Resisting the Question, "What Is an Avant-Garde?"

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"WHAT IS AN AVANT-GARDE?" I don't think there is a more timely question scholars interested in the history and theory of radical cultural production can ask. More than a simple inquiry, it is an invitation to recalibrate our key term and review in critical spirit our theoretical paradigms, the historical narratives that frame our subject as an evolving sociocultural phenomenon, and the institutional and geopolitical positions that enable us to research, write about, and teach the avant-garde.

There's nothing new about asking, "What is an avant-garde?" or recognizing that doing so has broader implications than the mere meaning of a word. It is, to repeat, a timely question, a question that orients us towards contingencies of time and place, towards the conditions and horizons of our ability to know our subject. It is asked and answered—sometimes explicitly, more often tacitly—every time an artist writes a manifesto or a critic uses the word "avant-garde" to describe a poem or painting. Most of the time, the asking and answering fall within conventional understandings and applications of the term and its history. On occasion, however, they can spark a genuine "shock of the new" (to recall Robert Hughes),[1] unsettling assumptions, shifting paradigms, bringing to light formerly encrypted histories, and recasting disciplinary configurations.

For example, when French anarchist artists and art critics asked the question in the 1880s, they challenged the prevailing notion that avant-garde art was whatever most effectively abetted the socialist propaganda engine. Against that presumption, post-Impressionist painters and decadent poets asserted the right to explore form and content that were in no direct way at the service of political movements, but that, as they saw it, challenged the status quo nonetheless.[2] The consequences were remarkable: in the short term, movements such as neo-impressionism and decadentism devoted to the exploration of *L'art pour l'art*, journals, and a network of galleries to promote the new art; in the long term, the aesthetic theories of Theodor Adorno and Clement Greenberg,

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which have proved so crucial to our understanding of the politics of aesthetic form.

A century later, to cite another example, feminist, queer, postcolonial, poststructuralist, and critical-race theorists asked the same question and, in so doing, unveiled the Eurocentrism, sexism, racism, and homophobia not only of the historical avant-garde but also of the academic discourses and institutions that had canonized it. When they asked "What is an avant-garde?" a rash of other questions followed: Why were there so few women and non-Europeans in the textbooks? Museum shows? Galleries? Why were so many vanguards cozy with fascists and sleazy marketers? And why had it taken so long to recognize these obvious inequities? The question now cast light on the reactionary politics that sometimes informed the historical avant-garde's radicalism, the scholarly discourses that described it, and the gallery and museum system that supported it. Further, the question drew attention to an aspect of the avant-garde sorely unattended by scholars and critics: that the avant-garde, in Paul Mann's words, was a "discursive economy" with all the vested interests that contour any system of circulation.[3]

These two examples—two of a bunch—show that to ask the question "What is an avant-garde?" is to be part of a venerable tradition, a tradition that, rather like the avant-garde itself, often turns on tradition itself to reveal and recast the conditions and horizons of tradition itself.

This essay is intended in that spirit. I will argue that our understandings of the avant-garde are tethered to perspectives that deplete our efforts to define, theorize, and historicize the avant-garde. Specifically, I will argue that we cannot answer the question, "What is an avant-garde?" until we better comprehend (1) the history of the field of avant-garde studies itself, (2) the contradictions inherent in any effort to compose a historical narrative of the avant-garde, and (3) the conceptual and historiographical limits that come into play when we define the avant-garde as an artistic, as opposed to a broader, cultural tendency. To illustrate this point, I will discuss a variety of avant-gardes, though paying particular attention to the Black Arts Movement, with which I am particularly familiar and which encompasses many of the most important issues facing the field of avant-garde studies today.

Ultimately, I will argue that, because of the nature of our subject matter as it relates to academic study, the dilemmas contouring any effort to write its history, and the epistemological limits of criticism amplified by our subject matter, the question is irredeemably contingent. My essay is therefore best understood as a study of the benefits of *resisting the question, "What is an avant-garde?"* And the answer that I'll suggest should be taken as a *resistant answer.* That is the only possible answer in an era when the avant-garde has achieved ubiquity.

The Institutions of Avant-Garde Studies

It behooves us to remember that the avant-garde is not a child of the university and has often taken a spirited stand against that institution and those who work in it. By the time avant-garde studies became a full-fledged academic field in the 1950s—dominated then, as now, by literary critics and art historians—the artistic avant-garde had been doing its thing for well over a century, accumulating a vast body of works, theories, galleries, scandals, and legends.

Criticism of the avant-garde has not always been the purview of the academic either. Baudelaire and Gautier weren't professors; they were working artists and public intellectuals. And though Ortega y Gasset's book on dehumanization in art, Greenberg's essay on kitsch, Benjamin's on the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, and the Lukács-Brecht debate are staples of academic essays and syllabi, they weren't written with canons and curricula in mind. Their critiques were intended to guide the Left's cultural apparatus, a set of institutions and organizations of which university departments and their faculty were only a minor part.

