

Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde:
An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of *Theory of
the Avant-Garde*

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Definitions

“WHAT IS AN AVANT-GARDE?” I understand this question as a provocation. The strategy is not a bad one, because sometimes a provocation can bring about a surprising clarity, if it causes the addressee to lay his cards on the table. Usually though, this does not happen, and for good reason. Lacan was adamantly opposed to speaking “le vrai du vrai,” arguing that the naked truth was always disappointing. In his *Logic*, Hegel ridiculed the arbitrariness of definitions that are supposed to pin down a concept to specific properties: even though no other animal has an earlobe, it is not an adequate way of defining human beings. And Nietzsche puts it concisely: “Only that which has no history can be defined.”

If such different thinkers as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Lacan—I could have also mentioned Adorno and Blumenberg—oppose definitions, then we should listen to them. In fact, it is a practice that runs the risk of depriving the concept of what keeps it alive: the contradictions that it unites within itself. Hegel’s short text *Who Thinks Abstractly?* makes this clear. A murderer is being taken to his place of execution. For the bourgeois, who subjugates the world via definitions and calculations, he is nothing but a murderer; he is, in other words, identical with his act. For the old nurse, however, who, catching sight of the head of the executed man, cries out, “Oh how beautifully the merciful sun of God shines on Binder’s head,” he is a concrete individual, who has committed a crime, received his deserved punishment for it, and is now partaking of God’s grace.¹

To be sure, dispensing with definitions causes problems. How can we be sure that those who express their views on the avant-garde are even

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talking about the same thing? Here we have to say without illusion: we cannot. For many academics and critics the term only refers to whatever is the most current (most progressive) movement in modern art.² Others even use it in a transtemporal sense—one not confined to the modern era. The painters of the early Renaissance can, in this sense, be readily discussed as an avant-garde. All this is unproblematic as long as the context makes clear what is meant in each case. We do not have to search for the “correct” concept of the avant-garde, but we can justifiably ask what these various definitions accomplish.

Whereas a nonspecific concept of the avant-garde marks, above all, a point in the continuum of time, in other words, the Now, designating the newest art of modernity, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* attempts to provide a clear differentiation between two concepts, without thereby creating an abstract opposition between them. In so far as the historical avant-garde movements respond to the developmental stage of autonomous art epitomized by aestheticism, they are part of modernism; in so far as they call the institution of art into question, they constitute a break with modernism. The history of the avant-gardes, each with its own special historical conditions, arises out of this contradiction.

The significance of the concept of the avant-garde developed in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* still seems to me today to lie in the fact that it does not draw up a list of individual characteristics that can be arbitrarily extended, but rather that, starting with Dadaism, surrealism, and constructivism, it develops a concept whose individual elements are integrally related. At the center of this constellation is an interpenetration of two principles: the attack on the institution of art and the revolutionizing of life as a whole. Both principles go hand in hand, indeed they mutually condition each other. The unification of art and life intended by the avant-garde can only be achieved if it succeeds in liberating aesthetic potential from the institutional constraints which block its social effectiveness. In other words: the attack on the institution of art is the condition for the possible realization of a utopia in which art and life are united.

The other aspects of the avant-garde concept arise out of these two intertwined fundamental principles. By renouncing the idea of autonomy, the artist also gives up his special social position and thereby his claim to genius. (That this surrender is admittedly ambivalent is not surprising in light of the utopian character of the avant-garde project, an ambivalence that becomes evident in a figure like André Breton.) In this conception of the avant-garde, the work of art also loses the central position that it once had among modern authors and that Adorno, after the Second World War, would restore once more in his *Aesthetic Theory*. The work, which was for Mallarmé the goal of all human activity (“tout, au monde,

existe pour aboutir à un livre”) is for Breton a side issue, one which makes recognizable a certain relationship to the world—nothing more but also nothing less (“on publie pour chercher des hommes, et rien de plus” he writes in *La confession dédaigneuse*). The Russian constructivists even equated the work of art with an object of use. In both cases it is subordinated to the project of revolutionizing living conditions and thus loses its aura and its illusion of metaphysical being in equal measure.

The history of concepts can show how the individual aspects of a concept, which unfold theoretically as a necessary interrelationship, have formed themselves historically.³ Here we should not play (theoretical) construction and history off against each other, as critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* have repeatedly done. If they were being consistent, they would have to deny the possibility of generalizing concepts altogether and to agree with Hugo von Hofmannsthal when, in objecting to the categories of worker and bourgeois, he maintained, “They’re all just people.”

