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Debates about the artistic avant-garde tend to stress formal oppositions. Yet in doing so they stage a confrontation that soon loses all its meaning, since it obscures the more fundamental problems that animate philosophical discussion—which have more to do with the heuristic function of art than with the capricious and gaudy spectacle of a small circle of people bound together by the latest artistic trends.

To address the question of avant-gardism without limiting our focus to issues of formal innovation, we must return to the first avant-garde—that of the first half of the twentieth century—and clearly identify its principles and intentions, especially in light of the movements that followed during the second half of the twentieth century and that persist today. This object of study demands that we implement a hermeneutic that privileges inquiries into meaning, as well as an approach that makes it possible to combine artistic elements toward an intelligibility [*évidence*] so original as to revitalize our ways of knowing without undermining their rigor.

The artistic revolution of the first half of the twentieth century conferred a new status upon truth in art. In their theoretical texts and practical experiences alike, creative artists—whether the first abstract painters or the Dadaists—define this truth in similar terms and expand upon it methodologically. The encounter between the interior structure of one's being and the organization of the world confers a double quality upon the elements of art—at once exterior and interior—which makes them privileged instruments for a particular way of disclosing meaning. This is true first of all in painting, given that it belongs to the order of strictly visual images (that is, such images are neither mental nor tactile). Yet in this regard painting also recalls music, the art of sound, since music and painting alike belong to a category of art that brings into play sensations felt from a distance, according to the distinction drawn convincingly by Maurice Pradines. With abstraction, painting came to share in the ambition Schopenhauer ascribed to music alone: that of

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knowing how to reach the noumenon. To these arts the artists of the avant-garde readily added poetry, in its capacity to attain the register of *transreason* (the Russian futurist *zaum*).

From this point onward, the question that arises is not about the death of representation but its redefinition. According to artists' own accounts, artistic composition is a convocation of meanings—a representation of elements within the order of meaning. At the same time, it also comprises a liturgy of the present, the representification of an event, which the artist experiences as an encounter between meanings, and whose trace it leaves in the work of art.

Through such testimony, the philosophy of art takes into consideration a comportment toward Being, which I will refer to as an ontological ethos. Taking the form of a conceptual blueprint [*épure*], this comportment describes the asymptotic approach of our possible relationship to an origin, or to the meaning of things; it proposes a perpetually renewable mode of evaluation. The fruits it yields are the works of art themselves; the works, in turn, are the trace of this relation, comprising the testimony of the artist or poet. This definition of the work of art clearly challenges the principle of evaluative indifference characteristic of postmodern thinking about art, insofar as such thinking appears markedly complicit with the interests of a totalitarian intentionality. Thus if it is true that thought is called upon to judge the value of these "fruits," such a judgment involves rehabilitating the critical function, which must completely disengage itself from the appreciation of taste and instead engage in a truth procedure. The work of art constitutes the principal material for the testimony in question, of course; but at the same time, an artist's account of the conditions for the appearance of the work in his or her life is no less indissolubly linked to the work, with which it maintains a complex relationship. This account, which emerges when the work stands as a particularly demonstrative and innovative landmark for the truth process, indicates the creative development that has led to the work itself.

Since the revolution of abstraction, arts such as painting, music, and poetry have freed themselves from their descriptive function, acquiring instead the function of an inventory of meaning we see implemented by the radical avant-garde of the early twentieth century; from here on this is how the arts will frame their approach to Being. The fruits of these activities—the works themselves—bear witness to the way Being is approached: that is, to the ontological ethos. The status of truth in art refers to the encounter between an absolute and an ethos. The difficulty here is that this is not a matter of isolating a truth exterior to consciousness (according to the system that determines truth through

the encounter between consciousness and a material reality exterior to it). For the mystery of the absolute is that, in spite of its radical alterity, it posits itself at the very source of one's existence, and thus at the core of one's being.

To identify truth implies taking into account the components of vital experience that confirm the relationship with Being we thus confront during the process of discernment. This identification involves an ethos, and it comprises the ultimate task of any philosophy of art. Discernment necessarily intervenes because the eschatological dimension of ontological exigency leads to an ethos of transgression with regard to worldly conventions; discernment is thus inextricably linked to the identification of value, wherever this may take place.