It wasn't until the 1950s that the avant-garde got its professors, appropriately sober journals, curricula, and canon. It was during this same period that the capitals of the industrialized and industrializing nations (such as Brazil) saw the development of major museums dedicated to the avant-garde (in the United States, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim), dozens of retrospectives of movements and individual artists, and a robust system of galleries specializing in the marketing of their paintings and sculpture. The following decade was punctuated by the foundational scholarly works of Anna Balakian, Maurice Nadeau, J. H. Matthews, Michel Foucault, Hilton Kramer, Renato Poggioli, Jacques Derrida, Roger Shattuck, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, Roland Barthes, Peter Bürger, Lucy Lippard, Donald Drew Egbert, and others. Those books and articles—and the publishers and editors who put them into print—established the avant-garde as a key term for academic study and a proper subject for the curriculum, at least in certain departments.

What is the avant-garde? For someone who first encountered the avant-garde as a student in the late 1980s—as I did—the answer to the question was obvious: surrealist films, expressionist dramas and paintings, futurist poetry, constructivist architecture, Dada collages. But there was an irony to that self-evidence, one aptly described by Fredric Jameson: as students, we experienced the shock of the new in a "set of dead classics."[4] This typically postmodern irony (at the time, colorized clips from *Un chien andalou* occasionally appeared on MTV) wasn't just character-

istic of my generation's first encounters with the art of the avant-garde. When I began studying the subject in earnest, there was a canon of scholarly work that was mandatory reading—Baudelaire, Gautier, Lukács, Poggioli, Lippard, Bürger, Marjorie Perloff, etc. But there was also an emerging discourse that was looking at both canons, at avant-garde art and its criticism, with a different set of priorities. I think here of Teresa de Lauretis, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Greil Marcus, Rosalind Krauss, Sue Ellen Case, Hal Foster, Guy Debord (rediscovered, like Situationism more generally, in the 1980s), Thomas Crow, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Griselda Pollock, and Kristine Stiles.

There were two particularly exciting aspects of this new wave. For one, it showed that we could no longer take for granted that "avant-garde" was synonymous with progressive politics or liberatory aesthetics. How could this idea be sustained in the face of the often Eurocentric, misogynist, homophobic, imperialist, and racist tendencies of surrealism, Italian futurism, vorticism, and other classic avant-garde movements? Equally exciting was how these writers approached the shortcomings they identified. Earlier criticism generally took a single position on the contradictions of a given avant-garde: it was either radical or reactionary, "avant-garde" or not. The new approach was more dialectical and dexterous, informed by a more nuanced understanding of power, ideology, and institutionality. We learned that, because the avant-garde was imbricated with hegemonic cultural, political, and social institutions, it was *both* an agent of critical consciousness *and* ideological blindness, *both* liberatory praxis *and* repressive authority. Within this more motile critical framework, we could not only better appreciate the radicalism of, say, André Breton's surrealist group, but also frankly recognize the limits of its attack on imperialism, capitalism, white power, and patriarchy.

As exciting as these two ideas were, there was a third that was especially compelling: discussing the avant-garde wasn't enough—it also brought into play the role of the critic and her institutions. Though I disagree with much of Peter Bürger's argument in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, I take as gospel his assertion that the avant-garde's ability to be a cultural agent depends in large part on how it relates to and thematizes its enabling institutions.[5] However, where Bürger's critique falls short is in his failure to incorporate into his critique the institutions that enable his own labor as a scholar and critic. Though he demands that we map and historicize the institutions of the avant-garde, there's not a word about academia, as if scholars and teachers were beyond history and power—and beyond the avant-garde. Yet the relationship between the avant-garde and its scholars and critics is long-lived, both productive and fraught, and determinant, to a degree, of both avant-garde praxis and

scholarship.[6] Leaving academics out of the picture all but ensures that we will fail to understand what the avant-garde is and why it matters.

As an illustration, consider the Black Arts Movement, the radical Afrocentric vanguard of the 1960s and '70s that catalyzed widespread changes in the way we think about race, power, and aesthetics. Its artists and activists targeted the institutions of primary and secondary education, believing them to be ideological institutions of racialized power in the United States. Dozens of independent educational and cultural centers were founded as alternatives to the institutionalized racism of those institutions. This does not mean, however, that BAM activists completely rejected the mainstream. Indeed, the movement played a leading role in the creation of academic Black Studies, transforming how Africa, the African diaspora, and African America are taught and their scholars funded in universities and colleges. Within those institutions, BAM activists not only altered academic discourse, but also took on tenure, promotion, and admission policies, attempting a thoroughgoing overhaul of departmental demographics and town-gown relations.

Of equal importance to the movement's critical interface with the institutions of higher education was how those institutions altered the movement. Because they worked in institutions that were increasingly concerned with homophobia, misogyny, anti-Semitism, and other forms of chauvinism, BAM artists and critics were forced to confront the movement's own shortcomings. At the same time, its more progressive sociocultural implications were also eliminated or diverted as it was disciplined via liberal arts curricula, the tenure and promotion process, and diverse discourses on racism and African-American culture. This institutional history is only just now being told, despite its palpable impact on how we understand the BAM, its significance, or its particular "avant-gardeness."[7]

A more sophisticated reading of the role of identity, place, and power in the institutions of avant-garde scholarship is not the only reason why we should ask and answer the question, "What is an avant-garde?" in a different way. Consider the issue of artistic medium. Until quite recently, when we spoke of "avant-garde art," we generally meant what RoseLee Goldberg has called the "solid arts": painting, film, poetry, sculpture. Though avant-garde music has enjoyed consistent attention from scholars, other performing arts—theater, dance, and performance art, in particular—have not. And even within the solid arts, certain media, such as textiles, have been marginalized, along with the artists who worked with them, a problem often compounded by issues of identity. Sophie Taeuber-Arp is a perfect example of such double marginality. Though she created compelling visual art, textiles, puppets, and dances and was

a founding member of the Dada movement, one could find little about her in academic works published before 1983, except for the fact that she was the lover or spouse of other avant-garde artists. Fortunately, this has now changed, thanks to that year's Museum of Modern Art retrospective (one of the first given by that museum to a female artist; sculptor Louise Bourgeois was the subject of the very first retrospective a year earlier). But even the MoMA show was biased towards the traditional solid arts, focusing almost exclusively on Taeuber-Arp's sculptures, paintings, and prints; that bias persists in more recent scholarship.

