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## Avant-garde

### *Some Introductory Notes on the Politics of a Label*

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#### 1

Since the 1970s the term “avant-garde” has served in certain sections of the historiography of the European arts as a common designation—a more or less fixed name—for a set of divergent, heterogeneous phenomena that together form some sort of a single entity, a historical ensemble or configuration. In other words, “avant-garde” is treated not just as a theoretical construction or interpretative model *ex posteriori*, but as a historical, once real, now past entity, also regarded in its historical time as—to some extent—a historical unity.<sup>1</sup> The term “avant-garde” itself is far older and was already introduced in the cultural field somewhere in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. It first developed into a regularly utilized denomination only in the late 1930s and 1940s, and became a more fashionable designation for innovative and experimental movements in the arts even later, in the 1950s and 1960s. It was later still that the label “avant-garde” became a common term in historiography. It is remarkable that, on the one hand, the existence of “the avant-garde” (sometimes plural: “avant-gardes”) as such a unity is claimed or supposed by many authors, not least as a presupposition for all kind of reflections on “the avant-garde(s),” but, on the other hand, very little consensus seems to exist concerning the question of who or what has to be regarded as “avant-garde(s),” even in a double or triple way.



First, one can notice that quite decisive disagreement exists on the historical extension of the avant-garde. In the historiography of the European arts of the past centuries a number of different sets of phenomena, isms, artists, etc., have been labeled as avant-garde by different authors. One might begin by distinguishing a configuration of isms, which has been labeled by scholars like Peter Bürger and Matei Călinescu not just as avant-garde, but as “historical” avantgarde(s), comprising such movements as futurism, cubism, expressionism, Dada, surrealism, constructivism, poetism, zenitism, and many more.<sup>2</sup> These are not just historical because they are regarded as the true historical kernel of the avant-garde (as they often are) but also because they received the label “avant-garde” at a point when they were already history and when new avant-garde movements had meanwhile emerged (after the Second World War). Some simply confine the avant-garde to this historical configuration. Others also include later formations, described by Peter Bürger and others as “neo-avant-garde” or “latest” avant-garde,<sup>3</sup> including such movements as Cobra, Fluxus, Pop Art, the Situationist International, minimalism, concrete art, and land art. Still other authors, for example the British art historian Francis Frascina and the German historian Corona Hepp, use “avant-garde” rather as a label for developments in the second half of the nineteenth century, with a peak around the previous *fin de siècle*, and the “historical avant-garde” as their tail end.<sup>4</sup> Whereas Bürger or Wolfgang Asholt and Walter Fähnders<sup>5</sup> see a clear-cut rupture between the avant-garde and preceding symbolism and *fin-de-siècle* aestheticism, Frascina and Hepp regard symbolism and aestheticism as core elements of the avant-garde. But even wider notions of the avant-garde (or maybe “avant-gardism” instead of “avant-garde”) can be found, in which “avant-garde” serves as an umbrella term for phenomena or concepts accompanying modernity from the Age of Enlightenment right up to the present, as, for example, in publications by Renato Poggioli, Charles Russell, and John Weightman.<sup>6</sup>

There are not only considerable diachronic differences but also many differences in opinion concerning the sets of isms, movements, and groups that should be regarded as part of the avant-garde in a certain period of time. Bürger by and large excludes cubism and expressionism from his historical avant-garde, whereas others, like Dietrich Scheunemann saw these as major movements of the early avant-garde.<sup>7</sup> The same holds true for fauvism and rayonism, which many regard as precursors rather than formations in the avant-garde complex. Constructivism, which is remarkably absent in both Bürger’s *Theorie der Avantgarde* and in Scheunemann’s opposing views, appears as a core element of the Central European historical avant-garde, according to the panorama presented by Timothy Benson (and what to think of Mondrian or Malevich?).<sup>8</sup> In a similar way, for the period after the Second World War one can observe that in some accounts Cobra and the Situationist International are virtually absent, with the so-called



neo-avant-garde being confined—for example, in Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde*—to abstract expressionism, minimalism, Pop Art, and Fluxus. In this last case the difference might reflect not just a focus on different movements but also a focus on the United States rather than on Europe, rather as Bürger's predilection for Dada and surrealism can be put down to his background in French literary studies.

Nevertheless, both the preference for and neglect of certain movements is mostly related to some theoretical rationale as well. And here, once again, quite profound disagreement can be observed. Much has been written about the aims, the program, intentions, aesthetics, and practice of the avant-garde, but only very little consensus seems to exist regarding its common properties and features. Whereas—to take one of the oldest theoretical reflections on the avant-garde—Clement Greenberg stresses in his essay "Avant-garde and Kitsch," the elitist character of the avant-garde, its self-chosen isolation and detachment from the rest of society, Peter Bürger claims the opposite, namely the pursuit of a return of art in the practice of everyday life.<sup>9</sup> Whereas some, like Bürger, regard the attempted reunification of "art and life"—the escape from or even demolition of the ivory tower of autonomous high art—as the main purport of the early avant-garde, others, like Scheunemann, neglect this revolutionary intention and focus solely on the aesthetic response to technological innovations, new forms of production, and the development of new media like film and photography as the quintessence of the avant-garde.<sup>10</sup> Whereas some stress the totalitarian purport of "the avant-garde,"<sup>11</sup> others stress the antiauthoritarian, libertarian dimension of the avant-garde as a whole.<sup>12</sup> Many other disagreements over the purport of the avant-garde could be added.

