integrated the avant-garde, has become avant-garde, with transgression, subversion, and so on and so on. But the question is, whether the omnipresence of the institution, both in the institution of economy and in the institution of the art, doesn’t show us that something
is absent. And that’s just what you mentioned, Éva—a sort of participation. And I would say in this context that conjunction of politics and aesthetics in the old project of the avant-garde—and here I don’t agree with Benedikt—is still necessary. It is still provocative and stimulating when we or when avant-garde artists would again combine aesthetics and politics, and it happens now and then—sometimes following old routines, sometimes, nowadays as well, in other forms, developing new procedures—precisely in the sense of ‘this’ project of the avant-garde.

**Piotr Piotrowski:** We all know that the question of the relationship between art and life is a historical issue from the 1920s, but today we all know as well that life is very often involved in contemporary art, understood as global art, in other words: art not only in Europe and North America, or Japan, but also—or perhaps in particular—in the so-called Global South: in Asia, Middle East, Africa, or South America.

The next question, closely related to the previous one, is the question of revolution, which is—of course—a political question. Do we need a revolution right now, as did the artists of the 1920s? In my opinion: yes, we need it. And if not a revolution in the literal sense of the word, we definitely need it as a sort of rebellion. The global world is organised and structured along economic lines. Capital is free and only to a limited extent controlled by the international community. In other words, politics doesn’t follow and check economy. We need, hence, some institutional and international mechanisms that can control global economy, in terms of human rights, trade unions, etc. We need something to protect the people from around the world against the international economic market. We need a sort of a global constitution, a global politeia. This is why we need rebellion, and that is what art can do.

**Éva Forgács:** I do agree in the sense that I think that World War II is the chapter that has been missing from most analyses concerning the relationship between the classical and neo-avant-garde. I don’t know what exactly you mean by art taking responsibility. But I do think that the neo-avant-garde is a generational issue. The generation that survived World War II, for example, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, reflected on World War II, notably in their 1947 *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Yet, in the art of the 1950s and 1960s, we still have to

analyse the responses to World War II and I think that is an important task we will have to take up and fulfil.

**Hubert van den Berg:** Since you addressed the neo-avant-garde, it might be a good time to switch to another subject which has already been addressed several times or hinted at: the question of the neo-avant-garde and especially on the question of the neo-avant-garde after 1945 in Europe divided by the Iron Curtain. If one looks at the neo-avant-garde and the discussion of the neo-avant-garde in the Western discourse, focusing on Western developments, one may ask: what was different in the Eastern hemisphere? Or, one may pose the question differently. In a way, Western art history has been the framework for discussing the neo-avant-garde and certain basic features distinguished in Western art in the period served as a model to describe ‘historical’ and ‘neo-avant-garde’ developments elsewhere, also in Eastern Europe.

Maybe one could re-orientate and reverse this common practice and, instead, take Eastern developments for the distinction of basic elements and look at Western developments from an Eastern perspective to come to a new perspective on the neo-avant-garde in European art history. For sure, the situation in the East, also for avant-garde artists, was quite different from the situation in the West, as far as the institutionalisation of ‘avant-garde’ art was concerned. That might be a second question. But maybe some of you want to say something about the ‘neo-avant-garde’ issue first.

**Peter Bürger:** Before we enter into a discussion on neo-avant-garde, we should recollect what we heard hitherto—that’s important. There were a few statements by Wolfgang and Piotr, in which they argued for a connection between aesthetics and politics according to the maxim: it’s not about revolution, but about rebellion. Of course, this is an important requisition, but we shouldn’t fail to see that political criticism has meanwhile become a matter of course in aesthetic discourses. Given this circumstance, it will be difficult to articulate and in particular to realise a resistant connection between aesthetics and criticism.

As for the neo-avant-garde now, already in the *Theory of the Avant-Garde* there is a critical, maybe even, polemical interpretation of neo-avant-garde positions. In these positions, I see the appropriation of devices and gestures of the historical avant-garde, which are utilised as *artistic means*, in other words *within* the institution. As such, they betray the utopian project of the avant-gardes.\(^\text{30}\) Here, I should quote once more the line from the *Theory of the

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\(^{30}\) Exemplified by the case of Daniel Buren, who appears as an explicit critic of the institution
Avant-Garde, formulated in the resolute jargon of the 1970s, that triggered an extraordinary vehement discussion: “The neo-avant-garde institutionalised the avant-garde as art and that negates genuine avant-garde intentions.” 31

You see, Benedikt, this jargon is also historical, since we would not talk in this way today anymore. But, and it is important to me to address this issue here once again, there is definitely another line of succession of avant-garde intentions. I think of Joseph Beuys or the Situationists—these are authentic avant-gardists in my sense of the term.