A handful of live events in the history of the avant-garde are securely canonical: the riotous premier of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*; the cabarets of the Zürich Dadas; the *serate* of the Italian futurists; Stravinsky and Nijinsky's *Le sacre du printemps*; Erik Satie, Pablo Picasso, Jean Cocteau, and Sergei Diaghilev's *Parade*; Chris Burden's *Shoot*. But these speak neither to the diversity nor the ubiquity of performance in the avant-garde. Addressing the issue twenty-five years after the publication of her truly groundbreaking survey *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present*,[8] Goldberg asks,

> Is this disconnect from history an inevitable component of performance, because the practice is by nature ephemeral? Or is something else at issue—lack of access to and familiarity with the hundred-year history of "live art"? Though the value of access to the "real thing" in museums should never be underestimated, young painters learn a great deal by looking at reproductions in magazines or slide projections in lecture halls. Their real advantage, therefore, seems to be the existence of the century-old autonomous discipline of art history whose agreed-on vocabulary and range of theories—formal and social—support and contextualize the Story of Art. For the artwork that leaves nothing or little behind, we lack the kind of shorthand taken for granted in discussions of the "solid arts."[9]

James Harding and John Rouse would add that it's not just a question of record keeping and archival access, but of the dominance of the models and methods of literary studies.[10] For example, Bürger discusses Friedrich Schiller at length, but he not only fails to mention the latter's highly influential work as a dramatist, but also frames the discussion wholly in terms of Hans-Georg Gadamer's text-based hermeneutic method. While Harding and Rouse don't deny the utility of that method, they also make clear that it is insufficient when considering the nontextual dimensions of performance or the widespread antitextuality of avant-gardes and their productions.[11] The benefits to correcting the antiperformance bias are theoretical, historiographical, and institutional. Harding and Rouse assert that if we recognize "the avant-garde gesture as first and foremost a performative act," then we can "shift away from the Eurocentrism that has dominated avant-garde studies almost since its inception."[12]

In sum, because the avant-garde so often implicates the institutions and discourses that frame it, the vanguard challenge will perennially play on the limits of academic criticism.[13] So, while it is always timely to pose the question, "What is an avant-garde?" we should also always ask, "Which questions are we *not* asking about the avant-garde?" and "From where do we ask about the avant-garde?"

Writing the History of the Avant-Garde

What are the storylines we use to tell the tale of the avant-garde, to situate its gestures of rebellion and resistance meaningfully across time and place? How do those storylines "dramatize" our subject, to recall the terminology of Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives*? How do they frame the avant-garde as an agent, as something that acts within a specific sociocultural situation, as something with a distinctive purpose?[14] How do our assumptions about the avant-garde inflect our analysis of historical evidence?

In a meticulous study of the historical documents and the critical scholarship on the legendary Théâtre de l'Œuvre's production of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, Thomas Postlewait describes a pattern of erroneous claims and commentary about Jarry, about the riot that supposedly broke out at the play's premier (including the persistent failure to recognize that there were, in fact, two premiers), and about the event's significance in the history of the avant-garde and modern theater. "We want the event to be the origin of a radical break in culture and values," he writes. "But in order to establish our preferred narrative, we must repress a significant part of the historical record."[15] There are many more things for us to learn about the touchstone events that festoon the existing histories of the avant-garde. Some of these discoveries will force a significant reorientation of the field, as we learn from scholars such as Postlewait, Kimberly Jannarone, and others who are finding remarkable materials in the archive, altering how we think of Antonin Artaud, Italian futurism, George Balanchine's choreographies, and other such topics.[16]

Putting aside questions of historical documentation and interpretation for the moment, is there just one story to tell about the avant-garde? Because their agency, situations, and purposes are different, a group of draft-dodging artists hiding out in Zürich during World War I and, say, a Malaysian playwright in the 1980s, are avant-garde in distinct ways. Malaysian dramatist Kee Thuan Chye wrote and produced his play *1984 Here and Now* to challenge the hegemony of ethnic and linguistic groups in his country. To do so, he had to negotiate a local matrix of publishing, theatrical, and legal institutions, as well as the assumptions

and expectations of those who attended English-language theater in Malaysia (that is, the nation's elite). Kee's "scene" was also shaped by U.S. neoliberalism (a major source of income and authority for English-speaking elites in Malaysia) and the European literary canon (including the historical avant-garde and, of course, George Orwell).[17] Both a legacy of the European avant-garde and a unique, innovative, independent manifestation of cultural resistance rooted in a singular situation, Kee's work is a perfect illustration of the many "rough edges" of avant-garde history, as Harding has called them: places of contestation, "simultaneous articulation," and "apostate adaptation."[18] Along such rough edges, the unitary, linear, Eurocentric concept of avant-garde history breaks down.