## 2

Observing these different ways of understanding the term "avant-garde," one might ask: are all these different scholars actually referring to the same phenomenon? Probably not. The label "avant-garde" might be used nowadays as a fixed historiographic denomination, be it for different formations and configurations, but one should notice as well that it also serves as a metaphor, not just to situate certain phenomena historically, but also to qualify them. Unlike many other terms in the history of the arts, which are originally metaphors as well—for example, "movement," "current," or "school"—the term "avant-garde" is accompanied or even introduced in most historiographic accounts and theoretical assessments by often quite extensive detours reminding the reader that it was originally a military term: specifically, that part of an army that marches in front of the main army corps, explores the battlefield, and engages as first army unit in battles with the enemy. Aspects of this original military meaning are then frequently mobilized in the description of the aesthetic avant-garde, used as a parameter for



the qualification of certain artistic groups, movements, individual artists, and currents as "avant-garde." The forward position of the "avant-garde" in a military context, the fact that this avant-garde is in the forefront, preceding the main sections of the army, operating rather isolated as the annunciation of something larger still to come, its operations in enemy territory, its function as a reconnaissance unit—all these and other aspects are then related to the emergence of new movements, new currents, new schools heading toward a new art, a new literature, new cultural practices. As well as exploring new territory, these movements and practices have to tackle the resistance of existing, traditional forces in the cultural field, before, when successful, establishing themselves as a new order or paradigm, as part of a linear understanding of history ruled by progress, constant innovation, the continuous replacement of the old by the new and, one might add, by an understanding of cultural history as a theater of war. The question, raised by Charles Baudelaire in the early 1860s, of whether such analogies are appropriate, might be left open. It is important, though, to see that the label "avant-garde" is often used as a rather arbitrary qualification, and not so much as a quasi-neutral historiographic denomination.

There is another important aspect in the common usage of the term "avant-garde." As mentioned already, one should keep in mind that the label only became fashionable—both as a self-denomination and as a historiographic term—after the Second World War. The term was introduced in the cultural field much earlier by the Saint-Simonist Olinde Rodrigues, who, in an imaginary conversation in 1825, offered artistic support to Saint-Simon with the remark: "It is we, artists, that will serve as your avant-garde. . . ."<sup>13</sup> Thereafter the term was used (initially only in French and other Romance languages) in the sense of the common military concept of "*servir d'avant-garde*"—serving as avant-garde. It took, however, until the middle of the twentieth century before "avant-garde" became a more common, frequently used term. Even among those groups and individual artists, who are nowadays often referred to as historical avant-garde, the term was anything but fashionable. Occasions where those belonging to the historical avant-garde refer to themselves as "avant-garde" are quite rare. Some of these avant-garde movements certainly had a self-understanding in which they defined themselves in spatial metaphors suggesting that they were holding a position more forward, more advanced than other sections of the artistic and literary field. It was quite common to refer to oneself as creators of a "new art" or "newest art," or "modern" or "ultra-modern" or "young" or "youngest" art, but seldom as "avant-garde." There can be no doubt that the spokesmen of these movements preferred as a rule their own labels and brand names, like futurism, expressionism, Dada, constructivism, surrealism, *Zenit* or *De Stijl*. When Clement Greenberg published his essay "Avant-garde and Kitsch" in



1939 in the *Partisan Review*, he was, in fact, one of the first to use the label as a fixed denomination.

### 3

One should note here, moreover, that the term "avant-garde" has functioned differently in different languages and in different cultural configurations. Notably, in French the word *avant-garde* was more frequently utilized than in other languages; logical, one might think, since it is a French word, but the compatible words in other languages, like *Vorhut* or *Vortrab* or *Vortrupp* in German, did not have the same frequency in cultural discourse. In Spanish or in Polish avant-garde publications, one finds the words *vanguardia* and *awangardny* more often, used by artists and congenial critics as self-denominations or, frequently, as ostentatious (self-) designation—and as such, one might argue, as a fixed designation.<sup>14</sup> In most European languages and cultural configurations, however, the term "avant-garde" is—at least as a fixed term, as colloquial common denominator—virtually absent until the 1940s and 1950s. There are some older examples, which are often quoted, like the series of articles "Revue der Avant-garde" by the editor of *De Stijl*, Theo van Doesburg, published in the Dutch modernist review *Het Getij* in the early 1920s. The fact that this series is often mentioned is no accident. There are not many more examples. Kurt Schwitters, who was a good friend of van Doesburg and is nowadays seen as one of the major representatives of the historical avant-garde,<sup>15</sup> never used the term. He probably did not even avoid it. It was simply not a common category in his reflection on art or in his self-understanding as an artist. Indeed, in Germany, the label "avant-garde" was virtually absent in an aesthetic context before 1945, and this is not only due to the rise of the Nazis, who disabled any proper discussion of aesthetic avant-gardism after 1933. Even before this year the label "avant-garde" was quite rare.<sup>16</sup> Hence, the German art historian Richard Hamann's *Geschichte der Kunst* (1933), which shows a profound knowledge of what we now tend to call "historical avant-garde," does not use the term "avant-garde," but, instead, "expressionism."<sup>17</sup> In fact, the first German book to address in its title something called "avant-garde" in a cultural context is a collection of essays, *Europäische Avantgarde*, edited by Alfred Andersch in 1948–49,<sup>18</sup> with contributions by among others Sartre, De Beauvoir, Silone, Spender, and Koestler—so not directly "avant-garde" in the sense we use it today. The first book title addressing the "historical avant-garde" in German stems from no earlier than 1961: an exhibition catalog on the review and gallery *Der Sturm* with the subtitle *Herwarth Walden und die europäische Avantgarde*.<sup>19</sup> In the case of the Russian avant-garde, the label was also only attributed at a later stage: in the 1910s and 1920s other umbrella terms were used.<sup>20</sup> In an English-speaking context, finally, one finds the same constellation, as Paul Wood pointed out recently:



