

Aesthetic and Political Avant-Gardes

By George Katsiaficas

The term “avant-garde” as used in popular discourse as well as in the more specialized worlds of art and politics has a variety of meanings. Sometimes it is overlooked—treated as having no special importance. There is no entry for it in the 32 volume *Macmillan Dictionary of Art* (1996), the *New Encyclopedia Britannica* (1995), or even in Raymond Williams’s highly regarded *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Yet for most of the 20th century—and the 19th as well—the term avant-garde was widely used to define attempts to forge new dimensions to our aesthetic and political definitions of reality. At the intersection of art and politics is where the term originated, and it is there that its most explosive interpretations can be found. In its 1973 edition the now-defunct Great Soviet Encyclopedia stridently attacked “avant-gardism” as “saturated with capitalist and petty bourgeois individualism.” More recently, feminists and post-modernists have attacked the avant-garde as a concept that fosters elitism.

If we were to attempt to give a brief definition to “avant-garde” as it has evolved over the last two centuries, it would refer to people seeking to transform aesthetic and political developments in society. Sometimes entwined together in complementary relationships, and at other moments separate and even antagonistic strands, aesthetic innovation and political engagement are both embedded in the core of the meaning of avant-garde. In what follows, I will trace the development of avant-garde movements from their origin in 19th century France to the contemporary period. In my view, the tension between the political and the aesthetic in avant gardes is significant and valuable; political activists can learn a great deal from the impact of aesthetic movements.

Generally speaking, what is called “avant-garde art” today is completely depoliticized, a facet of its nature considered by many to be a hallmark of “modernism.” According to this view, the modernist tradition’s emphasis is on the “aesthetic” rather than on morality, human suffering or politics. Thus understood, modernists have replaced the spiritual and religious structuring of emotional experience with a secular equivalent: the “aesthetic.” Within this constellation, the “depoliticization of the concept of the avant-garde would be established within the aesthetic theory of modernism.” ¹

To put it another way, there are two dimensions to this definition of modernism:

1. A preoccupation with form
2. The autonomy of art from other concerns of social life

Once we review the history of the concept of the avant-garde, however, it becomes apparent that when first used in relation to artistic movements, i.e. before the “modern” period, “avant-garde” movements were thought

to be forces that would propel society forward, not simply to uphold aesthetic values at a time when consumerism and weapons of mass destruction are destroying the foundations of the Beautiful and threaten the very existence of society.

The resolution of this apparent contradiction is the understanding that within art's formal aesthetics, a truth is contained that transforms society. For Marcuse:

Art can express its radical potential only *as art*, in its own language and image.... The liberating 'message' of art...is likely to persist until the millennium which will never be, art must remain *alienation*...Art cannot represent the revolution, it can only invoke it in another medium, in an aesthetic form in which the political content becomes *metapolitical*, governed by the internal necessity of art. ²

The call for art to obey the dictates of the political struggle would mean "the imagination has become wholly functional: servant to instrumentalist Reason." ³

Origin of the Term "Avant Garde"

In France in 1825, Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) is credited with the first use of "avant-garde" in his book, *Literary, Philosophical and Industrial Opinions*. Saint-Simon believed that artists, scientists and industrialists could lead humanity out of the alienation and oppression everywhere surrounding us. To make this point, he composed an imaginary conversation between representatives of these three traditions, and has the artist make a proposal:

Let us unite. To achieve our one single goal, a separate task will fall to each of us. We, the artists, will serve as the avant-garde: for amongst all the arms at our disposal, the power of the Arts is the swiftest and most expeditious. When we wish to spread new ideas amongst men, we use in turn the lyre, ode or song, story or novel; we inscribe those ideas on marble or canvas...We aim for the heart and imagination, and hence our effect is the most vivid and the most decisive. ⁴

This notion of an avant-garde emerged in France from the intersection of the milieu of revolutionary politics and cultural opposition to art's domination by the Academy. As I will discuss below, in Europe from the 1820s until the 1930s, avant-garde art was opposed to the contemporary meaning normally applied to the term: "art for art's sake."

