Introduction

In the last approximately three decades, avant-garde studies has rapidly grown to become a dynamic field of research within the humanities. The growing interest in the activities and aesthetic practices of the avant-garde has manifested itself in the form of new international research networks devoted to exploring the avant-garde in its various historical and local manifestations. In the same period, we have seen a growing number of publications dealing not only with the critical movements of the historical avant-garde that emerged in the cultural centres of Europe, such as futurism, dada, constructivism, expressionism or surrealism, but also with lesser-known or less canonised movements that emerged in outer, or “minor” regions yet within the European continent as well as outside of Europe in the same period. The growing interest in the avant-garde has furthermore found its expression in the critical re-evaluation of the historical avant-garde and its heritage, with an increased emphasis on the continuity of avant-garde activities in the post-war period and up to our contemporary period. New publications on the avant-garde have addressed not only its role within the traditional art disciplines, such as literature, the visual arts, music, architecture, film, theatre or performative arts, but also its manifestations at the intersections of these different art disciplines as well as outside of the traditional field of autonomous artistic practice. Since its emergence, a vital element of the avant-garde’s revolt against tradition and its declared attempts to pave new ways for artistic creation and aesthetic activities has consisted in challenging prevailing notions of the aesthetic and the institutional settings in which these notions are embedded. The *Journal of Avant-Garde Studies* will provide a platform for the continued theoretical and scholarly discussion of the avant-garde and its modes of radical artistic experimentalism, social engagement and institutional critique. The periodical will serve as a broad forum for historical and theoretical discussion of the avant-garde in its different geographical ramifications, historical periods, artistic manifestations and cultural contexts.

Outside of the field of avant-garde studies, and indeed to some extent also within it, there has been a predominant tendency to see the avant-garde—or avant-gardism—as simply the most experimental or radical edge of modernism. From that perspective, the avant-garde is often reduced to its aesthetic

experiments and activities within the autonomous field of artistic practice, thereby overlooking the modes of institutional critique that are at the very core of the avant-garde project. Whereas studies of modernism and modernist culture have certainly to some extent shifted the focus towards an analysis of institutional settings and cultural contexts, an analysis of the avant-garde that sees it primarily as the radical arm of the modernist enterprise risks missing the key characteristics of the avant-garde.

Whereas the *Journal of Avant-Garde Studies* provides an open forum for discussion of the avant-garde in its different aesthetic and cultural manifestations, it aims to adhere to a clear conception of the term. Of central importance is the understanding of the term “avant-garde” as both an aesthetic and a sociological category, in the sense that the avant-garde not only defines itself by its means of artistic expression but also by its organisation of alternative aesthetic and cultural activities. This might be described as the activist strain of the avant-garde, aiming at the redefinition of art’s role within the social framework.

Launching a journal focused on avant-garde studies quite obviously calls for some clarification of what we see as the main characteristics of the avant-garde. Firstly, from an aesthetic viewpoint, the avant-garde is characterised by its emphasis on *permanently revising which artistic expressions are relevant, keeping the boundaries flexible*. In the period of the historical avant-garde in the early 20th century, this quest for renewal found its unmistakable expression in calls for the destruction of the museums as well as in radical declarations of the obsolescence of earlier or prevalent artistic traditions. The nuances of the “new” include the avant-gardes’ acute awareness of the earlier tradition beyond what immediately preceded them, which is illustrated by many idealised and imaginary “returns” harking back to previous epochs, such as the Middle Ages. In this sense, the avant-gardes also destabilised any coherent notion of “tradition”. This is the call for the “new” that can be described as the uncontested driving force of avant-garde aesthetics, as it aims to explore or launch novel modes of expression as a response to a new social and cultural environment. In the period of the historical avant-garde, this aesthetic moment was linked to the rapid and all-embracing changes of social modernity, new scientific theories leading to a paradigm shift and the advent of new technology and media. As such, the avant-garde constantly found itself engaged in responding to new social developments, political landscapes, technological advancements and constant shifts in the media ecology. The neo-avant-gardes have continued these efforts.

