The Future of Avant-Garde Studies
A European Round Table (2010)

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This roundtable reveals how much has changed in the ensuing decade. In 2010, The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines had just issued its first volume, on British publications, followed by its coverage of American magazines in 2012 and two formidable volumes on Europe in 2013. The latter is especially notable inasmuch as the avant-garde was more concentrated in non-English speaking countries. The breadth of coverage established periodical studies as indisputably central to any subsequent work on modernism and the avant-garde. Another notable trend of the past decade is “global modernism” and as Peter Bürger ruefully observes: “In our field, globalization discourse only spells disaster.” Why? He doesn’t exactly say, though he suggests he’d foreseen the danger in Theory of the Avant-Garde as the subjugation of art to commodity aesthetics and the entertainment industry. Some would argue that globalization is a kind of equal opportunity initiative. But that is to endow present concerns with legislative finality over the past; and when Bürger cautions that the past as historical phenomenon is not over and done with, he doesn’t mean it’s fair game for retrofitting. The virtues of “recovery” notwithstanding (driven it seems by a long simmering disgruntlement with the fabled “men of 1914”), the avant-garde has the historical advantage simply because vanguard initiatives arose organically around the world. Yes, they tended to be Eurocentric, but it would be presumptuous to dismiss the Mavo group in Japan just because Murayama Tomoyoshi spent time in Berlin, or to disparage Antropophagia because Blaise Cendrars inspired certain Brazilians on repeated visits. At issue is whether it’s possible to acknowledge the centrality of Europe for the study of modernist avant-gardes without resentment and without vindictive claims regarding Eurocentrism, as these tendencies have become more prominent since the 2010 round table.