II. First Responses to the *Theory of the Avant-Garde*

Soon after its publication, the book met with forceful criticism. To be sure, there is always an element of obduracy in any form of metacriticism. For this reason, in what follows, I will not confine myself to rebutting the arguments of my critics (although in some cases, of course, this is impossible to avoid). I would much rather, first of all, use this criticism, where possible, as an opportunity to think through further what was only sketched out in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, and, second, to try in each case to discern the focus from which individual critics are speaking. This will make it possible to explain certain contradictions in terms of the varying perspectives of authors. At the same time, it will help make clear the intellectual climate within which the book was written. In order to clarify these connections somewhat, I need to address wider issues.⁴

In the image of artistic modernism that prevailed against conservative resistance in the period after the Second World War, especially in West Germany—I am thinking, for instance, of Hans Sedlmayr’s book *Art in Crisis, The Lost Center*⁵—movements intent on radical social change were largely blotted out. The first Documenta in Kassel in 1955 makes this abundantly clear. While four of Max Ernst’s paintings were on display, his association with surrealism was not mentioned. The name of Dalí was missing from the catalogue, along with that of André Breton. Modernism, as it was presented in Kassel, was a purely internal artistic phenomenon. In the introduction to the catalogue, Werner Haftmann

emphasized the continuity and consistency of modern art's development over several generations. The category of rupture was eliminated and along with it the historical avant-garde movements. The same is true for aesthetic theory and art criticism of the time. Both Theodor W. Adorno's theory of the development of artistic material (procedures and techniques) and Clement Greenberg's theory of a progressive reduction to the essential qualities of each medium insisted on this element of continuity. Greenberg explicitly states: "Modernist art develops out of the past without gap or break."⁶ Although Adorno works with the category of rupture in *Aesthetic Theory*, it applies only to the structure of the artwork. Whereas Walter Benjamin in his pathbreaking 1929 essay "Surrealism" could still describe the movement as one that sought "to win the energies of intoxication for the revolution,"⁷ Adorno, twenty-five years later, stresses above all the obsolete qualities of surrealist images, in which the consciousness of failure is preserved—in a technologized world, human beings have failed themselves.⁸ It is as if the historical rupture called forth by fascism were to render the very category taboo in the postwar period. This only began to change when surrealist slogans started showing up on the walls of Paris in May 1968. At this moment the historical avant-gardes and their utopian projects were also rediscovered.

The impulse of hope triggered by the May '68 movement also caught hold of German universities at the same time and led to a series of publications about avant-garde movements, including my own 1970 volume *Der französische Surrealismus*, though, to be sure, it submits surrealist texts to the principles of academic analysis. The foundations for my later theory are laid down here—for example, the insight that the "works" of the surrealists can be read in terms of Benjamin's concept of the allegory. When I conceived of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* a short time later, the impulses that the May events had awakened had already been arrested. The student movement had disintegrated into vehemently squabbling groups, each of which claimed to represent pure Marxist doctrine.

In this situation, I transferred, without being conscious of it, utopian aspirations from a society in which they could clearly not be realized to theory. Theory now seemed to be the key that could keep open the door to the future that I imagined, along with Breton, as a finally livable world ("un monde enfin habitable"). This is why the book relies so heavily on the rigor of argumentation and methodical construction. From Habermas, I had learned that the illumination of the past only succeeds insofar as it simultaneously lights up the present. The history of the historical avant-gardes and our history were mirrored in each other. Our epoch had—in the Benjaminian sense—entered into a constellation with a specific past; my accomplishment was simply a matter

of having understood this constellation and used it as the basis for a theoretical construction.

