Isms, Wasms, and the Avant-Gardist Spirit

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The history of the avant-gardes is filled with anecdotes, so it is apt to begin this reflection with one. During the Dada centenary, I visited a timeworn bookshop in Zurich. The bookseller told me he was unwilling to deal in the original Dada publications, which had become bibliophilic trophies, because the Geist, spirit, of Dada had moved on to other, more effervescent contexts. Indeed, the “avant-gardist spirit” has since been expressed elsewhere (e.g. recently in the decolonizing practices of the pan-Samí Suohpanterro group), but it begs the question that is it the same spirit and how should it be defined? The links between various geographically and temporally scattered movements are difficult to trace, which was also one of the main observations expressed in the Poznań round table discussion. However, the bookseller’s implicit point was more important: the formal features of an avant-gardist work of art are only a manifestation of the spirit at a given historical moment, not identical with the idea of the avant-garde itself. This is to say that not only aesthetic expressions but also social structures and modes of thought change. Any single concept is therefore hard-pressed if it is to account for such diversity.

As Hubert van den Berg suggests in his introduction, the methods of traditional Modernist Studies are not suitable for studying the avant-gardes. The Dada works provide an illustrative example of a critical feature of avant-garde literature, which also underpins its difference from the canon of modernist writings. Namely, choosing any one literary ‘masterpiece’ of the avant-garde is difficult, because the logic works differently. The avant-garde work of art cannot be judged autonomously because it requires sufficient knowledge of the historical and social situation where it was produced. In this sense, it resembles an event. This historical particularity of the avant-gardes has been acknowledged. However, the past present(s) of the movements need to be understood laterally if scholars aim at a reading that will do proper justice to the work. The transcript reveals a need to acknowledge how those ideas that were beyond the immediately aesthetic and formal realms of art affected the avant-gardes.
Considerable progress has since been made in recognizing the autochthonous traits of the avant-garde events.

Sitting in the audience in Poznań and reading the transcript almost ten years later, I find myself still puzzled by Peter Bürger’s insistence on historical determinism. The foregrounding of a notion, be it the historical avant-garde or the neo-avant-garde, instead of—at least, an effort towards—a comprehensive account of phenomena risks failing to identify avant-garde practices in their heterogeneity. Hence, a decade ago there was a dire need for more openness to the actual practices of the avant-gardes and less focus on predetermined scholarly views (does this qualify as avant-garde?), especially as neither of the terms mentioned above is globally applicable. A thorough international *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history) of the notion of ‘avant-garde’ would be welcome.

The deterministic approach results in essentialization of history. Bürger reduces the historical potential of avant-garde movements to an evolutionary success story. His theory does portray a historical change, but history is constant change. His view does not fully recognize that history, as it played out, is only one dimension of the history of potential events and contexts, and it is this potential that was vital for the avant-gardes. To achieve such a broader historical view, as scholars we should be more open to the laterality of the historical reality at a given point in time, even though the structures of the academia (e.g. various disciplines with their respective interests) do not always facilitate this. In the round table, Benedikt Hjartarson noted the need for a broader perspective in highlighting how, for instance, esotericism and vitalism affected avant-garde practices in a manner the early 2000s avant-garde theory was unable to conceptualize. Ten years on, we still need various overlapping and heterogeneous histories, not only of the avant-gardes but also of adjacent ideas. In a nutshell, trying to force the avant-garde praxis (such as movements, ideas, techniques) into a readymade framework renders the question of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde somewhat academic.

Another concern is raised by the question of geography, geopolitics and their temporalization. It is easy to criticize the panel’s optimistic attitudes on globalization in hindsight, but some criticism is warranted. Namely, Bürger’s idea that art could only be local was contested already by 2010. Think about digital works of art that were produced by geographically—or temporally—dispersed networks (such as under the pseudonym Netochka Nezvanova)? In the past ten years, there have also been studies using the now *démodé* buzzword “glocal”, admirably attempting to capture a snapshot of geographical and temporal particularity while framing it in terms of an overarching ideological backdrop. In hands-on research practice, the aspects of global and local are seldom equal.
Moreover, the round table commented on the Internet, but the Poznań conference predated the rise of social media. Arguably, the globalization of art, what Piotr Piotrowski referred to, has since led to a certain observable homogenization of works of art and spaces where it is presented. It seems that the locality of production plays little part in the current art market if it does not straightforwardly link with the financial promotion of the work. Here I am thinking about the exoticization of particular loci—consider, for instance, how the establishment quickly recuperated the Chinese avant-garde in the China/Avant-Garde exhibition of 1989. Provocatively, Ai Weiwei can be called avant-garde as much as a series of cars by Mercedes.

Finally, a more pressing outlook on the future of avant-gardes in the academia. During the last decade, research on the avant-gardes has begun to establish itself as Avant-Garde Studies with funding awarded by European national bodies, also in East-Central and Eastern Europe. In the optimistic view, the avant-gardes are justly regarded as an insufficiently studied arena that is not always that well understood. For instance, several projects are currently investigating the ties of avant-garde and ecology, which would have been unheard of before the climate crisis, Anthropocene extinction and concerns regarding overpopulation. Do desperate times call for desperate measures? More likely, the modes of thought developed in the avant-gardes have the potential of redirecting thinking not just to outside the box but without the box—an aim recognized already by Dada. In the less optimistic outlook, the post-1989 situation has led the avant-gardes to be harnessed to serve such historical narratives where they are utterly misplaced. For instance, the new (national) cultural narratives in Eastern Europe have begun to ‘redeem’ the avant-garde to promote themselves as culturally less homogenous during the communist hegemony. Instead of a more comprehensive view of historical potential, these narratives provide a new evolutionary story. The result is often a false nostalgia for the utopianism of the avant-gardes because the critical political and social edge of these movements is reduced to promoting national(ist) interests. History is being rewritten but not made.

Meanwhile, the Geist moves on.