"Avant-garde" became pervasive as a synonym for "modern art" during the boom in culture after World War II. But many of the movements it is loosely used to refer to predate World War II by several decades, and at the time when they first flourished, the term "avant-garde" was not nearly so often used to describe them. . . . The concept achieved a kind of dominance or "hegemony" [only] in the period from about 1940 to about 1970. . . . In artistic terms, these were the decades in which a conception of artistic "modernism" was consolidated, whose most important centre was New York. Modernism, as a specialized critical discourse in art, declined in influence after about 1970, but in wider and less specialized thinking about art during the years since, the term "avant-garde" carried on bearing the meanings it assumed then, and to an extent it continues to do so. "Avant-garde", then, became not just a synonym for modern art in the all-inclusive sense of the term, but was more particularly identified with artistic "modernism", and hence shorthand for the values associated with that term.<sup>21</sup>

At least four reasons can be identified for the virtual absence of the label "avant-garde" in what we now tend to call the "historical avant-garde." In the first place, however much a Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, a Herwarth Walden, or a Theo van Doesburg may be regarded nowadays as prominent representatives of the avant-garde, they saw themselves primarily as representatives of their own avant-garde projects, as futurist, as expressionist, as constructivist, and so on. Marinetti, for example, not only referred to his own circle as "futurism" but also subsumed more or less the whole contemporary avant-garde under this label.<sup>22</sup> Yet, where Marinetti calls every avant-garde artist a futurist, the same artists are labeled by Herwarth Walden as expressionists, whereas Tristan Tzara calls them Dada and Van Doesburg presents at least some of them, whom we now tend to see as futurists, Dadaists, or expressionists, as exemplary collaborators of *De Stijl*; in other words, as constructivists.<sup>23</sup>

In the second place, as we have seen, in the early 1860s Charles Baudelaire had already rejected "the Frenchman's passionate predilection for military metaphors" and not least for the term *littérateurs d'avant-garde*.<sup>24</sup> This military connotation of the term "avant-garde" might be another reason that at least some sections of the configuration of isms we now tend to call "historical avant-garde" consciously abstained from using the term. Schwitters, who frequently spoke out against militarism, might be an example here.

In the third place, one can observe in contemporary publications by and on the historical avant-garde that a whole range of other colloquial umbrella terms existed: other fixed denominations such as "new art," "modern art," or "isms of art." Only when these terms became timeworn and began to lose their distinctive quality did it become necessary to replace them by another term, which could distinguish certain trends in the wider field of modern and new art.



In the fourth place, the fact that many movements from the previous decades, like expressionism, cubism, futurism, surrealism, and constructivism had become historical phenomena in the course of time obviously created the desire for an umbrella term of these somehow interrelated movements. And here the label "avant-garde" made its debut as an increasingly colloquial label—only after the demise of the early avant-garde of the twentieth century. As Hans Magnus Enzensberger pointed out in his essay "Die Aporien der Avantgarde" (1962), the label is marked by a curious contradiction that might well have hindered its popularity in previous decades: "The *avant* of the avant-garde . . . can only be marked *a posteriori*."<sup>25</sup> Although the notion of "avant-garde" was not completely absent before the period, there is much to support Enzensberger's thesis that, at least as far as the historical avant-garde is concerned, the label functioned as a posthumously applied category.

#### 4

The fact that—as a rule—the historical avant-garde did not refer to itself as avant-garde has several interesting implications. To begin with, this fact makes any reflection on the metaphorical purport of the label as an indication for the true nature of the labeled phenomena obsolete, at least as far as the early twentieth century is concerned. Such reflections, as in the preface of Richard Kostelanetz's *Dictionary of the Avant-Garde*,<sup>26</sup> say, rather, something about the properties attributable to these phenomena according to the author applying the label, rather than those labeled as such.

This fact also raises an important historiographic question. If the historical avant-garde, at least as a whole, did *not* see itself as avant-garde, to what extent was this avant-garde then a historical unity, or is this unity only a historiographic fiction? One important distinguishing feature of the historical avant-garde, according to avant-garde historiography, was the assumed self-understanding and self-definition as avant-garde.<sup>27</sup> What remains, if this historical avant-garde saw its art as new, young, modern, ultra-modern, and sometimes not even that—abstract artists in particular were aware of the proximity of their art to prehistoric artifacts—but only to a very little extent as avant-garde? Some avant-garde art was undoubtedly new; other art was—as the Dadaist Hans Arp noted in 1916—as old as the oldest human artifacts, in a way a return to the minimalism of pebble culture.<sup>28</sup>

Yet the representatives of the historical avant-garde indeed understood themselves as some form of a unity. While a demarcation of the contours of the avant-garde may be permitted neither in terms of a self-understanding as avant-garde, nor even in terms of the novelty or modernity of avant-garde art, a solution might be offered by the characterization (proposed by Asholt and Fähnders<sup>29</sup>) of the avant-garde as



a project, one that, like Habermas's *Projekt der Moderne*, is conceived not as a completed unity, but rather as something that still has (or still *had*) to be completed—that is to say, a project that consists of a number of fragments, which are partially still isolated, yet indicate a future unity to come. One might think, following Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, of a rhizome-like entity or multiplicity,<sup>30</sup> or, following Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, of a multitude with some degree of cohesion, but at the same time marked by an obvious heterogeneity, diversity, or some extent of incoherence.<sup>31</sup>