Artistic intelligibility [*évidence*] manifests itself as a confluence between what Chinese philosophy designates as "heart-mind" and what the Hesychastic tradition refers to as "the energies," brought together in an attitude of moral exigency. Through such concepts we can return anew to Wassily Kandinsky's understanding of "interior resonance": for Kandinsky, interior resonance has little to do with aesthetic appreciation, but functions instead as a kind of indicator that gauges one's experience of an event, as well as its own potential as an instrument of meaning.

Turning to the term "avant-garde" itself, it seems to have become a commonplace in our ways of thinking about art. Since the nineteenth century, its use has become widespread, designating any artistic movement that can be described as innovative. The term's fate is grounded in the relevance of its military metaphorics, which liken artistic invention to the actions of a small band of forces that sets off in advance of an army in order to clear its path. We thus strike upon several basic characteristics of the avant-garde: first, the notion that the avant-garde restores the collective dimension of explorative creativity. But the term also evokes the conditions of conflict that arise between this creativity and the prevailing society; at the same time, we must keep in mind that "avant-garde" designates artistic activity as the means for opening up new territory.

The term's current problems arise from its social and economic valorization, which has become so important today that all artists want to be considered avant-garde—even though they generally consider the essential character of avant-gardism to involve little more than a spectacular revolution in form. The notion of avant-gardism subsequently takes on a different meaning than it had originally: it has come to signify a mindset of formal innovation, rather than a dedication to exploration and radical creativity that clashes with convention. Thus the positions of an entire range of so-called avant-gardes can be accommodated within

an economic consensus that values formal innovation for reasons of competitiveness and profitability. At the same time, competitive rivalry leads to the disappearance of the collective dimension of innovative creativity which had been, no doubt, a fundamental characteristic of the avant-garde. We must therefore accept the idea that the very evolution of the avant-garde, which compels it to follow the trends of the marketplace, also brings about its death—a death to which the contemporary art market and institutional consensus alike seem fully determined to have us bear witness by crowning its most ridiculous propositions with museum exhibitions. These preliminary remarks highlight the instability of terms such as "avant-garde," as far as artistic experience goes. For it is by no means clear that the term means the same thing for the avant-garde of the first half of the twentieth century as it does for the avant-garde that followed.

With regard to the contemporary avant-garde, it is worth recalling here the important precautions formulated by the founders of the radical avant-garde since its very inception. In a letter to Hans Richter, who was then remaking himself as an historian of Dada, Marcel Duchamp writes on the subject of neo-Dada that "this Neo-Dada, which they now call New Realism, Pop Art, Assemblage, etc., is an easy way out, and lives on what Dada did. When I discovered ready-mades, I thought to discourage the carnival of aestheticism. In neo-Dada they have taken my ready-mades and found aesthetic value in them. I threw the bottle rack and the urinal into their faces as a provocation, and now they admire them for their aesthetic beauty."[1] This condemnation, which the otherwise courteous Duchamp never retracted, harbors a real malaise: indeed, in the contemporary avant-garde we are hard-pressed to find the artistic characteristics that the first avant-garde taught us to discover.

It would be quite unjust to systematically write off the contemporary avant-garde in its entirety, as if it constituted an undifferentiated whole; yet doing so nevertheless helps us highlight the issues at stake. What Duchamp takes issue with in the artistic practices he discusses is an error of evaluation. This error is bound up with a whole set of factors that lead to serious misinterpretations, in the exacting eyes of pioneers such as Duchamp.

Paradoxically, we live today under the equivalent of a new prohibition of the image, which recalls the earliest prohibitions of the biblical period. This furtive contemporary interdiction expresses itself through a devaluation of the iconic instrument as an instrument for approaching meaning. The major tendencies in artistic creation today propose either to reduce art to a function of discursive language—that is, to adopt a linguistic standard that renders iconic creation a by-product of

discourse—or else to link it to psychoanalytic source material, which is largely independent of individual responsibility. In both cases, such reductions amount to denying the cognitive functions of artistic creation, especially those proper to the image.

