The post-war renaissance of avant-garde strategies and its critics

The notion that the artists of the neo-avant-garde have recuperated, continued and developed further techniques that had been pioneered in the first decades of the past century is widely accepted, and has been the object of numerous studies in the field of the fine arts (cf. Foster 1996 and Buchloh 2000). However, such a critical reassessment is still missing in the sphere of literature, where the precise nature of the liaison between predecessors and descendants has not yet been sufficiently explored. While the fact that concrete poets such as Eugen Gomringer, Franz Mon, and the poets of the *Wiener Gruppe* and the *Noigandres* group appropriated and built upon strategies, techniques and quests of the historical avant-garde has been acknowledged both by the protagonists themselves as well as in critical discourse, the exact nature of this relationship has yet to be theoretically assessed. How do the two phases of avant-garde language experimentation relate to each other in terms of repetition, recuperation and development? Up to now mainly general judgements circulate, ranging from dismissals of the works of the post-war literary avant-garde as epigonic repetitions to their glorification as radicalisation and improvement of the explorations of its forerunners.¹ Are the works of the concrete poets an inauthentic reprise, a re-staging and uncritical repetition of techniques and strategies of the historical avant-garde, as Peter Bürger alleges? Are they a pointless revival of an institutionalised and failed historic project that lost its legitimacy a long time ago (Bürger 1974: 71-2)? Or is there a sense of progress and development? Can the concrete poets claim to have continued, developed or even radicalised and improved the work of the modernists or the ‘historical’ avant-garde? As Hal Foster asks: “Are
the postwar moments passive repetitions of the prewar moments, or does the neo-avant-garde act on the historical avant-garde in ways that we can only now appreciate?” (Foster 1996: 4).

Bürger, arguably the most prominent critic of the neo-avant-garde, argues that, since the historical avant-garde has already failed to sublate art into life and to restore its social significance, and since it can now be received as art, the gestures of the neo-avant-garde are insincere: they are both operating from inside the institution they are meant to attack and embark on a mission which was unrealisable in the first instance and is thus condemned to fail a second time. Moreover, Bürger posits shock as the most important device of the historical avant-garde, and argues that the lifespans of shock techniques are by their very nature limited, for they cease to be effective when repeated. Many other scholars, critics and writers embrace a similarly dismissive viewpoint as Bürger: the historical avant-garde is frequently considered as the absolute and unrepeatable endgame, as the last possible stage of a “tradition which seeks continuity through rejection”, as Octavio Paz put it (1991: 102). “The avant-garde is the great breach, and with it the ‘tradition against itself’ comes to an end”, Paz (1991: 103) declares. A notion that everything has been done already, that an aesthetic ground zero has been reached, that nothing new can possibly be discovered in that field, prevails. Another frequent accusation against the neo-avant-garde is that it lacks the socio-cultural explosive force of the historical one, that it is uncritical, affirmative and that it willingly surrenders to commodification and appropriation by the culture industry. Former avant-garde protagonists themselves join into the chorus of condemnation, most prominently the Dadaist Raoul Hausmann: “Renaissances are usually pointless and depressing phenomena”, he claims (1972: 155). Hausmann accuses the neo-avant-garde not only of plagiarism, but of a lack of utopianism, and vigorously denies that it has any critical intentions whatsoever: “DADA was amongst many other things a protest against bourgeois and intellectual traditions. NeoDADA definitely isn’t” (1972: 155).

The German poet and critic Hans Magnus Enzensberger too attacks the neo-avant-garde, and in particular the works of concrete poets such as Franz Mon, as epigonic imitation, inferior renaissance of long worn-out techniques and even as fraud and spineless scam. He argues that not one sentence has been formulated by the concrete poets of the 1960s which had not already been written by the Futurist F. T. Marinetti and his supporters. In “Die Aporien der Avantgarde” (“The