What concerns the neo-avant-garde here, however, are fierce attacks against the Theory of the Avant-Garde that came, in particular, from Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster in an art-theoretical debate. That was understandable to me. They were young in the 1970s and they were annoyed that their artists were dismantled. When I took a closer look at Buchloh 32 and at Hal Foster’s Return of the Real, 33 I could see that they had their problems with the neo-avant-garde as well and could not come themselves to an unambiguous assessment. Hal Foster—not just a clever, but, also, a very honest theoretician—had to admit that my critique was indeed justified in the case of many neo-avant-gardists like Robert Rauschenberg, the Nouveaux Réalistes, Arman, and others. Only minimalists like Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, and Marcel Broodthaers remained.

When I examined the latter more precisely, I discovered that minimalism indeed pursued a break with the European tradition, yet not a break with the institution of art. Frank Stella, who gave the cues for the minimalists, did declare in all seriousness: “Yeah, it’s art that we want.” 34 And Carl Andre, who claimed to terminate the history of sculpture with a performance that consisted only in turning an object from one side to another, was convinced that this was a highly advanced gesture—I don’t know really.

31 Peter Bürger: Theory of the Avant-Garde. Minnesota/Manchester: University of Minnesota/Manchester UP 1984, 58: “... the neo-avant-garde institutionalises the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardist [sic!] intentions.” In the German original: “Die Neoavantgarde institutionalisiert die Avantgarde als Kunst und negiert damit die genuin avantgardistischen Intentionen.” In: Peter Bürger: Theorie der Avantgarde. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1974: 80 [italics in the original text and translation].


Something similar can be observed in the work of François Dufrêne. He was a very ingenious man who wrote very ingenious things with the intention to play down the significance of the historical avant-garde: Marcel Duchamp and all that—forget it, it’s just nonsense. But there is a straight line from Paul Cézanne to Daniel Buren! Wow! You can take it or leave it. Buchloh distanced himself at least from this view at some point, but returned than again to Dufrêne’s opinions and became one of his major apologists.

In this discussion on the neo-avant-garde, my polemical perspective furthered a better insight and helped to recognise that this formation of imitators only used avant-garde slogans and protest gestures to position themselves institutionally. I would like to describe the Urszene (primal scene), on which Buren’s reputation as a neo-avant-gardist bases. But we have no time for that now.35

Éva Forgács: In one point I’m not sure that I agree. When you say that the neo-avant-garde “institutionalised the avant-garde”, I think this is not the case since the neo-avant-garde was an alternative concept. If you go back to the art scene immediately after World War II, one of the first things you see is the formation of CoBrA in 1948, a group of artists who wanted to restore both abstract art and the freedom that preceded totalitarianism. And then, gradually, as the economic situation in Europe became better and the art market became a very important factor—yes, they were institutionalised.

Yet, when a museum wanted to buy contemporary art, what could they buy? They could buy the avant-garde. And collectors, who wanted to buy contemporary art, again—that was all they could buy. So, I think that the avant-garde was institutionalised, yes, but not by the neo-avant-garde, but by the system, by the establishment, by the galleries, and the museums. And then came a counter-reaction by, yes, the Situationists and by many other groups like CoBrA and all the other alternative art tendencies that wanted to do everything in their power to be unmarketable: to withstand absorption by the system, not to be purchased and sold. So, I think that somehow the neo-avant-garde took again the same stand as the historical avant-garde: not to be part of the institution. Of course they became part of it, but at a later stage. So, that did happen, but, not least to the credit of the neo-avant-garde, they really didn’t want to.

Piotr Piotrowski: Regarding the question of the neo-avant-garde, it should be noted that it is, of course, by and large an American concept. Here in Eastern

Europe, we did not use the notion ‘neo-avant-garde’ in the 1960s and 1970s. In that period, we were still talking just about ‘avant-garde’. And, for example, in the former Soviet Union another concept was used: ‘second avant-garde’ that meant something like the next wave of the same sort of art, namely avant-garde art. You have to keep in mind that the different historical contexts produced a different vocabulary and different approaches to contemporary art as well as to the historical avant-garde that were seen from perspectives formed by these divergent contexts.