Gustave Courbet (1819-77) and Realists in the 1840s like Honore Daumier (1808-79) and Jean Francois Millet (1814-75) were some of the earliest advocates of the idea that art could play an emancipatory role in society. Courbet's monumental canvas *The Stonebreakers*, painted in 1849—one year after the failure of continental wide revolutionary movements—had long served as a standard for political avant-gardism. (Parenthetically, I must note that this painting was destroyed on February 14, 1945 when the

British Royal Air Force used incendiary bombs to destroy the German city of Dresden, killing tens of thousands of its people.) In literature, the great Romantic Shelley wrote that the poet is the “unacknowledged legislator of the world” and Arthur Rimbaud (1854-91) sought to create verse that not only contained explicit references to social concerns but also embodied the contestation of power in its structure through a “disordering of the senses.”

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After the savage barricade fighting of 1848, Paris was rebuilt according to Baron Haussmann’s designs in the 1860s. The working class was removed to the *Banlieue* (outside the city center), aptly symbolizing its marginalization, and a new bourgeois culture of consumerism flourished, embedded particularly in the bars, dance-halls and cafes, where pre-packaged “entertainment” could be bought. Although largely absent from French art in this period, the defining event of that epoch was the Paris Commune’s bloody suppression in May 1871 at the cost of some 25,000 lives. During the Commune, Courbet had been one of the chief organizers of the Federation of Artists. Moreover, it was he who helped advocate and carry out the destruction of the classical column at Place Vendome, originally erected as homage to Napoleon’s battlefield success. Although he survived the slaughter during the “Week of Blood” at the end of the Commune, Courbet was imprisoned and his work barred from exhibition. Financially ruined, he went into exile in Switzerland, where he died a few years later.

We are well familiar with the gay Parisian scenes painted after the Commune by Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir and Degas, images highly priced in today’s art market. The pleasures of Paris in the period after the Commune continue to remind us to enjoy ourselves—despite all the insanity and barbarism around us. These canvasses are memories of an era long since surpassed and yet not now available to dwellers of contemporary cities in which crime rates have soared and modern conveniences like the automobile have altered the social landscape in deleterious ways. Within this context of art’s appropriation by the victorious bourgeoisie, the term avant-garde was seldom used in relation to art, retaining a meaning only among radical fringe groups of the Left and Right.

In his portrayal of the new gay reality of Parisian life, however, Edouard Manet (1832-83) is increasingly reinterpreted today as having integrated the two contradictory meanings of the avant-garde (aesthetic innovation and social engagement 6). Manet’s formal radicalism is often contrasted with Courbet’s engagement in class struggle, and hence Manet’s works are understood as the origins of modernism. Yet Manet’s works contain more social content than generally understood. In his *Rue Mosnier with Flags* (1878), for example, the Parisian landscape is bleak—unlike *Rue Montorgueil, Festival of 30th June 1878*, a similar canvas painted in the same year by Claude Monet. Whereas Monet’s rendition of Paris after the Commune depicts the gallantry of the nation, the throngs of people in the streets and the flutter of countless flags above them, Manet paints an old one-legged man with his back to the viewer, making his way on crutches up a semi-deserted street. French flags hang eerily overhead, as much as a menacing accoutrement as celebration of the nation. Seldom mentioned in

modernism's valorization of Manet is his service in the Parisian National Guard during the Commune, no doubt a factor in his subsequent compositions like *The Barricade* and *Civil War* (both from 1871).

As Impressionism emerged, it was critically greeted, jeered, and regarded as scandalous. The French legislature even considered a bill to bar public funds from helping in its exhibition. Perhaps for this reason, modernists today regard it as the first avant-garde movement. Yet impressionism is an art of the immediate satisfaction of the senses, and its popularity can be understood by locating its context in a society based on consumerism and individual gain. While its formal distance from scientific realism is of great sensory importance, our investigation into an avant-garde must look elsewhere.

