Red Flags

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On June 22, 2017, facing the vast façade of the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg, performers rehearsed for the next evening’s Scarlet Sails Festival, held annually during the city’s legendary White Nights celebrations. An open-air stage stood on Palace Square, its backdrop of massive triangles showing an LED display of Suprematist shapes from before and after the October Revolution, plus some by Chagall and Kandinsky, like endlessly circulating shards of Russia’s revolutionary cultural heritage. A rust-red but otherwise relatively lifelike image of a horse, fifteen meters tall, was soon supplanted by Malevich figures of the kind now available as glossy miniatures in museum gift shops around the world. The sound system blared out a director’s intermittent bullying above the ponderous overture to Prokofiev’s Romeo and Juliet while men on stage carried flags emblazoned with scarlet-red squares and women in long scarlet skirts twirled in weary lockstep, their matching scarves moving in the wind like silky sailcloth.

Just a few months shy of the centenary of the storming of the Winter Palace in the early morning hours of November 8, 1917 (New Style; October 26, 1917, Old Style), here was the calculated absorption into spectacle culture of the historical avant-gardes. But what relationship was being enacted between artistic achievements and non-art practices? Was this the sublation of the separation of art and life, the Hegelian Aufhebung outlined by Peter Bürger in the wake of the turbulent 1960s in The Theory of the Avant-Garde? Could “art” and “life” even make sense, here, as conceptual categories? And, if so, was this deafening scene the ultimate perversion of radical artistic practices—antagonistic, rebellious, revolutionary, subversive—or their logical and necessary conclusion?

My students in southern California, undergraduates from across the United States and around the world, show little tolerance for avant-gardism. They roll their eyes at what they see as the empty posturing of the Italian Futurist Manifesto; Marinetti stayed up all night with his pals, raced his motorcar into a watery ditch, invoked the “holy black breast of my Sudanese nurse” and celebrated “militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anar-
chist, the beautiful ideas which kill, and the scorn of women." Where my own professors discussed subversive irony and the cataclysmic ending of the long nineteenth century, my students perceive adolescent posturing, smug misogyny, aristocratic privilege, Orientalist clichés, and the stench of impending Fascism. They are wary of early twentieth-century artists with manifestos, even (and perhaps especially) the delightful Tzara, with his sly mockery of manifestos. Who decides, we now ask, who or what can be heroically, historically avant-garde? Who makes dinner for the avant-gardists? What complex lines of resistance, engagement, and collaboration—concepts equally at home in art and politics—can we trace between the historical avant-gardes and political extremism of all kinds?

From the perspective of our own debased world-historical moment, it seems clear that avant-garde campaigns and their later theorizations rest on a conviction, however hazily defined, that a better future may one day exist. Such optimism seems increasingly difficult to muster, and it may be this incapacity loosening our grip on the historical avant-gardes, as much as any acts of appropriation for marketing purposes or increasing attention to the power structures supporting our choice of heroes. In 2010, Bürger invoked the “straight line from Paul Cézanne to Daniel Buren,” but such confidence in this lineage—and in linearity itself—now seems quaint. Our own most compelling avant-gardists may well be the members of Pussy Riot, those intrepid feminist punks, or 17-year-old Greta Thunberg, that determined and rebellious revolutionary raising red flags with necessary urgency for the global climate crisis. How should we engage with outrageous forms of cultural production, then and now, in an era of political outrage?