Since the form and content of the artifacts, as well as the aesthetics and program of the groups involved, are marked by much heterogeneity and many incompatibilities and contradictions, the cohesion and collective dimension of the avant-garde are best conceived as the lines and nodes of a rhizome-like network, which can be regarded as the nomadic, deterritorialized *locus communis* constituting what we now tend to call “the historical avant-garde.” The fact is, that in the configuration of isms, groups and movements nowadays often summarized as “historical avant-garde,” a mutual feeling, understanding, or spirit of collectivity can be discerned. This internal, mutual understanding was documented in a book like *Isms of Art*, edited by Hans Arp and El Lissitzky in 1925,<sup>32</sup> or the earlier mentioned series of essays “Revue der Avant-garde” by Van Doesburg, as well as by the simple fact that many avant-garde reviews of the 1910s and 1920s, like *Der Sturm*, *De Stijl*, *The Little Review*, and *MA* not only served as a platform for the ism(s) and projects represented by the editors themselves but also for other isms.<sup>33</sup> In the first decades of the past century, the avant-garde network is more or less identical with the configuration of isms that is distinguished in studies that use “historical avant-garde” in a more restrictive sense, such as Peter Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde*.<sup>34</sup>

Now, in the present volume, it is the so-called neo-avant-garde, rather than the historical avant-garde, that is at stake. Here, the understanding of the avant-garde as a network also offers a new perspective, in particular when combined with the observation that the label “avant-garde” became a productive, active label only after the Second World War. The conception of the avant-garde as a fluctuating rhizomatic network allows for moments of crisis, like the First World War, the fascist and Stalinist repression in the thirties, the Second World War, and the cold war thereafter, in which many lines and nodes were endangered and extinguished, but others indeed continued, sometimes in exile, sometimes in some underground. To keep to the image of the rhizome, these are moments in which parts of the network are cut off and killed, parts of the root system migrate, new sprouts emerge in different places, superficially as completely new plants, yet stemming actually from the same root complex. Whereas often an almost complete rupture between “historical” and “neo-avant-garde” is assumed, one can observe that there are significant links and continuities



between the early and later avant-garde. A clear example is the artistic movement Cobra, which had its roots in prewar movements, but which also served in later years as the starting point for developments like the Situationist International.

## 5

In many reflections on the twentieth-century avant-garde(s), the avant-garde movements after the Second World War have a slightly dubious or at least problematic character, which is already reflected in the label "neo-avant-garde." Certainly, from a current-day perspective, at a point where the neo-avant-garde is no less historical than the historical avant-garde, the label has some strange side effects.

Enzensberger notes that "avant-garde" is already marked by a strange contradiction, and the same holds even more true for the label "neo-avant-garde." Although the prefix "neo-" may seem perfectly in line with the belief in progress, innovation, and the new, typical for Western modernity, the discernment of "neo-" movements, currents, and styles—at least in the arts—has another dimension. It implies that the movement, current, or style involved is not simply new, but rather a new edition, a new appearance of something old, of something previous. As a consequence, "neo-" styles always possess an aura of the retrograde, the repetition, the epigone, of the *Ewiggestrige*, of living in the past, of trying to revive a past style. As such, something "neo-" is from the outset—at least nominally—at odds with the core avant-garde business of being original, of conquering new territories, of presenting something unprecedented. And it is certainly no accident in this context that many if not all commonly distinguished "neo-" movements, currents, and styles can be qualified as conservative, or as expressions of a conservative or a retrograde aesthetic stand (e.g., neo-Gothic, neo-romanticism and neoclassicism).

As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, in the modern European cultural field the (self-) presentation as avant-garde has an obvious strategic character in relation to the attempts of new artists and writers to conquer and consolidate a position of their own in the artistic and literary domains. One of the key aspects of this (self-) positioning as avant-garde is self-evidently the claim to be new, to be the first. In short, the avant-garde claims to be "vanguard," "completely new," "modern," "ultra-modern," or, put differently, to be original. As Rosalind Krauss outlined in her book *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, this claim to be original is essential to the (self-) understanding of avant-garde movements:

The avant-garde artist has worn many guises over the first hundred years of his existence: revolutionary, dandy, anarchist, aesthete, technologist, mystic. He has also preached a variety of creeds. One thing only seems



to hold fairly constant in the vanguardist discourse and that is the theme of originality.<sup>35</sup>

Krauss goes even a step further, arguing that “the very notion of the avant-garde can be seen as a function of the discourse of originality.”<sup>36</sup> In the light of the apparent necessity of the avant-garde to be original, the “neo-” predicate is, of course, fatal. The term “historical avant-garde” may cause some unease on this front too. But is an avant-garde of yesterday still not to be preferred over a re-edition of yesterday’s avant-garde, above an avant-garde, which is *not* original, as the label “neo-avant-garde” as *contradictio in terminis* is implying?<sup>37</sup> In the case of Bürger’s *Theorie der Avantgarde* one should observe that the assessment of the historical avant-garde is quite negative as well. Whereas the neo-avant-garde is dismissed as an inauthentic copycat project, Bürger stresses from the outset that the historical avant-garde failed to meet its (or maybe more precisely Bürger’s) objectives. And what is better? What is preferable? To be an authentic failure or an inauthentic success? In order to skip these questions, it seems better to skip the labels, which provoke them in an unnecessary and actually rather outmoded way, since the neo-avant-garde has now become a historical phenomenon itself, a historical avant-garde from a previous century.