This kind of fracturing or "roughing up" of the story is particularly apparent when we look at the avant-garde in a more global way, but is also apparent in individual movements, as is clear when we turn again to the Black Arts Movement. For sure, the BAM possessed characteristics that align it firmly within the classic avant-garde tradition. The art and criticism of the movement are peppered with approbative references to Dada, surrealism, and futurism, as well as to the political vanguards of China, Cuba, and other decolonizing nations. Just take a look at Amiri Baraka's "Black Dada Nihilismus" or his manifesto "The Revolutionary Theatre" with its many references to Artaud.[19] The historical avant-garde was an inspiration and a rich conceptual and creative resource for conscious Black artists and their audiences.

But the artists and critics of the BAM also pitched their labors explicitly *against* that tradition, viewing it as elitist, Eurocentric, imperialist, and racist. Playwright Ed Bullins was in plentiful company when he expressed his disdain for the "so-called Western avant-garde." As Bullins writes in respect to avant-garde drama,

> These "avant-garde" movements are not attempts, in most cases, to break or separate from Western theater's history, conventions, and traditions, but are efforts to extend Western dramatic art, to perpetuate and adapt the white man's theater, to extend Western reality, and finally to *rescue* his culture and have it benefit *his* needs.[20]

Scholars and critics of the time, white and nonwhite alike, were regularly taken to task by BAM members for failing to account for the distinct experiences of the minoritized and marginalized. BAM theorists like James Stewart, Charles Fuller, and Larry Neal decried assumptions about aesthetic objectivity in arts scholarship and funding that denied a fair hearing for the diversity of African-rooted aesthetic expression (an issue I'll return to below).[21] In this respect, the BAM was decidedly *anti*-avant-garde.

But the BAM was not defined by its relationship to the Euro-U.S. avant-garde—it also shaped itself and its modes of expressive critique in ways that had nothing to do with the avant-garde. Neal and Baraka resurrected and revised West African ethical/aesthetic systems; Stephen Henderson found philosophy in the grassroots tradition of cultural production carried by blues musicians from the jook joints of the South to the rent parties, night clubs, and bohemian poetry clusters of the North. A similar urge motivated BAM fellow traveler Cedric Robinson, who shows in his magisterial *Black Marxism* that the "Jacobin imaginary" and its fantasy of vanguard agency has distorted the historical record, denying an accurate account of the role that the African-American masses—not elites, not parties, not avant-gardes—have played in the destruction of racist colonialism.[22]

This "pro-con-and-other" attitude is not a symptom of hypocrisy or naïveté. BAM artists and critics had to sustain a high level of theoretical and practical mobility to survive and succeed in a situation that was, to say the least, complicated. Maintaining a motile and ambivalent position vis-à-vis the Western avant-garde tradition empowered black artists and intellectuals to engage that tradition on a variety of fronts and from a variety of perspectives, intervene in its scholarly apparatus (that is, the creation of Black Studies), and alter the sociopolitical and discursive conditions that governed the emergence and development of avant-gardes. Simultaneously following, disavowing, and independent, the BAM was something of a "quantum avant-garde." In Burke's words, the BAM's vanguardism depends on how we portray its agency, its acts, its scenes, and its purpose.

This trickster-like quality isn't only characteristic of "new" vanguards like the BAM or Kee Thuan Chye. The radicalism of Breton's surrealist group, for example, appears quite different when viewed from within conventional understandings of vanguardist cultural production than it does from the perspective of, say, René Crevel or Suzanne Césaire. Both were minorities within the group (Crevel was bisexual; Césaire was black, female, and a colonial subject). Both called into question the movement's racism, sexism, homophobia, Eurocentrism, and privilege. They showed that the vanguardism of surrealism was dependent, contingent upon specific, historically and culturally situated structures of power and representation. They did not disparage the surrealists when they raised such questions nor dismiss the surrealist critique by recognizing its rootedness in European history. Rather, they expanded the scope of surrealism, identified problematic assumptions and aporias in its theory and practice, and sharpened its challenge to power within conditions beyond those of its creators.[23] From the perspective of the racialized and sexualized minority, the French surrealist group led by André Breton both

was and was not avant-garde. Situated within a history that accounts for gender, sexuality, colonialism, and the singular conditions that govern challenges to power, surrealism is also a quantum vanguard.

An additional issue: the role of "Europe" in avant-garde historiography is in need of more critical attention. The usual presumption is that the avant-garde began in Europe and evolved towards its current, global phase through a sequence of exchanges, ruptures, and reactions, each with Europe as its origin and ultimate referent. This is the narrative promulgated by the key historical works of the field (Poggioli, Matei Călinescu, Egbert), and by most of those attempting to think of the avant-garde in a more global, transnational fashion. While it would be foolish to deny clear and hardy developmental lines within avant-garde history that originate in, and orient around, Europe, or to deny that Europe and Europeans have played a dominant role in the history of the avant-garde, there are other lines worth considering, and other origins.