Anarchism and the Avant Garde

In contrast to the Impressionists, Camille Pissarro (1830-1903), Paul Signac (1863-1935) and other anarchist painters among the Postimpressionists sought to integrate artistic and political concerns in their works. For Signac in particular, it was radical techniques like pointillism through which artists "have contributed their witness to the great social process which pits the workers against Capital." Signac inveighed against the reduction of radical art to its content (as advocated by political activists like Proudhon), arguing instead that the revolution "will be found much stronger and more eloquent in pure aesthetics...applied to subjects like working-class housing...or better still, by synthetically representing the pleasures of decadence."⁷

Avant-garde art's affinity for anarchists in this period is deeper than generally realized. Pablo Picasso emerged from the anarchist circles of Barcelona and lived in similar ones in Montmartre in the decade before World War 1. G.K. Chesterton, the British writer, observed in 1908 "an artist is identical with an anarchist."⁸ Whether one considers the Fauves ('the wild beasts') who exhibited at the Salon of Autonomy in 1905 or the "anarchic threat to cultural values"⁹ posed by the ostensibly non-political work of Henri Matisse (whose *Blue Nude* was burned in effigy by students at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1913), the anarchist threat posed by avant-garde art was considered quite real at that time. Of utmost significance in this regard is Cubism, which radically deconstructed the one-point scientific perspective that had dominated European art for over 500 years.

One of the problems raised by Cubism is the question of elitism of the audience. How can the artist transform the grammar of visual expression and thereby transform consciousness while being able to communicate with more than a handful of people? Unlike Impressionism which easily speaks to people in consumer societies, Cubism requires thinking before it can be understood. Although initially greeted with such abhorrence, for example, Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* is today regarded as one of the greatest paintings of the first half of the 20th century. Picasso himself was so unsure of what he had produced that he kept it hidden for years in his bedroom. Looking back at Cubism from nearly a century later, we can see that the circles of understanding have grown increasingly wider.

After the carnage of World War 1 had decimated Europe and revealed the barbarism of its institutions, art turned against the orderly mentality that had produced such bloody results. With Dada we have the ultimate revolt against bourgeois orderliness. Play, random choice and spontaneity become enshrined as the avant-garde's new core values. Instead of being confined to the canvas, Dada used all available media to express its repulsion with the "civilized barbarism" of European culture: collage, music, film, photography, sculpture—and these media were turned against themselves. "Down With Art!" they screamed. "Dada is on the side of the revolutionary Proletariat." They called for destruction of the "aggressive complete madness of a world abandoned to the hands of bandits."¹⁰As the movement spread throughout Europe, it was increasingly intertwined with radical communism, at one point being called "German Bolshevism."

During the Russian revolution and the civil war that followed on its heels, the new language of abstract art was mobilized in the struggle to defeat the counter-revolution. Once the revolution was consolidated, Constructivism emerged as an artistic movement aligned with the building of a new society. Closer to engineering than to any other avant-garde form of art, Constructivism was undermined from two different sources. On the one side, its transmutation into the Bauhaus idea of "form following function" reduced it to a purely utilitarian endeavor. More ominously, the Soviet Union's initial revolutionary spurt so evident in the first decade of the revolution, turned into counter-revolution. As the old Bolsheviks were liquidated in Stalinist purges, social realism became the only acceptable form of art, and Soviet authorities condemned all forms of avant-gardism. In 1932, all arts groups were legally dissolved.

The Surrealists negated the anti-individualism of Dada and Constructivism, although here too, radical political thought informed their aesthetics. The first surrealist journal was entitled *The Surrealist Revolution* and the second, *Surrealism in the Service of the Revolution*. Strongly affected by Freud's discovery of the continent of the unconscious, the Surrealists painted dreams and fantasy as a means of critiquing bourgeois cultural commodification and conventional notions of personal identity.

Formalistic art histories emphasize abstraction and Cubism while ignoring Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism, and in so doing have enshrined the notion that avant-garde or "modern" art must be free of political content. Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism all attempted to bring the avant-garde back to its original Saint-Simonian roots—to integrate aesthetic innovation with a radical critique of the social order. They sought "the destruction of art as an institution set off from the praxis of life"—a break with "high modernism." The modernist impulse to sever art from politics can be as problematic as those who seek to unite the two mechanically. In the cases of Dada, Surrealism and Constructivism, these movements were able to reinvigorate the relationship between political engagement and aesthetic innovation.

Contemporary Avant Gardes

After World War 2, when avant-gardes re-emerged, the distance between

aesthetic formalism and political engagement had once again widened: pop art, minimalism, abstract expressionism, conceptual art and action painting seldom had anything to do with overtly political themes or impulses and their formal contributions to aesthetic development are dubious. If we compare the aesthetic and political engagement of Dada, Surrealism, Futurism (in both its right-wing Italian and left-wing Russian versions), and Constructivism with the apathetic and consumeristic practice of more recent artistic avant-gardes, the contrast is striking.