Secondly, from a sociological perspective, the avant-garde is characterised by *its modes of institutional critique and its attempt to create alternative venues and spaces of aesthetic activity*. Of central importance in this context is *the organisation of collective activities in artistic groups and movements*. The founding

of organised movements is often linked to *the publication of collective manifestoes and other programmatic texts* that define the respective movement's cultural domain and outline its programmatic aims. Within these movements, *artists from different disciplines* (and individuals not working in a specific field of artistic practice) *often gathered and joined forces in exploring new means of artistic expression and reflection*. In this sense, the aesthetic experimentalism of the avant-garde often has a transdisciplinary character, to shape new modes of expression through intersecting artistic practices from different disciplines (prominent examples might be concrete poetry or the turn to performance and applied artistic practices in different periods). The emphasis on organised collective activities is furthermore linked to the creation of alternative venues of artistic practice. Of crucial importance are *the little magazines*, serving as organs of the respective group or movement, *as well as independent publishing houses, exhibition spaces and locations of performance*. An important characteristic is also the multi-layered organisation of the avant-garde, where transnationally transmitted aesthetics and established networks meet the local artistic activities and appropriations of the "isms": the establishment of new, often multilingual journals or exhibition venues serves as means of communication across geographical, linguistic or cultural borders. By establishing alternative forums for the new art, individuals and groups in different countries often enter a transnational network with "kindred spirits" in other countries and establish spaces of aesthetic innovation and social or cultural resistance, even though local social and political landscapes could radically differ and affect the outlook of various geographically dispersed movements. This underlines the importance of a journal that is meant as a forum for discussion of the avant-garde in a global context, exploring its organisation of aesthetic activities in a transnational setting and its critical responses to particular local developments.

Thirdly, the implicit links between the exploration of new means of artistic expression and institutional critique are characteristic of *the modes of aesthetic activism lying at the core of the avant-garde project*. Institutional critique, in this sense, refers not only to the explicit revolt against specific institutions, museums, galleries or academies that the avant-garde often attacks as custodians of tradition or sites of stagnation, whereby the avant-gardes establish alternative institutions more favourable to their efforts. Furthermore, institutional critique refers to the revolt against the institution of art as such and the notion of aesthetic autonomy in bourgeois society. In this sense, the historical avant-garde can be regarded as the negation of the bourgeois idea of aesthetic autonomy and an attempt to reintegrate art into the praxis of life. The avant-garde has thus been seen as the entry of the idea of the autonomous artwork in the period of self-critique, art finally negating its own existence as a separate realm of activ-

ities within bourgeois society. The dissolution of art as a separate realm thus goes hand in hand with an emphasis on the social role of art, as it finds its place again in the field of social actions. This process is marked by *the shift from the finished artwork as an autonomous entity towards an emphasis on art as a process* and solid links between artistic practice and political action. This may serve to explain the strong links that can often be found between artistic movements of the avant-garde and radical political movements from the early 20th century up to the present day, although the avant-garde has undoubtedly also been linked to more moderate, even conservative or reactionary movements in the political field. However, the avant-garde can by no means be seen to signify the dissolution of art as a specific or autonomous sphere of action, as it gives way to political or social action. It might also be claimed that the project of the avant-garde is driven by *a specific form of aesthetic activism that aims at the revolutionisation of the whole order of life based on new aesthetic practices*. This can be described as the utopian moment of the avant-garde, as it has launched its aesthetic visions of radical social and cultural change in different periods. Furthermore, this is an aspect of the historical avant-garde's project that has been redefined and criticised by later avant-garde movements, negating what they see as the inherently totalitarian element of the earlier movements.

As the description of the key characteristics above indicates, the avant-garde cannot be reduced to simple artistic innovation in the sense of new styles, idioms or aesthetic forms. Historically, the avant-garde is a category into which the art institution has classified radical artistic efforts that often are incommensurate amongst themselves.

Artworks that combine all the elements and characteristics of the avant-garde are relatively rare and even so they would hardly fit any strict description. Approaching a work or a collection of works in terms of avant-garde products means highlighting specific links between innovative, experimental or radical artistic practices on the one hand, and a programmatic perspective on the institutional setting and social function of those practices on the other. The two terms "avant-garde" and "modernism" do not function as synonyms. The avant-garde characteristics of a work cannot be deciphered solely by looking at style, form or aesthetics in the work itself; the analysis furthermore calls for a focus on the context in which the work is published, exhibited or performed. Whereas it may be possible to draw up a history of the avant-garde in terms of the continuous renewal of the means of expression, it is in other words also possible to draw up a historical development of avant-garde practices that range from the aesthetic activism of the historical avant-garde to practices of socially engaged

art in our contemporary period. These approaches have their place in a journal devoted to the avant-garde and its partly contradictory aesthetic and political heritage.