Aside from the matter of the terminological adequacy of certain labels, one may ask, Were the implied postwar movements indeed the shallow repetitions that Bürger claimed? They might have repeated some previous experiments and sometimes in a way that did not meet the old standards, which were—as in the case of Dada—not seldom exaggerating mystifications.<sup>38</sup> There can be no doubt either, though, that in many respects the artistic practice of the avant-garde after the Second World War produced a completely different art—in all artistic disciplines. As Hal Foster suggested in his article, “What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?” one could argue that the avant-garde after the Second World War was in many ways creating, realizing, and developing what the previous avant-garde only started to think about.<sup>39</sup> The fact that the self-understanding as avant-garde only became common sense in the neo-avant-garde seems to confirm Foster’s argument.

As for the labeling, the historical avant-garde may in fact be viewed as a retrograde projection by a neo-avant-garde trying to construct a history of its own, which is then turned by critical observers like Bürger against its inventors. The properties attributed by Bürger to the historical avant-garde—an anti-mimetic tendency; the rejection of an organic conception of art; the rejection of art as such or as institution; the ambition to take art out of the holy vicinities of the museum, the academy, the classical theater, the concert hall and opera house into everyday life; the elaboration of a new art practice in line with reflections of the Frankfurt School and Walter Benjamin—all that was rather typical of developments in the arts in the late 1960s and early 1970s,



perfectly in tune with the programmatic of the politically engaged (or at least politically conscious) parts of the contemporary avant-garde.<sup>40</sup>

Given the fact that the label "avant-garde" only became fashionable after the Second World War, it seems more adequate, thus, to skip the additional predicate "neo-" and call the movements concerned simply avant-garde, as they themselves did in this period. In the 1960s and 1970s the predicate "historical" may have had a certain additional surplus value, insofar as it referred to the historical roots and predecessors of the contemporary configuration of movements and groups that indeed understood themselves as avant-garde. Noteworthy here is the fact that many representatives of postwar avant-garde formations and sympathetic critics could be found among the chroniclers and historians of the historical avant-garde. In line with Enzensberger, one might argue that only their effort turned the historical avant-garde into an avant-garde.

In short, in the 1960s and 1970s there was indeed an avant-garde that understood itself as avant-garde, to a much stronger degree than that configuration of isms in the first half of the twentieth century, which was only *a posteriori* labeled avant-garde. Representatives of the later configuration of artistic movements defined themselves as avant-garde, yet in a tradition of aesthetic renewal and artistic revolt, elaborating on previous experiments and enterprises from the first decades of the twentieth century. And it is certainly no accident that only since the 1970s has the term "avant-garde" served as a common, more or less fixed denomination in the historiography of and theoretical reflection on the arts. As should now be clear, this was a product of contemporary artistic movements that started to write a history of the arts in their own terms, using a label that was fashionable in the period when the history was written, not when it occurred.

## 6

Several factors have been mentioned, which probably contributed to the emergence of the notion "avant-garde" as a fashionable label in the second half of the twentieth century. One more needs to be added. "Avant-garde" might signal novelty or a claim to be the first, to be modern, to be at the forefront, and so on. It also signals, however, something else: political engagement and commitment. It is certainly no accident that those artistic movements that we tend to call "avant-garde" had their heydays in two periods of extreme political instability, change, revolt, and revolution—periods in which peaks can be observed not only in the activities of these artistic movements that, in broad terms, combined radical aesthetic experiments and innovations with the ambition to revolutionize both artistic practice and society as a whole, but also in political movements pursuing fundamental change and likewise claiming avant-garde status. Several aesthetic avant-garde



movements participated in the revolutionary periods in the wake of the First World War and the protest movements of 1968, and not only aesthetically.

As mentioned before, resonances of the military origin of the term “avant-garde” continue to be heard in its more recent usage in an aesthetic context. It is indeed striking that almost every reflection on the avant-garde explores the military background of the term. This cannot be said for the political background of the term. Often—as in Krauss’s or Poggioli’s reflections, for example—only the metaphorical aspects of the original military notion are discussed. The fact that the political arena served as an intermediary between the theater of war and the cultural field is frequently ignored. Whereas the notion “avant-garde” may stem originally from the battlefield, the term entered the cultural sphere through politics, where it was already in common use during the French Revolution.

When Olinde Rodrigues described the mission of the artist in relation to the political philosophy of Saint-Simon, for whom the artist had to “serve as avant-garde,” he ordained the artist with a political mission: as artistic avant-garde of a political movement, serving the realization of the ultimate goals of this movement. Also in later decades, one can observe (notably in France) that the label “avant-garde” implied simply “political,” albeit in a progressive sense. So, when Baudelaire speaks out against *littérateurs d’avant-garde*, he is actually not criticizing aesthetically innovative writers, but rather politically engaged writers of left-wing provenance. The accompanying understanding of the notion “avant-garde” is obviously still very close to the original military meaning of the term and the actual role of the avant-garde on the battlefield: it fulfills the orders of some general command, which directs the army as a whole and is—to use Carl von Clausewitz’s dictum—actually continuing politics with other means. In this context, as von Clausewitz elaborated in his famous *Vom Kriege*, the avant-garde only serves and obeys.<sup>41</sup>

It is not until the turn of the twentieth century that a new avant-garde concept emerges, again initially in the political, then in the artistic sphere. In 1902 Lenin publishes the pamphlet *What Is to Be Done?* as a contribution to discussions concerning the course of the Russian social-democrat party.<sup>42</sup> In this pamphlet he not only defines the proletariat as the vanguard of the coming revolution but also defines the Communist Party as the vanguard of the proletariat—the vanguard of the vanguard, as it were. The change is obvious: the avant-garde is no longer receiving orders, but giving them; it is no longer a few units serving as a battle force in the forefront, but identical with or supplanting general command.