Andrea Flores Khalil, in a fascinating study of the poetry, film, and visual art produced by French-speaking Arab artists in Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt during the twentieth century, constructs a multidirectional chronology in which North African artists, inspired by their encounter with European avant-garde art, reflected critically on what brought them to that encounter and, doing so, were alerted to alternative possibilities and timelines of the avant-garde. Attempting to counter both damaging Western notions of progress and modernity as well as the orthodoxies of Islamic culture, these artists and their works did not simply reject the past in the Poundian sense of "making it new." Though certainly seeking the new—they were as conscious of the vicious atavisms in their societies as their European comrades were of theirs—these writers also recognized themselves in light of indigenous cultural modes that predated European influence and provided robust formal and theoretical resources for the Arab artist in his effort to move beyond European hegemony and articulate a more empowering modernity.

And here the question of the avant-garde's European lineage comes into play. According to Khalil, writers like Abdelwahab Meddeb and filmmakers like Moncef Dhouib perceived their European influences, paradoxically, *as both precursors and followers.* These artists came to understand that there was no European modernity without Arab modernity, no Arab modernity without the European. As Khalil puts it, there is "a strange, circular, temporal effect" that must be accounted for when considering such history, a sense that the avant-garde is "always returning and moving ahead simultaneously."[24]

Recent work in modernist studies has found a similar kind of circularity, showing that modernity and modernism have not only signified

differently in Africa, China, and Latin America than in Europe and the United States, but that these concepts may not be uniquely or originally European. We've learned that modernity has signified differently for racialized minorities *within* Europe and the United States (that is, Crevel and the BAM) than it has for the more privileged and secure.[25] It is certainly true that vanguards have developed most often when and where European systems of trade, warfare, and intercultural communication have intruded into sociocultural situations that were formerly unaffected by those systems. And such intrusions inevitably carry with them ideas of the "new," the "radical," and the "experimental" that are rooted in European culture. But those ideas are always localized, transmuted to greater or lesser degree, and they often catalyze reflections on local dynamics of new and old, modern and traditional.

In this context, Richard Schechner writes,

> There is no area, be it Micronesia, the Pacific Rim, West Africa, the Circumpolar Region, or wherever, which does not have artists actively trying to use, appropriate, reconcile, come to terms with, exploit, understand—the words and political tone vary, but the substance doesn't—the relationships between local cultures in their extreme particular historical development and the increasingly complex and multiple contacts and interactions not only among various cultures locally and regionally, but on a global and interspecific scale.[26]

This does not mean that any cultural activist who positions him or herself in this fashion is avant-garde. The point is that vanguards come into being in sociocultural situations that may or may not be the consequence of a common stimulus (that is, European modernity) and are distinct in terms of how they articulate the past, present, and future and how they conceive and practice cultural activism within that articulation. Schechner's comment alerts us to other contingencies, suggesting that the avant-garde is a situated practice and a situational concept. Indeed, the avant-garde—again, as both practice and critical concept—is dependent upon varying conditions of production, circulation, and reception. In those terms, the question, "What is an avant-garde?" is not the most useful question to ask. Very much like Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau's description of "hegemony," I would argue that the avant-garde is "not the majestic unfolding of an identity but the response to a crisis."[27]

Though I'm not against the effort to think about what the avant-garde *is*—I do it all the time and enthusiastically encourage others to do the same—I'm more interested in thinking about how others have asked and answered the question and what that tells us about our own discourses and institutions, which are often implicated in the very crises that catalyze vanguards. How did Baudelaire ask and answer the question? Or Islamic

radicals in the dungeons of Gamal Abdel Nasser? Or socialist poets in the salons of 1920s Mexico City? Or agitprop playwrights in apartheid-era South Africa? Or the artists and audiences of the tent theater movement of 1960s Tokyo? When we sustain the avant-garde as a *question*, when we conceptualize it as a *critical contingency* rather than a *substantive agent*, we open our discourse to a range of agencies, acts, scenes, situations, and purposes—open that discourse to "a critical reassessment of the historical functions of the term *avant-garde* itself."[28]

The Avant-Garde Beyond Art

The avant-garde began as a military strategy. It received one of its most influential formulations from Henri de Saint-Simon, a man concerned at least as much with the avant-gardes of industry and science as with art, and whose disciples carried his ideas not only to art schools but to the leading military, medical, and engineering schools of France and, from there, to France's colonies. The term is as ubiquitous to political history as it is to art, as anyone familiar with the theories of Bakunin, Lenin, Mao, Castro, Debord, et al. is aware. A casual Internet search shows that it is embraced not only by artists and scholars, but by industrial design firms, advertising companies, recording studios, tattoo artists, investment bankers, and a host of others with little obvious concern with art. Yet, despite this rich and suggestive variety of meanings and histories—a true ubiquity—most scholars presume that any answer to the question "What is an avant-garde?" will primarily concern art and aesthetics (understood broadly as the domain of sensibility and representation), even if that answer is grounded in careful historical research, thorough analysis of discursive frameworks, and a meticulously constructed sense of institutionality.