I really believe that the avant-garde modelled according to the American conception of ‘neo-avant-garde’ was, and is not, the same as modelled according to the Russian conception of a ‘second avant-garde’ or the Eastern- or Central-European notion of ‘avant-garde’ without any prefix or predicate.

What American scholars, among others, in particular, those from the magazine *October*, had in mind, was a sort of critical art. Here, we can ask, whether minimal art or Pop-Art and Andy Warhol were critical indeed? Of course, in terms of their relation to traditional art, they were critical. But it’s a rather problematic issue whether Andy Warhol or Robert Morris were indeed critical in terms of the historical avant-garde. I am not sure whether minimal art was critical when it came to social issues or in its approach to reality in terms of taking political responsibility for people in general as the historical avant-garde did. I am really not sure. It was presented as critical in the critical discourse of contemporary art historians, among them critics from the *October* magazine, but not in the actual art practice of its protagonists.

Here, in Eastern Europe, the situation was different because of different political circumstances. Of course, East European artists watched on the West, read Western books, and imported some Western art patterns, but here they had different meanings than those in their original context. A good example would be to compare what Rosalind Krauss said about neo-constructivism or geometrical art. According to her this art was not really revolutionary. She was certainly right, when she said so in the context of the United States. If we go to Eastern Europe, however, less to Poland, but more to Romania, Bulgaria, and the German Democratic Republic where this direction in art was popular particularly among unofficial artists, we can say: yes—geometry was critical here, even revolutionary, since it was a sort of opposition to official socialist realism, to totalitarian culture.

The same could be said for conceptual art. Seen in the framework of the American neo-avant-garde, conceptual art had a different meaning in Russia or Hungary (or for example in South America), not identical with its meaning in the United States. So, it depends on the context. Just to finish, the US-American discourse on criticality of minimal art is perhaps problematic from our per-
spective, but here, in Eastern Europe, due to the divergent historical context, we can say that the tradition of the historical avant-garde was still alive, and it was not the ‘neo-’, but somehow a continuation of the rebellious classical avant-garde.

So, there are two issues. In the first place, while speaking about the so-called neo-avant-garde or simply the post-war avant-garde, we have to speak about different strands of avant-garde art. The second issue is that in the framework of comparative art studies we have to speak about a variety of (political) meanings that depend on the particular political contexts.

Éva Forgács: Yes, there wasn’t such a thing as a ‘neo-avant-garde’ in Eastern Europe, because the classical avant-garde had never achieved what it achieved in the West. So, the entire problem was non-existent and could remain undressed. The term ‘underground art’, as we used it in the 1960s, was more appropriate: unofficial art that continued in the footsteps of the historical avant-garde. This was perfectly valid, since this ‘underground art’ still had the same goal as the historical avant-garde.

Wolfgang Asholt: A small note in the margin. As I observe, when it comes to the ‘neo-avant-garde’, we spoke only about art. I see a profound problem here, since in the historical situation of the avant-garde we have a co-presence of art and literature. As for what is said about art here, why can’t we find the same thing for literature simultaneously? Did literature read the lesson of history in a different way? Can we say that—after Yalta—in this sense the project of the avant-garde in literature, at least in Western literatures, abandoned the project of the avant-garde?

Of course, in the period after World War II, we also find some literary avant-garde works. But that’s not the point. In general, literature abandoned avant-garde practices or changed their purport and meaning, as—for example—in reflections on ‘avant-garde’ poetics, as they can be observed from the Nouveau Roman onwards to so-called French Theory notably by concealing their intimate relations to surrealism. Here, several questions arise. What were and are the specific conditions of literature? What were and are the epistemological criteria for literature to do so? I have no answers, but the problem is obvious, after all that has been said.

Now I come to the neo-avant-garde. Piotr said that we have to distinguish at least two neo-avant-gardes after 1945. This raises the question: to what extent the second part of the notion ‘neo-avant-garde’ still means still the same? What is still meant by ‘avant-garde’? Okay for ‘neo’, if there was no real ‘neo-avant-garde’. But what if there isn’t really a ‘second avant-garde’ either? In Germany,
we had a debate on the question if we are now going through a zweite Moderne, a second modernity—a highly problematic concept. As for ‘avant-garde’ after 1945, also considering the division due to Yalta, I am wondering, what avant-garde actually was on the one side, and what avant-garde could be on the other.