This new, Leninist version of the avant-garde—as political leadership at the forefront, giving direction to the following revolutionary forces—is soon joined by an artistic version following the same rationale, one that



draws upon an idealist aesthetic perspective. Within idealist aesthetics, as formulated initially by philosophers like Shaftesbury, Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel, art functions as a utopian representation of a better future life, and is ordained with the special mission of giving direction to human progress.<sup>43</sup> The missionary role of the artist in idealist aesthetics could easily be merged with the new Leninist understanding of an avant-garde, which likewise fulfilled the role of precursor, albeit in the political field.

This new conception, shaped by a primarily aesthetic perspective, is first articulated in the context of what later would be called "the historical avant-garde" by the Italian futurists in 1909, and repeated in many of their later manifestos as well.<sup>44</sup> The futurists' aesthetic orientation was—of course—completely at odds with the primacy of the political in Lenin's conception of the world. There can be no doubt, though, that in the following century artists who used the term "avant-garde" were often well informed about the Leninist concept, not least after the Russian Revolution, when Communist parties acted as a rallying point for the European and American critical intelligentsia until as late as the 1970s.

One artist to adopt the Leninist avant-garde concept and give it an aesthetic turn was Theo van Doesburg. In the first essay in "Revue der Avant-garde," van Doesburg opens with the claim that "all modern and ultra-modern groups of the whole world march" under the slogan "avant-garde"

in the direction of a completely new way of expression in all forms of art. Avant-garde already expresses the notion of an *International of the spirit*. This international possesses no other rules and regulations than the inner urge to give life an ideal-realistic expression and interpret life in art purely aesthetically.<sup>45</sup>

Van Doesburg then continues: "At present, 'Avant-garde' is the *collective denomination for all revolutionary groups of artists*. And not just in the field of modern aesthetics, but likewise in the field of modern politics, the word is a general slogan and battle cry."<sup>46</sup> This last claim was undoubtedly an overstatement, as the label was actually quite uncommon, at least in the cultural field.

In the rest of the essay van Doesburg discusses only the aesthetic avant-garde. He apologizes that there is no place for the social avant-garde in the limited space he has in *Het Getij*.<sup>47</sup> Was this the real reason for excluding the social avant-garde, as he called it? Probably not entirely. In 1922, van Doesburg was also involved in an attempt to found a Constructivist International, already alluded to in *Het Getij* as an "International of the spirit." In debates around this International, the question of the two avant-gardes became a hot issue that finally led to a conflict between van Doesburg and some Hungarian constructivists with a communist inclination (including Ernő Kallai, László Péri, László Moholy-Nagy, and Alfréd Kemény). Were they two equal



wings, as van Doesburg suggests in *Het Getij*? Was the aesthetic avant-garde actually superior? Or had the aesthetic wing to submit itself to the seemingly more general avant-garde in the sociopolitical sphere? In brief, the Hungarians demanded that "artists fight together with the proletariat for a communist society," and pleaded for the creation of a new "Proletkult-organisation" under the leadership of the Communist Party.<sup>48</sup> Van Doesburg answered with a manifesto, titled "Anti-tendenzkunst" in Dutch and "Manifest Proletkunst" in German, asserting that art has to follow its own rules, without any obedience to alien objectives, be it communist, religious, or nationalist:

Art... as envisaged by the whole avant-garde, is neither proletarian nor bourgeois. It develops forces, that are strong enough to influence culture as a whole, instead of being solely influenced by social relations... What we, modern artists, prepare instead, is the monumental work of art, superior at large to all placards, whether made for champagne, Dada or communist dictatorship.<sup>49</sup>

## 7

This disagreement evidently put an end to any attempt to bring about a Constructivist International. It is very instructive, though, for a double conflict that marks discussions throughout the twentieth century both *within* avant-garde sections of the cultural field, and among artistic and political groupings that understood themselves as the ultimate avant-garde. As far as the aesthetic avant-garde was concerned, one might argue that the conflict in fact concerned two opposed avant-garde concepts, of which one—the Leninist version—gave the self-assigned avant-garde a considerable degree of aesthetic sovereignty, while the other one—the Saint-Simonist version—ordained the avant-garde to political servitude.

Both concepts stemmed from the nineteenth century—the Leninist one from the end, the Saint-Simonist from the beginning. In this respect, it is quite remarkable that the notion "avant-garde," which was, hence, a product of the nineteenth century, could still become as fashionable and popular as it did after the Second World War, not least due to its political connotations, which are most evident in the debates in and around the avant-garde in the post-1945 period. Simultaneously, this long (pre-) history might explain in part why the label "avant-garde" soon came into disrepute: it was simply a concept of another age. Enzensberger had in 1962 already foreseen the short shelf life of the label "avant-garde" as a popular self-denomination in the artistic field. As he suggested, the "avant" of an avant-garde can only be distinguished in hindsight, thus posthumously, and so is quasi-automatically associated with the death of the phenomena labeled as such. In other words, the emergence of the category "avant-garde" as a common denomination in artistic discourse triggered straightaway rumors about the supposed death of the



avant-garde. But another cause of the demise of the avant-garde concept was most certainly its tight relation to the political sphere, and within this political sphere to a certain type of left-wing radicalism that landed in a terminal crisis in the 1980s, and received its lethal blow when the Soviet empire collapsed in 1989. Much criticism in the late eighties and nineties, often from a postmodern perspective, targeted in particular the apparently totalitarian tendency of much aesthetic avant-gardism, not least on the basis of affiliations with political avant-gardism with undeniable totalitarian traits.<sup>50</sup>