Under these circumstances, each artist now behaves as though he or she had to devise an axiomatic system without any regard to its validity. It is as if all theoretical constructs and experimental approaches were systematically excluded from the contemporary artistic landscape. We see a widespread denial of the autonomy of the artist and the truth function of art. This refusal principally concerns painting and the plastic arts, but it has quickly spread to other creative practices as well. This tendency toward denial is tied to three social phenomena whose combined effects bring about a disruption of the avant-garde paradigm. The first is the tendency to devalue the image—and artistic creation in general—as a particular site of evidentness [*évidence*]; alongside this, we find an erosion of hope brought about by the so-called "end of utopias," as well, finally, as a tendency to question inspiration, both in art as well as in other fields, such as religion.

1. The devaluation of the image and artistic creation as particular sites of intelligibility leads to the idea that it is the world that provides the standard for artistic creation, as well as the site of its evaluation: we thus abandon evaluation to the consensus of the "general" (Søren Kierkegaard). What gets overshadowed as a consequence is the fundamental intuition of artists, for whom artistic intelligibility is the axis around which the world is organized. Indeed, insofar as art functions through the transfer of intelligibility [*évidence*], an artistic creation consistent with a principle of evaluation asserts itself as a site for deciphering the coherence of things, a "formative" standard for the world. The work of artists of the radical avant-garde brings the elements of the world to a site of legibility—whether "elementary" as in the first abstractions, mechanomorphic as in the work of Marcel Duchamp, or visionary as in the work of Hans Richter.

The contemporary avant-garde is bound up with the devaluation of the image, insofar as it prioritizes the pursuit of formal innovation at the expense of rigorous content.

Our era is still characterized by a fascination for the implement [*ustensile*]. Yet the prominence of the implement derives from a falsified reference to Duchamp.[2] Duchamp subjected the implement to *détournement* and transformed its techniques. Unaltered by Duchamp's *détournement*, however, the implement restricts artistic creation to a "constant form" (a term borrowed from Chinese thought). By contrast, the "constant internal principle" in art unfolds as a rhythm apposite to

all formal possibilities; this is why Chinese thinkers, for whom rhythm contains the dynamic of the universe, seek it out in the rock, the cloud, the root, the bamboo. Dada tracked it down by chance, as a provocation in meaning. Exploring the meaning of things is a function of the pure arts (painting, music, poetry). But the promotion of the implement has, quite logically, resulted in the confusion between pure art and the applied arts we see today: even the most commercial trades, such as fashion design and cooking, aspire to the function previously reserved for the pure arts, which remain the only arts suitable for comprising a *mathesis* for transforming the world.

2. The second phenomenon that concerns us here is the belief in the "end of utopias," a belief that equates any intention to improve the world with ideology. We thus witness an erosion—itself eschatological—of our horizon of expectation. There is, no doubt, an idea of progress at the origin of the intention to transform the world through art. This idea is based on the belief in the positivity of a temporal sequence. In the mentality of the radical avant-garde, there is a relationship between utopia and prophecy that breathes life into its major projects, such as Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument* from 1920 or Kurt Schwitters's unusable cathedral. To renounce this hope is to return to an antiquated notion of time as the measure of decline from a state of original perfection deemed as a golden age. In denying any progress other than technical advancement, the contemporary era has led to the systematic promotion of fashion and circumstance. But it is not true that all the elements of time are immediately intelligible; there is always a double reading, which involves evaluation as well as discernment. This double reading enables us to identify what constitutes an *event* in time and to distinguish it from what is merely a *circumstance*. An event is that which has meaning, as well as that which reveals meaning. An event, which comprises the relation of the present to the absolute, marks the coincidence between the moment and the supersession of one's limits. As for circumstance, it is simply what is bound up in the moment, and which no longer consists of anything as soon as we look at it. It is what becomes lost in the fugitivity of the chaotic succession of worldly moments.

The belief in the end of utopias freezes time. Reinforcing the idea that the world is the standard for artistic creation, this belief renders artistic creativity futile—reducing it to a mundane form of spectacle that functions through the collusion of a group which exerts its power of intimidation over an otherwise free consciousness. Such intimidation represents an evasion of dialogue that amounts to a refusal of the other; it has nothing in common with the "provocations" of the radical avant-garde (such as Dada, for example). For whereas provocation constitutes

an invitation to depart from convention, intimidation is by contrast the pressure to adhere. It thus works against freedom.