Contemporary political movements have simultaneously incorporated many of the aesthetic dimensions of artistic avant-gardes into their practical attempts to transform everyday life. I am thinking here of groups like the Provos, the Orange Free State and Kabeuters in Holland, the Situationists and March 22nd Movement in France, Subversive Aktion in Germany, and the Diggers and Yippies in the USA.¹¹ The roots of some of these groups can be traced to Fluxus, an artistic movement that sought to reinvigorate art's hollowing out through empty formalistic developments.

Politically engaged groups like those named above painted on the canvas of everyday life. They sought to transform the grammar of people's existence rather than to change the aesthetic forms of art. When the Yippies threw money on the floor of the New York Stock Exchange, it was a Dadaist action par excellence—and it not only succeeded in halting trading as brokers scurried for the dollars, but it also received wide publicity. Similarly when they ran a pig for President of the USA in 1968, they forever changed the calculus of politicians' image, not only in the USA. As Stew Albert recalls:

In 1971 in Germany. Jerry Rubin, Phil Ochs and I hung out with Daniel Cohn-Bendit for a few days. Very friendly. He loved the fact that I had run for sheriff and kept pretending we were all in a western. Kabeuters? --We did spend a few days with them and Indonesian grass in Amsterdam. They were talking about creating an Orange Free State - sort of their Woodstock Nation. No contact with the others that you mention although Jerry and I were influenced by the Provos.

The Yippies had many other influences - ranging from Mad Magazine, Artaud, Jean Shepard, Dr. Strangelove to DaDa and Surrealism. We had a sense of putting things together, arranging them in unusual and illogical ways, to shock, get attention and make points.

We realized that TV had become an extension of consciousness - was now part of the communal human brain. Our object was to create images (throwing money at millionaire stock brokers, running a pig for president) so different and entertaining that they would be shown on television and overthrow addicted patterns of mass thought. We turned the streets and its objects into unbounded outdoor props for the creation of TV images.

Yippies helped bring the notion that small-group actions might be more appropriate vehicles than political parties for the transformation of modern

societies. When a student rebellion in May 1968 spread throughout France, a small group of older activists suddenly occupied the Sorbonne, thereby providing a central meeting place for the movement as well as a place where workers and others could come to join. Soon ten million workers were on strike and France was on the brink of revolution. This is one example that we can point to in the late 20th century when small-group avant-garde actions instigated larger shifts and movements. While they are regarded as separate from aesthetic movements, the dynamic of contemporary society has been to create the preconditions for the aestheticization of everyday life. As Marcuse posed the relationship:

The autonomy of art reflects the unfreedom of individuals in the unfree society. If people were free, then art would be the form and expression of their freedom. Art remains marked by unfreedom; in contradicting it, art achieves its autonomy. ¹²

¹*The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, edited by Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) p. 270. [back](#)

² Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) pp. 103-4. [back](#)

³ Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, p. 107. [back](#)

⁴ Reprinted in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (editors), *Art in Theory 1815-1900: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998) p. 40. [back](#)

⁵ Rimbaud, *Collected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986). [back](#)

⁶ Two paintings that can help us understand better the role of the artist as a social critic and aesthetic innovator are Courbet's *Painter's Studio* (1855) and Pissarro's *Portrait of Cezanne* (1874). [back](#)

⁷ Reprinted in Harrison and Wood, p. 797. [back](#)

⁸ Quoted in Theda Shapiro, *Painters and Politics: The European Avant-Garde and Society 1900-1925* (New York, Elsevier, 1976) p. vii. Britain had long lagged behind France in both avant-garde aesthetic and political developments so much that the first English use of the term "avant-garde" was in 1910 in a newspaper review in the *Daily Telegraph* (according at least to the *Oxford English Dictionary*). [back](#)

⁹ See Wood, p. 186. [back](#)

¹⁰ See Tristan Tzara, *Dada Manifesto*. [back](#)

¹¹ For discussion of these groups, see my book on the global imagination of 1968, translated into Korean by E-Who Press in 1999. [back](#)

¹² Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press: 1978) pp. 72-3. [back](#)