At the same time—despite all suggestions about the death of the avant-garde, or the impossibility of presenting oneself still as avant-garde in the context of the high arts<sup>51</sup>—a Google search on October 19, 2007, shows that the term “avant-garde” could be found on 11.2 million Web pages on that day. If one adds the same term in other languages, for example, “vanguardia” in Spanish, the number rises considerably—to 15.6 million hits in total on the same day. Many Google hits do not involve any form of aesthetic avant-garde, but even if one reduces the 11.2 million hits for “avant-garde” by the additional search terms “art,” “kunst,” and “konst,” some 2.39 million hits remain. And that is quite some more than the 21,200 hits that one finds if one searches for the exact formulation “death of the avant-garde.” Some may believe that the avant-garde is dead, but they still have to convince the rest of the world, it seems. Automobile factories like Mercedes or Renault, lingerie producers, glossy magazines, and many other commercial enterprises aiming for maximum turnovers happily use the label. One other completely arbitrary example to conclude: in October 2004, the culture section of the Dutch newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* contained an article titled “Mona Lisa with Camel’s Head: Chinese Avant-garde Flourishes in Shanghai.”<sup>52</sup> The article is not hinting in any way at the popularity of the term “avant-garde” in Maoist discourse some three decades earlier, but is devoted exclusively to current developments in twenty-first-century China—in an exclusively positive, jubilant way. This and many other similar articles in art reviews in the printed press, as well as on the Internet, indicate that the notion “avant-garde” obviously has a vivid afterlife, despite its apparent demise in aesthetic debates in the late twentieth century. This resurgence of the label could be taken as further indication of its rhizomatic character, which reflects not only the heterogeneous configuration of movements to which it has been applied, but also its hybrid multitude of meanings.

### Notes

1. This chapter elaborates and revises reflections on the historical phenomenon of the avant-garde in the European arts in Hubert van den Berg, “Kortlægning af det nyes gamle spor. Bidrag til en historisk topografi over det 20. århundredes



avant-garde(r) i europæisk kultur," in *En tradition af opbrud. Avantgardernes tradition og politik*, ed. Tania Ørum, Marianne Ping Huang, and Charlotte Engberg (Hellerup: Spring, 2005), 19–43; Hubert van den Berg, "On the Historiographic Distinction between Historical and Neo-avant-garde," in *Avant-garde/Neo-Avant-garde*, ed. Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 63–74; Hubert van den Berg, "Life and Death of the Avant-garde on the Battlefield of Rhetoric—and Beyond," in *Forum: The University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of the Arts* 1 (Autumn 2005), [http://forum.llc.ed.ac.uk/issue1/Berg\\_Avant.html](http://forum.llc.ed.ac.uk/issue1/Berg_Avant.html); Hubert van den Berg, "Mapping Old Traces of the New: For a Historical Topography of 20th-Century Avant-garde(s) in the European Cultural Field(s)," *Arcadia* 41 (2006): 331–51; Hubert van den Berg, "'A World-wide Network of Periodicals Has Appeared...' Some Notes on the Inter- and Supranationality of European Constructivism between the Two World Wars," in *Nation, Style, and Modernism: CIHA Conference Papers 1*, ed. Jacek Purchla and Wolf Tegethoff (Kraków: International Cultural Centre, 2006), 143–55.

2. Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1974), 44; Matei Călinescu, *Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 140.

3. Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, 79; Cathérine Franklin et al., *L'ABCdaire de l'Art Contemporain* (Paris: Flammarion, 2003), 33.

4. Francis Francina, ed., *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993); Corona Hepp, *Avantgarde. Moderne Kunst, Kulturkritik und Reformbewegungen nach der Jahrhundertwende* (Munich: dtv, 1987).

5. Wolfgang Asholt and Walter Fähnders, eds., *Manifeste und Proklamationen der europäischen Avantgarde (1909–1938)* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995); Wolfgang Asholt and Walter Fähnders, eds., *Der Blick vom Wolkenkratzer: Avantgarde-Avantgardekritik—Avantgardeforschung* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000).

6. Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1968); Charles Russell, ed., *The Avant-Garde Today: An International Anthology* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981); Charles Russell, *Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries: The Literary Avant-Garde from Rimbaud through Postmodernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); John Weightman, *The Concept of the Avant-Garde: Explorations in Modernism* (London: Alcove, 1973).

7. Dietrich Scheunemann, ed., *European Avant-Garde: New Perspectives* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 7.

8. Timothy O. Benson, ed., *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation 1910–1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002).

9. Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," *Partisan Review* 6 (1939): 34–49; Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, 42–44.

10. Scheunemann, *European Avant-Garde*, 15–48.

11. Boris Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin: Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion* (München: Hanser, 1988); Dirk von Petersdorff, "Das Verlachen der Avantgarde: Rückblick auf eine ästhetische Prügeley," *Neue Rundschau* 106 (1995): 69–73.