The most obvious reason for this presumption is, I would think, disciplinary. Most of those who study the avant-garde belong to academic departments whose focus is primarily aesthetic objects: literature, visual art, theater, and so on. We like art best, so that's what we write about. And though academics are increasingly open to interdisciplinary approaches, in practice, it is difficult to carry out interdisciplinary research and not always obvious when such work should actually be attempted. But the assumption has roots that run deeper than the contingencies of our likes and dislikes or the organizational structures of universities. I would argue that there is also a problem with the way we think about the "politics of form" and about avant-garde studies itself: its methods, purposes, and possibilities. Three decades ago, Raymond Williams

wondered why "[n]o full social analysis of avant-garde movements has yet [been] undertaken."[29] Essaying such an analysis two decades later, Barrett Watten argues that the "lack of an adequate connection between avant-garde negativity and the larger social logic" in which vanguards and their creations circulate hampers our ability to properly delineate the "politics of form."[30] While such a politics is most apparent in art—and has been best addressed by those who specialize in the analysis of aesthetic objects—Watten asserts that the question of form is not an exclusively artistic question.[31] He writes,

> Avant-garde negativity is quite variously articulated in relation, particularly, to gender and nationality at specific historical moments. There is no "one" avant-garde, defined by the paradigmatic example of the historical avant-garde; a much wider range of cultural politics . . . continues to emerge from social formations that engender formal experiment.

Within a conception of the avant-garde that understands it as articulating a cultural politics within a wide range of social formations, the avant-garde can be approached as a varying, situational articulation of the "politics of form." Such an expanded field enables us not only to bring more subjects into the purview of avant-garde studies, but also allows us to consider the cultural productions of already accepted avant-gardes in more sophisticated fashion.

What would such an expanded field look like? Again, the Black Arts Movement provides a useful case, giving us an opportunity to assess the limits of an art-focused reading of the avant-garde and understand Watten's notion of the "politics of form." In his influential essay "The Black Arts Movement," Larry Neal characterized the BAM as the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept." This sibling relationship was built around the fact that "the Black Arts and the Black Power concepts both relate broadly to the Afro-American's desire for self-determination and nationhood."[32]

The key issue for Neal is representation, which he understands in both its political and aesthetic sense. He writes, "A main tenet of Black Power is the necessity for black people to define the world in their own terms." To this end, African-Americans must wage a "cultural revolution,"[33] a comprehensive program that would, in the words of one of Neal's comrades, the Revolutionary Action Movement's Robert Williams, "destroy the conditioned white oppressive mores, attitudes, ways, customs, philosophies, habits, etc., which the oppressor has taught and trained us to have." Williams concludes by advocating, "on a mass scale, a new revolutionary culture."[34] This revolutionary culture would certainly be comprised of empowering, incisive, memorable paintings, poems, plays,

and dances. But Neal and Williams's concept of culture is not limited to "high culture" alone.

Consider a cornerstone of that cultural revolution, the affirmation "Black is beautiful!" On the face of it, this would seem to be an aesthetic matter, one best addressed by creating compelling, empowering counterimages to those that would portray the African-American as unvirtuous, undeserving, and inhuman. However, one of the reasons why the affirmation of black beauty resonated so deeply with African Americans was because black abjectivity wasn't only communicated by paintings and poems—indeed, art was only a minor part of the equation. The ubiquitous advertisements for skin lighteners, hair straighteners, and nose narrowers in the back pages of African American publications such as *Ebony* is only one piece of evidence that demonstrates how the ideology of self-hatred was promulgated through a range of psychological, cultural, economic, and social formations. Indeed, as George M. Fredrickson shows, classical conceptions of beauty were integral to the efforts of white Europeans to define a hierarchy of being in order to justify slavery and empire. Victor Courtet de l'Isle, one of the most influential theorists of racism in the 1800s, argued that "the races could be measured through an assessment of how closely the faces of each type approximated the Greek statues of Apollo."[35]

For this reason, black artists who challenged the racism of the mainstream art world had to do more than change art. Though the hegemonic formalism of 1960s art culture in the United States did not depend on magazine ads or Greek statuary to affirm its aesthetic principles, it nevertheless affirmed the neoclassical notion that great art was timeless and humanist. This view was perceived as patent hypocrisy for those on the wrong side of the color line. Black artists understood, as Mary Ellen Lennon writes, that

> the aesthetic standards used to judge "great art" long assumed "natural" and "universal"—*everyone knows Shakespeare was a genius*—were fundamentally *subjective* and racist at their core. There was no "raceless" or "universal" experience in America, they argued. . . . Far from being a simple byproduct of white oppression, art and the Euro-American aesthetics used to police the boundaries of "great art" were instead "major tools of black oppression" and indispensable bulwarks for the white American power structure. This "Euro-Western sensibility" denied the black experience.[36]

Thus, black artists, in line with Neal and Williams's encompassing visions of the black revolution, had to take on the "*de facto* segregation of the art world in all its institutionalized forms," including art journals and textbooks, art criticism, curricula, faculty recruitment and retention,

tuition and scholarship structures, and gallery and museum programming.[37] But even this thorough-going institutional engagement was not sufficient, since the very way that "art" was conceptualized and marketed by art-world institutions and intellectuals marginalized certain kinds of cultural producers and cultural products that had always "engaged the totalizing implications of black beauty." These producers were little known and now largely unremembered. "Too good to quit," as Lorenzo Thomas characterized them, these anonymous artists had worked for decades in quotidian media like sign painting, fashion design, hair style, cuisine, and street-corner oratory, keeping alive a resistant, empowering, historically conscious street-level Afrocentric culture. Their very existence riled the authorities; this "underground of unknown artists . . . . was purposely denigrated and misrepresented in both black and white critical media."[38] For these artists, a positive sense of self, community, and history were inseparable from economic, political, and cultural independence and empowerment. They gave the movement street-level credibility and popular energy.