Benedikt Hjartarson: Let me pick up on the notion of the neo-avant-garde. I think talking about the neo-avant-garde in terms of a ‘neo-avant-garde’ or a ‘second avant-garde’ is merely a terminological decision, because in the end it simply indicates a certain historical difference by drawing a boundary between the historical avant-garde and the post-war avant-garde. The fundamental difference is rather that we have a neo-avant-garde that was really working on the basis of a tradition that was already established and it defined itself as such through dialogue. Furthermore, theoretical and critical discourse did also define the neo-avant-garde and itself through this dialogue with the avant-gardes of the past. I think this is a crucial issue.

I would also like to pick up on a remark made by Asholt on the link between aesthetics and politics as a defining aspect of the avant-garde. I completely agree with him. I think we share the same opinion in that regard. If the concept ‘avant-garde’ as such really has some use as an analytical tool, it needs to focus on this link between aesthetics and politics. It’s definitely a defining aspect of the notion ‘avant-garde’. Here is also a correlation with our approach to the avant-garde and I think this is probably one of the most important legacies of Bürger’s theory: his definition of avant-garde from a perspective that looks at the avant-garde simultaneously in sociological and aesthetic terms. In order to define an avant-garde we need to look at it sociologically and aesthetically: in terms of movements, dynamics, social critique, political practices, as well as in relation with new aesthetic means of expression. Now, when we talk about the neo-avant-garde, the question is always; where does it connect and correspond with the tradition? What was important in the historical avant-garde for this specific neo-avant-garde movement? Did it relate merely to certain aesthetic techniques and means of expression or did it relate to the political aspects of the historical avant-garde project as well. I think that is a very important matter.

Éva Forgács: I’d like to direct our discussion to the present and specifically to Eastern Europe. What is different today? It appears that presently in East-Central or Eastern Europe the most urgent task of theoreticians and art historians is a double one. On the one hand, there is the need to construct the narrative after ‘Yalta’, as Piotr did in his book in an exemplary way. Yet, the
single national narratives in this part of Europe are very difficult to construct or reconstruct, since they have been denationalised, as well as kind of Sovietised. So, in the sense of Walter Benjamin’s theses, “On the Concept of History”, it is a huge, almost impossible, task to re-conquer your own past and construct the whole historical narrative. Art history is only part of it.

The other parallel task, that has to be resolved at the same time, is to become global, to be relevant today, and to be part of the whole global international culture and discourse. I think that’s at present in Eastern Europe a huge challenge as well.

Peter Bürger: As for global—that’s a broad subject. In the rather conservative Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, I read recently the interesting remark: “We live in a globalised world, yet business is local.”37 Remarkable! And in my view, the same holds true as well for art, which can only be local. Yet, we should not enter into discussions related to economic policies here. In our field, globalisation discourse only spells disaster.

It seems important to me that we observed differences between an Eastern and Western-European avant-garde, and also how we did this. The same objet d’art, the same manifestation, could have a completely different significance: revolutionary on the one side and conservative on the other. This way, we could not be contented by generalisations. But maybe I didn’t exactly understand what you meant by ‘global’.

Éva Forgács: When an artist wants to be successful, s/he has to appear in international exhibitions. S/he has to appear at biennales, s/he has to be present in the international art press, and the like. It is not enough to exhibit locally, although it is certainly necessary as a first step. However, East European artists are in this respect in a very disadvantaged situation, since they don’t have a hin-

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terland, health care, etc.—a supportive background behind them. They don’t have legal help to control their intellectual property, and lack both state and private financial support—grants, scholarships, and a lot more. I think that they are trying to be global first of all in that practical sense, not philosophically.

**Peter Bürger:** But is it art when it is ‘globalised’? Is the criterion for art the presence of works of some artist on the international art market? Is it art, as it could be seen recently in Berlin: a light installation by Ólafur Eliasson, that could serve just as well as ornate lighting for a fashion show? Yet, Eliasson is exhibited everywhere at the moment: in the Tate Modern, in the Centre Pompidou in Paris, in Berlin, in the Martin-Gropius-Bau, and in the United States as well.\(^{38}\)

In this context, we should talk about a development that results from the failure of the avant-garde: the intended *Überführung* (transition) of art in the praxis of life did not occur. What did happen instead was what I already foresaw as “false sublation of autonomous art” in the *Theory of the Avant-Garde*: its subjugation under the laws of the entertainment industry and commodity aesthetics.\(^{39}\)

The globalisation of art poses to us today a real problem. And it is important to me that we criticise this development—I mean this false sublation—even against the decisions of major institutions, the museums of the globalised world. Instead, we should apply other criteria as those used by these institutions when we have to determine what *art* is. And we should keep to these criteria.