3. Lastly, the third phenomenon that affects the fate of the avant-garde paradigm is the tendency for contemporary prefabricated thought [*le prêt-à-penser*] to question inspiration. The search for and judgment of inspiration nevertheless constitutes an essential part of an artist's work. Inspiration—the encounter with transcendence—is confused with hallucination, that is to say, a perception without an object. As a result of this negation of transcendence, the work itself, perversely, becomes personified, at the expense of the construction of personhood through a relationship to the absolute. The work fashions an artificial world easily assimilated within the realm of commerce and politics. However, by defining the elements of a work as its means, and the transfer of intelligibility or "cogitable" certainty as its goal, I insist that it is the coincidence of means and ends that enables the work to function as an instrument for the construction of personhood. This is incommensurate with the spheres of either commerce or propaganda.

Alongside its devices for crash-landing us in the immediacy of consumption, the contemporary era has seen the growth of a consensus about (moral) transgression, which has supplanted the transgression of consensus. We are thus witnessing the emergence of rituals of false transcendence. The consensus about transgression is based on the idea that it is essential to free oneself from morality. The transgression of consensus, on the other hand, derives from a problematic: nothing less than a complete moral reassessment. The mere inversion of values does not constitute a refusal of value. Rather, the real transgression toward which artistic creation aims is the transgression of the limitations of human finitude. This latter mode of transgression entails a positive project with regard to moral philosophy. Indeed, three years after *Beyond Good and Evil*, Friedrich Nietzsche himself registers the exigency of morality and truth in his famous letter from Turin, *The Case of Wagner*: "That music should not become an art of lying."[3] And yet much of the contemporary avant-garde evolves in this confused way from romanticism to dandyism, from spleen to nihilism. Nihilism implies a withdrawal with regard to the absolute: this is without a doubt the most serious and most basic difference between the contemporary avant-garde and the radical avant-garde. For this withdrawal leads to an evaluative indifference (a "whatever") that serves as an effective ally for totalitarianism.

We might seek out nihilism in the radical avant-garde, but we would not find it. Amidst the turmoil of the last century, and in different spheres of artistic creation, the radical avant-garde developed at once a paradigm for art, a common struggle, and a unified set of preoccupa-

tions. The revolution it initiated is grouped around four major synthetic movements: the first is the struggle of abstraction against figuration in painting, led by Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, and Kazimir Malevich; the second is the struggle of poetry against literature in the field of verbal creativity, led by the poets of *zaum* and transreason, as well as by Dada and Bretonian surrealism; the third is the struggle of interiority against style in architecture, whose principle theorists were Theo van Doesburg and Le Corbusier; finally, the fourth is the struggle of "metaphysical" theater against psychological drama in scenography, led by the great voices of Hugo Ball and Antonin Artaud.

I consider the following components to be the cement that binds together this avant-garde:

- the establishment of a constant internal principle, as opposed to a constant form, that directs art toward the exploration of original dynamics;
- the affirmation of the autonomy of an individual creative consciousness with regard to evaluation, which rejects authoritarian prescription and leads to individual verification;
- the systematic exploration of all forms of alterity, which thwarts the possibility of confining art to a single cultural tradition and opens creativity to faraway, foreign, or "primitive" civilizations and works of art;
- an openness to transcendence, which authorizes our access to what is different from, or superior to, everyday knowledge;
- the will to transform the world through art, which takes on the status of a specific and privileged instrument of transformation;
- and, finally, the idea that the creative act is the bearer of a dissatisfaction that surpasses the simple play of aesthetics and calls instead for an ethical gaze coupled with an eschatological insistence.

It is on account of this ethical rootedness that the radical avant-garde has become a seat of resistance in the struggle against totalitarianism.

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NOTES

1 Marcel Duchamp to Hans Richter, 10 November 1961, quoted in Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 207–8. Translation modified by the author.
2 For further discussion, see my *Duchamp confisqué, Marcel retrouvé* (Paris: Éditions Hazan, 2009).
3 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Case of Wagner*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1967), 180.