In sum, the Black Arts Movement's attack on racist standards of beauty demanded a comprehensive—if not totalizing—engagement with white power, combining representational strategy, media politics, institutional intervention, discursive recalibration, economic development, and an altered, consciously "black" practice of everyday life. Within such an encompassing concept of black beauty, a painting was no more (or less) significant than a deftly turned barroom toast, a poem than a compelling streetcorner oration, a jazz composition than the sharply turned brim of a porkpie hat or the syncopated gait of a church-going couple.[39] And none of these would be relevant if they had not been created and circulated within a complex, historically grounded, geopolitically articulated network of practices that, in Neal's memorable formulation, would serve as a "bridge between [the creators] and the spirit . . . . an affirmation of daily life and the necessity of living life with honor."[40] "The Black Arts Movement," he writes, "believes that your ethics and your aesthetics are one."[41]

This leads us to an issue that is germane not just to the expansive politics of form explored by the BAM, but to two basic methodological questions that arise if avant-garde studies is to embrace a similarly expansive mode. First, within such an expanded framework, can't virtually everything, in principle, be considered avant-garde? Do we now equate, say, demi-fascist Tea Party rallies with Italian futurist *serate*? Experiments with low-temperature vacuum cooking in a northern Spanish restaurant with Vsevold Meyerhold's constructivist spectacles? A new fad in body piercing with the growling cabaret performances of Emmy Hennings?

Yes and no. For it is one thing to claim that something *is* avant-garde, another to approach something *as if* it were avant-garde. The former is an assertion, the latter a step towards critical analysis and careful argument. This distinction between *is* and *as if* is an important one for performance studies, a field that also employs an expansive, situation-oriented methodology, what Richard Schechner calls a "broad spectrum approach."[42] Explaining the difference, he writes, "There are limits to what *is* performance. But just about anything can be studied *as* performance. Something *is* a performance when historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition say it is."[43] This distinct intellectual process can be differentiated from the more speculative process of considering something *as* performance: "What the *as* says is that the object of study will be regarded 'from the perspective of,' 'in terms of,' 'interrogated by' a particular discipline of study."[44] In other words, when pursuing the question "What is an avant-garde?" we can consider in critical fashion both those subjects already recognized as valid by the field of avant-garde studies, but also those that, while not now recognized, are "open" to the established criteria of investigation and criticism.

A similar question faced black activists in the 1960s. While there was general agreement that a cultural revolution had to be based in a comprehensive approach to African and African American culture (that is, anything African and African-American should be considered *as* black), there was spirited argument concerning the validity and value of specific aspects of that culture for the empowerment of African Americans and the waging of the cultural revolution. In other words, there was much argument about what *is* black. The blues, for example, was a widespread object of debate, with one side arguing that it promoted submissiveness (this being the position of Maulana Ron Karenga), the other that it was a mode of historically grounded subversion and radical epistemology (that being Neal's perspective). Reflecting the dynamic tension between the *as* and the *is* of blackness, Kimberly Benston defines it not as something that can be essentialized or abstracted from the situation, but rather a site of "multiple often conflicting implications of possibility."[45] We might usefully characterize the avant-garde in just such a fashion.

A Resistant Answer to the Question, "What Is an Avant-Garde?"

However, if debate over what *is* avant-garde is to be meaningful, we need criteria to guide that debate. Such criteria need to be expansive enough to encompass the "multiple often conflicting implications of

possibility" of the avant-garde's politics of form (that is, to energetically embrace the *as*), but also draw our attention to the need for the kinds of critical self-reflection that I've advocated in this essay. I would suggest three such criteria.

First and fundamentally, the avant-garde *challenges power.* That challenge is as varied as the stratagems and technologies of power itself. Indeed, one of the more noteworthy contributions of the avant-garde is a more sophisticated understanding of how power works, whether it be the mechanical and imaginative power of the internal combustion engine embraced by the futurists or the interpersonal power of the mantra "the personal is political" deployed so effectively by civil rights and feminist activists in the 1960s and '70s. This criterion mandates a situational approach to the avant-garde, since every avant-garde challenges power somewhere, sometime, within a singular conjunction of people, ideas, institutions, discourses, technologies, and things. Further, to understand the challenge, we must attend not only to its situation but our own position within or relative to that situation.

Second, to be avant-garde, one must be a *minority.* This criterion anchors our understandings of the avant-garde firmly to the avant-garde's historical origins in the military, where it designated a small group of soldiers that went in advance of the main body. It also acknowledges the historical contributions of minorities to the avant-garde tradition. Finally, it alerts us to varied forms of institutional interface, since minorities can be vested, as is the political minority in the U.S. Congress. It reflects a sociologically grounded concept of small-group identity. The avant-garde is *different* from the majority—an avant-garde painter paints differently, an avant-garde military group fights differently.