**Piotr Piotrowski:** First of all, while talking about the neo-avant-garde in earlier times, let’s say, a few decades ago, we did not speak about globalisation, since the structure of the world was not global in a sense we are talking about it now. It was somehow universal, but this was not the same and another story. Now, however, talking about a particular prospect of art after 1989, we do so in a time of global culture, including, of course, counterculture, alter-globalist movements, etc. Today, we are talking about many art centres, not only in the West, such as frequently-mentioned cities like Berlin, London, Paris or New York, but also in the Global South, in Beijing, Taipei, Johannesburg, São Paulo, and so on.


Let me note what is also important here: we talk about cities and places rather than about countries. This implies a shift from art geography (as in Russian constructivism, Italian arte povera, American Pop-Art) to art topography, since the cities—as we know from sociology—are much more autonomous and much more cosmopolitan than the countryside or countries as whole. This situation is different than it used to be, and this is—of course—another challenge for our considerations. The year 1989 opened this perspective. And it's not just an extension of the scope of previous art studies, but the fundamental change in their character and design.

Please keep in mind that the collapse of the Berlin Wall and communism in Eastern Europe took place almost at the same time when the apartheid regime in South Africa collapsed. And the same happened to military regimes in South America—it was a global development. The issue for global art studies, which must be comparative art studies, would be not only the question of what this development meant, and how it changed our perspective to see contemporary art, but also—and this is particularly important for us art historians—whether and how it has changed our perspective to see a history of art.

In my opinion, the historical process of 1989 and after provokes a broadening of art historical research. During the Cold-War-period, particularly in that period, given the binary structure of the world then, we used to compare Eastern-European art with the Western one. Why not compare it now with other ones, let’s say from South America or Asia? Important here: we should be aware that single local cultures are not separate and separable from each other and basically they are not separate or separable from global culture.

Of course, such an approach provokes new and different analytical questions that we did not imagine before. As a result, art history becomes a much more complex process, and perhaps it’s facing, what Dipesh Chakrabarty has pointed out, a provincialising of the West.\(^{40}\) It doesn’t mean that we have to ignore the role of the West in terms of its influences over other parts of the world, particularly in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, or the Cold War, but it means that we can see the West, especially right now after the events in 1989 that definitely did open those questions, as just a province among other provinces like South Asia, Eastern Europe, North Africa, etc.

To conclude, while talking about 1968 we have merely agreed that it changed our perspective on the historical avant-garde. Now we are facing perhaps the same question, namely: how contemporary, global art studies will change the

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perspective in historical studies, including studies on the avant-garde. This is how I see globalisation: not in terms of economy, not in terms of art market, not in terms of tourism or global mass media entertainment, but as an intellectual challenge.

5 Coda

At this point the panel discussion was followed by a brief discussion with some remarks and questions from the audience, which rather involved returning to and repeating points addressed in the previous discussion. The meeting was concluded by some brief remarks by the participants, stressing in particular the importance of on-going methodological and theoretical reflection, to refresh the narrative frames of avant-garde studies, and, in particular,—as outlined by Piotr Piotrowski in his final intervention—the necessity to come to a more global approach that should consider and include avant-garde conceptions developed outside Europe and the United States, not least as an indispensable mission to develop a new perspective on the arts in a global setting, including and most likely affecting a future understanding of the avant-garde as well.

To conclude this transcript, a brief story by Bertolt Brecht may serve as bridge to move from the past and into the present, originally included in an additional question for the round table not posed, since the conversation filled the available time slot in the conference scheme. In his *Kalendergeschichten*, Bertolt Brecht tells several short stories with a certain Mr. Keuner as protagonist. One of the shortest, “Mühsal der Besten”, has only two lines. It could have served as a motto for the round table as much as it might serve as motto for further ramifications on the question, which directions avant-garde could, might or should take: “‘Woran arbeiten Sie?’ wurde Herr K. gefragt. Herr K. antwortete: ‘Ich habe viel Mühe, ich bereite meinen nächsten Irrtum vor.’” — “‘What are you working on?’ Mr. K. was asked. Mr. K replied: ‘I’m having a hard time. I’m preparing my next mistake.’”