The *Journal of Avant-Garde Studies* welcomes contributions on all aspects of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde practices. It is not only open to contributions dealing with the avant-garde in the established disciplines of visual art, literature, theatre and performance art, architecture, film or design, but also to contributions focusing on manifestations of the avant-garde in spheres outside of the traditional domain of aesthetic activities. As stressed above, the avant-garde cannot be restricted to innovations within particular art disciplines, as it may involve intersections between different fields and mediums as well as aesthetic practices and social action. It is an attitude, outlook, self-positioning. As a project that aims to programmatically redefine the role of the aesthetic within society and revolutionise the whole order of life, the avant-garde calls for a transdisciplinary approach. Some of the early historical avant-garde movements launched aesthetic renewal programmes for the different art disciplines, publishing technical manifestoes on literature, painting, theatre, music and cinema. However, we should not forget that such movements also published a series of manifestoes and programmatic texts on, for example, aviation, cooking and men's fashion. Emphasis on the development of new modes of living and the will to radically change the symbolic order of all the sectors of cultural activities in modern bourgeois society certainly takes on different forms in each avant-garde movement, including the neo-avant-gardes.

On the other hand, the all-embracing agenda of a new way of living can be seen as one of the most powerful manifestations of the avant-garde project in the early 20th century. It is demonstrative that a traditional approach to the avant-garde, which focuses on its ideas of innovation within the restricted fields of literature, painting, theatre or cinema, misses the radical element of the avant-garde as a cultural and aesthetic project. There is still much ground to cover in how the avant-gardes' experimentation has affected media and cultural theory and linguistics. The *Journal of Avant-Garde Studies* will attempt to provide a platform for discussion of the avant-garde in its wide-ranging activities. Single issues may undoubtedly include a rather clear focus on specific fields of artistic practice. Yet, the journal will attempt to bring together contributions dealing with the diverse fields of activities of the avant-garde.

The periodisation of the avant-garde has been a hotly debated topic in the last decades, and this journal is not intended to bring an end to that discussion. Declarations of the end, failure, demise or even death of the avant-garde have

accompanied it since its emergence. Critics have described the avant-gardes as transitory or fleeting trends doomed for failure. Even the avant-gardists themselves have often shown a strong tendency of declaring their impending disappearance. This may partly be traced back to their insistence on the performative and transitive nature of their actions and partly to the rationality of the idea of the avant-garde itself, as it gives way to new currents and movements breaking with both established traditions and immediate forerunners. This refers not only to an inherent characteristic of the avant-garde's rhetoric but also to the contradiction of dealing with the avant-garde as a tradition. With its more than a century-long history, the avant-garde has long ago become a tradition with its own modes of historicisation and canonisation. However, this should be seen less as a sign of the avant-garde's failure, institutionalisation or commodification, than as a complex historical process in which the avant-garde's project is constantly picked up, redefined and re-enacted in different historical situations.

The *Journal of Avant-Garde Studies* will provide an open forum for discussion of the avant-garde of different periods, from its emergence up to our present day. We do not see the avant-garde as a current belonging to a specific period that can be bracketed off but rather as a conceptual tool that we as scholars use to reconstruct and describe certain sets of aesthetic and social activities.

The activities of the avant-gardes did not come without their own prehistory of the late 19th century, and a closer look at publications on the avant-garde in different languages shows that the beginning of its history is often dated back to that period. The journal will welcome contributions dealing with the background of the historical avant-garde movements in cultural formations such as group activities around the turn of the century, the secessions of the 19th century, or activities within the milieu of cultural bohemia that were related to aesthetic self-fashioning and alternative ways of living. Importantly, we shall have strong emphasis on the avant-garde movements of the post-war period, labelled neo-avant-garde. This can also be claimed to be a crucial period of the avant-garde, because it is these new movements that gave relevance to their historical antecedents as precursors of later developments. Fine-tuning the concept (and related concepts, such as the *arrière-garde*) in relation to the prevailing culture would allow tracing the life cycles of these movements from their emergence to their prime and eventual waning.

The groups and movements of the post-war neo-avant-gardes can thus be described as the first decisive moment of the re-enactment of the avant-garde project. Whereas scholars often tend to draw a demarcation line, signifying the end of the avant-garde for example in the late 1960s or late 1970s—if not already

in the late 1930s—and thus claiming the torch of the revolutionary or heroic avant-garde for themselves as legitimate successors, the *Journal of Avant-Garde Studies* intends to provide a forum for discussion of the avant-garde as an ongoing project.

The *Journal of Avant-Garde Studies* welcomes contributions on the avant-gardes in all their various manifestations in a global setting. This broader perspective on the history and development of the avant-gardes in a global context is one of the most important aims of our journal. While we thus stress the aim of opening a broader perspective on the avant-gardes from a global and post-colonial perspective, it is also necessary to highlight the complex geopolitical situation in which the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde movements emerged. We shall welcome contributions on the avant-gardes from across Europe to Latin America, Africa, Asia, the United States and Australia, ranging from the early 20th century to our contemporary period. We hope that the journal will serve as a dynamic platform for discussion of the avant-gardes in their broad and complex scope, including reassessment of its well-known and canonised works as well as works yet to be discovered.

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