Difference isn't always a choice, of course. The French surrealists, almost all of whom were children of privilege, had the freedom to choose to identify themselves against the majority. The activists of Black Arts Movement had no such choice; as African Americans, mostly poor or working-class, living within a racist society, they were always already a minority. Again, the technocrats who advocated Saint-Simon's model of the avant-garde in the 1840s were graduates of elite French educational institutions and they put the model into practice against subalterns, most notably in Algeria. Avant-gardes can be down-pressed, degraded, subaltern minorities, too, such as the women who run Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya (a women's collective in Chiapas, Mexico) or the queer activists of ACT-UP.[46] Regardless of their specific position vis-à-vis the hegemonies of their societies, vanguards take an *antimajority stance* and, in so doing, gain forms of power, perspective, and productivity that are unavailable to the majority. As with the challenge to power, the criterion of minority

requires careful analysis of the specific situation within which the vanguard is articulated, as minority status is always a differential calculation.

Third, to challenge power from a minoritarian perspective, the avant-garde must work with and within *culture*. Culture is fundamental to modern power and it is medium and lifeblood to the avant-garde, the stuff it shapes, the ethos within which it lives, a site of "multiple often conflicting implications of possibility," the material and context for the avant-garde's politics of form. "Culture," as we know, is as contentious a term as "power" and "minority." Indeed, as Terry Eagleton points out, it is one of the most complex and debated terms in the English language. Eagleton suggests "the complex of values, customs, beliefs, and practices which constitute the way of life of a specific group."[47] As with power, the avant-garde has often been the creator and inspiration of varied kinds of cultural "complexes." Indeed, as I've discussed in detail elsewhere, the avant-garde was one of the crucibles out of which came the very idea of "cultural politics."[48] As with the criteria of power and minority, culture also requires a meticulous calibration of analysis and situation; specifically, we must attend carefully to the ways in which a specific avant-garde defines culture and develops a critical praxis in order to instrumentalize some aspect of culture so as to transform relations of power.

Thus, in response to the question "What is an avant-garde?" and the issues I've raised regarding the field of avant-garde studies, the problems of historiography, and the politics of form, I would suggest the following formulation:

The avant-garde is a minority formation that challenges power in subversive, illegal, or alternative ways; in particular, by challenging the routines, assumptions, hierarchies, and/or legitimacy of cultural institutions.

One virtue of this open-ended answer is that it lets us spread our disciplinary umbrellas wider. The effects of this alternative definition have been apparent in the research writing classes I've taught at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, classes themed around the issues and methods of avant-garde studies. Because they form part of IUP's liberal arts curriculum, I have to be cognizant of the knowledge and goals of students who come from a variety of backgrounds and disciplines. Indeed, my interest in a broadened concept of the avant-garde was very much the child of necessity.

Because these students have little, if any, knowledge of the avant-garde, we spend several weeks learning what "historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition say" the avant-garde is. We read selections from Poggioli and Călinescu, discuss Bürger and De Lauretis, define and apply the three criteria I've described, and engage classic

avant-garde art such as Duchamp's ready-mades, Dalí and Buñuel's *Un chien andalou*, Kurt Schwitters's *Ursonate*, performative texts by Yoko Ono, and protest documents by the Guerrilla Girls. Having familiarized ourselves with the conventions of avant-garde discourse, we then move on to unconventional subject matter; say, the molecular gastronomy of Spanish chef Ferran Adrià and the radical Islamic theology of Sayyid Qutb. I choose these topics because those who write on them regularly deploy the term "avant-garde." In that sense, Adrià and Qutb have already been recognized *as* avant-garde by others. It is the job of my students to analyze this discourse and do the work of deciding whether Adrià or Qutb actually *is* avant-garde. They do so by deploying the three criteria I've suggested: examining the particular methods with which these figures challenge power, how they articulate and animate their difference from the majority, and how they conceptualize and engage "culture." The results of that process and the discussions it informs vary from course to course; indeed, I try to promote such variety, as this kind of open-ended, research-grounded debate prepares my students for their own research projects.

Given the presumption of the class that anything might be considered *as* avant-garde, student projects often go to surprising places. I've read essays about the founder of the Hilton hotel chain, competitive swimming pool design, the rock band Smashing Pumpkins, breast augmentation, Gatorade, and many, many other topics. Frankly, most of these topics don't pan out. While there is an argument to be made about the topics *as* avant-garde, I was left unconvinced that the makers of Gatorade or breast enlargement surgery really are avant-garde. But every semester I receive papers that are entirely convincing, altering the way I think about, for example, bohemian subcultures, education reformer Maria Montessori, right-wing evangelical movements in the United States, or the photographs of Ilse Bing.

The fact is that my ultimate goal is not to be convinced that this or that subject *is* avant-garde. While I want my students to learn how to make a convincing argument, the answer to the question, "Is X avant-garde?" is far less important than the process of asking and answering it. In the end, my students (hopefully) leave my class with a better understanding of the significance of power, minority, and culture in a given situation and the ways that individuals and groups have been able to articulate power, minority, and culture to change the world in some way, small or big. These are good goals for avant-garde studies, too.

Thus I would rather *not* answer the question, "What is an avant-garde?" Or, more precisely, I would prefer to ask that question in a different, resistant fashion. The avant-garde's pluralistic and contingent nature, the complexities of its relationship to institutions, the biases inherent to

academic specialization and social identity, and the limits of theory and historiography in an era of prolonged and unpredictable transformation suggest that any answer to that question is a bad bet.

But I'll continue to ask it. As far as I'm concerned, "What is an avant-garde?" is the most important question those in the field of avant-garde studies can ask.

INDIANA UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

NOTES

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