12. Michael Scrivener, "An Introduction to an Anarchist Aesthetic," *Freedom* 40 (1977) 23:[I–IV].

13. Quoted in Călinescu, *Faces of Modernity*, 103.



14. In the 1920s one of the spokesmen of the Spanish avant-garde movement *ultraismo* published a survey of the early European avant-garde using the label "avant-garde": Guillermo de Torre, *Literaturas europeas de vanguardia* (Madrid: Edición Caro Raggio, 1925). In Poland, the futurist and constructivist art journal *Blok* (1924–27) presented itself explicitly as an "avant-garde" journal in its subtitle, *Czasopismo awangardy artystycznej*, meaning "Review of the Artistic Avant-garde."
15. This is seen in a recent exhibition in the Sprengel Museum in Hannover and Museum Boymans-Van Beuningen in Rotterdam; cf. Karin Orchard and Isabel Schulz, eds., *Merzgebiete: Kurt Schwitters und seine Freunde* (Cologne: DuMont Literatur- und Kunstverlag, 2006).
16. As pointed out by Ulrich Weisstein, "Le terme et le concept d'avant-garde en Allemagne," *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles* 1 (1975): 10–37.
17. Richard Hamann, *Geschichte der Kunst von der altchristlichen Zeit bis zur Gegenwart* (Berlin: Verlag von Th. Knaur Nachf., 1933), 873–92.
18. Alfred Andersch, ed., *Europäische Avantgarde* (Frankfurt: Verlag der Frankfurter Hefte, 1949).
19. Leopold Reidemeister, ed., *Der Sturm: Herwarth Walden und die Europäische Avantgarde. Berlin 1912–1932* (Berlin: Nationalgalerie in der Orangerie des Schlosses Charlottenburg, 1961).
20. Gérard Conio, *Les Avant-gardes entre métaphysique et histoire: Entretiens avec Philippe Sers* (Lausanne: L'Âge de l'homme, 2002), 9–14.
21. Paul Wood, ed., *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 10.
22. Cf. unpaginated reprint of the 1924 manifesto *Le Futurisme mondial* in Giovanni Lista, ed., *Marinetti et le Futurisme": Études, documents, iconographie* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'homme, 1977). Although Marinetti claims the whole contemporary avant-garde and environs to be futurist in this manifesto, the Italian futurists, due to their obsessive predilection for the military, actually used the term "avant-garde" quite frequently.
23. Herwarth Walden, *Expressionismus: Die Kunstwende* (Berlin: Verlag Der Sturm, 1918); Tristan Tzara, "Quelques Présidents et Présidentes," *Dada* 6 (1920): n.p.; Theo van Doesburg, "Principieele medewerkers aan De Stijl," *De Stijl* 8 (1927): 59–62.
24. Quoted in Călinescu, *Faces of Modernity*, 110–11.
25. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Einzelheiten II* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1984), 63.
26. Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* (New York: Schirmer, 2000): ix–xii.
27. Walter Fähnders, *Avantgarde und Moderne 1890–1933* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1998), 199–200.
28. Cf. a programmatic note by Hans Arp from 1915 in Alfons Backes-Haase, *Kunst und Wirklichkeit: Zur Typologie des DADA-Manifests* (Frankfurt: Hain-Athenäum, 1992), 35; Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo, and J. L. Martin, eds., *Circle: An International Survey of Constructive Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1937); Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory* (New York: New Press, 1983).
29. Wolfgang Asholt and Walter Fähnders, eds., 'Die ganze Welt ist eine Manifestation'. *Die Avantgarde und ihre Manifeste (1909–1938)* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), 1–9.



30. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Rhizome: Introduction* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1976); Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980).

31. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005).

32. Hans Arp and El Lissitzky, eds., *Die Kunstismen: Les Ismes de l'art. The Isms of Art* (Erlenbach/Munich/Leipzig: E. Rentsch Verlag, 1925). Although the book offers a survey of the avant-garde, the label "avant-garde" is not used by Arp and Lissitzky. It is only introduced in an inserted leaflet in the 1990 reprint. See Alois Martin Müller, "Letzte Truppendschau, Dernière Revue des Troupes, The Last Parade," in *Die Kunstismen: Les Ismes de l'art. The Isms of Art*, ed. Hans Arp and El Lissitzky (Baden: Müller Verlag, 1990), n.p.

33. These reviews often directed the attention of their respective readerships toward other avant-garde magazines. See also van den Berg, "A World-wide Network of Periodicals."

34. In Bürger's case, though, with the essential difference that several movements that he denies the status of "historical avant-garde movements" (see *Theorie der Avantgarde*, 44) also belonged to the historical configuration.

35. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986), 157.

36. Ibid.

37. One can observe that the "neo-" label was used by former Dadaists like Raoul Hausmann and Hans Richter to discredit avant-garde developments after the Second World War. As the references in Peter Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde* indicate, Bürger based his own judgment on the "neo-avant-garde" partially on their polemical assessments, which aimed at securing credit for the role they claimed in the historical Dada movement. See van den Berg, "On the Historiographic Distinction."

38. Cf. Hubert van den Berg, *From a New Art to a New Life: Avant-Garde Utopianism in Dada* (Aalborg: Center for Modernismeforskning, Aalborg Universitet, 2006).

39. Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?" *October* 70 (1994): 5–32.

40. Benedikt Hjärtarson, "At historisere den historiske avantgarde," in *En tradition af opbrud: Avantgardernes tradition og politik*, ed. Tania Ørum, Marianne Ping Huang, and Charlotte Engberg (Hellerup: Spring, 2005), 44–60.

41. Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (Berlin/Leipzig: Behr's Verlag, 1915), 274–81.

42. Vladimir I. Lenin, *What Is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement* (Moscow: Progress, 1969).

43. Cf. Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

44. Cf. Asholt and Fährnders, *Manifeste und Proklamationen*, 3–120.

45. Theo van Doesburg, "Revue der Avant-garde," *Het Getij* 6 (1921): 109.

46. Ibid.

47. Ibid.

48. Quoted in Hubert van den Berg, *The Import of Nothing: How Dada Came, Saw and Vanished in the Low Countries (1915–1929)* (New Haven, Conn.: G. K. Hall, 2002), 169.

49. Ibid., 167.



50. Cf. Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin*; Von Petersdorff, "Das Verlachen der Avantgarde."

51. Cf. Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-garde* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991).

52. "Mona Lisa met kamelenkop. Chinese avant-garde bloeit in Shanghai," *NRC Handelsblad* (October 15, 2004), *Cultureel Supplement*: CS3.