If we now cast a glance at the discussions the book stirred up after its publication, it becomes obvious that they were not primarily concerned with defining the avant-garde but rather with questions of methodology. Even its author understood *Theory of the Avant-Garde* as, primarily, an attempt at laying the foundations for a materialist cultural science. Repelled by vulgar Marxist “derivations” of artistic works from the socio-economic basis, whereby formal analysis was usually neglected, he had become convinced, after reading the essay on reification in Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* and the methodological reflections in Marx’s *Grundrisse*, that a scientific approach needed, first of all, to discern the historical site from which the development of art in bourgeois society could be construed. The emphasis on the immanent development of art under the sign of the doctrine of autonomy, which the author set against various Marxist dogmas that were circulating at the time in the newly founded University of Bremen, are explicable in this context. According to one of the young revolutionary-minded intellectuals, for instance, a materialist aesthetic theory would have to “try to determine the functions and significances of aesthetic phenomena in the struggle for emancipation of the masses.”⁹ Ansgar Hillach, another of the authors in the 1976 volume of responses to my work, took refuge in a reconstruction of Benjamin’s concept of allegory, which, however, he was not willing to apply to avant-garde practices such as montage. He then goes on to characterize automatic writing (*écriture automatique*) as “the transformation of the profane illumination of an inherently empty subjectivity into a corporeal collectivity” (A 118). Today we might smile at this strange combination of philology and revolutionary mysticism, yet despite its extravagance, it bears witness to the desire to charge one’s own writing with revolutionary impulses. The most productive theoretical contributions to the volume are those in which my theses are questioned in terms of their implicit assumptions and confronted with Adorno’s aesthetics (Lüdke) or when the relationship between autonomy and avant-garde is defined not as a rupture but as a continuity (Lindner).

As is well known, in the Hegelian category of sublation (*Aufhebung*) that I made use of, both moments are thought together. The avant-gardes, I argued, did not strive for the destruction of the art institution, but rather its sublation. This would, at the same time, release its constrained aesthetic potential in order to shape ordinary life. Lindner, on the other hand, sought to strengthen Benjamin’s preferred idea of destruction—let us recall Benjamin’s plea for a “new, positive concept of barbarism.”¹⁰ This was also typical of the discussions of the 1970s.

Given that the revolution that young intellectuals dreamt of back then existed only in their heads, their debates were subject to the pressures of radicalization.

As a result, virtually no other thesis of the book met with more unanimous rejection during the seventies—though for a number of different reasons—than the one concerning the failure of the historical avant-gardes. Those intellectuals coming out of the student movement who thought they could connect directly with the ideas of the Russian futurists and constructivists and who read Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay as a still relevant foundation for a materialist aesthetics were compelled to reject this thesis. For it stripped them of the possibility of seeing themselves as direct descendents of the revolutionary artistic avant-gardes of the first third of the twentieth century and forced them to reflect on the differences between particular historical situations. In other words, such a thesis could not help but destroy the illusion that they were part of a revolutionary movement.

The vehemence with which my thesis about the failure of the avant-garde was rejected starts to make sense when we elucidate the kinds of interpretations to which it was subject. Hence, in his much discussed Adorno Prize speech of 1980, Jürgen Habermas referred offhand to the failure of the surrealist revolution as an "error of a false negation." "When the vessels of an autonomously developed cultural sphere are shattered," he observes, "the contents get dispersed,"¹¹ and this dispersal does not yield a liberating effect. If the project of the avant-garde is already understood as one of "false negation," then its false actualization in the aestheticization of everyday life of late capitalist society can no longer offer a contrast. The very project thus seems to be nothing more than a historical "mistake" that should be avoided in future.

As a result, I tried repeatedly in later publications to clarify my thesis. On the one hand, I pointed out that the most lucid avant-gardists were themselves aware of the extravagance of their project to revolutionize everyday practices and hence recognized its unrealizability. "Notre victoire n'est pas venue et ne viendra jamais. Nous subissons d'avance cette peine," we read in Pierre Naville's *La révolution et les intellectuels* in 1927.¹² On the other hand, I also suggested that the failure of an historical project should not be equated with a lack of effectiveness and importance. Measured against their goals and the hopes that they carried, all revolutions have failed: this fact does not lessen their historical significance. But it is precisely in its extravagance that the project of the avant-garde serves as an indispensable corrective to a society foundering in its pursuit of egoistical goals. This project was by no means conceptualized as purely aesthetic but also, at least for the surrealists, as moral.

III. The Reception of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in the English-speaking World

From the beginning, the book's reception took place under the sign of postmodernism. Even before the American translation of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* was published in 1984, the Lukács student Ferenc Fehér commented on the book in his essay "What is beyond Art? On the Theories of Post-Modernity," characterizing it as "a consistent but misleading romantic theory of the *cultural revolution*, indeed, the only significant version of its kind. It is consistent in that Bürger makes a frontal attack on the autonomous art work which he intends to abolish with the gesture of *happening* or of *provocation*."¹³ I still remember how surprised I was to read these sentences while on a flight to the United States. Fehér makes no bones about equating my thesis—which seeks to determine the historical avant-garde's importance for the development of art in bourgeois society—with the intentions of its author. In other words, he understands *Theory of the Avant-Garde* as a manifesto. What could have lead to such an interpretation? While reading Fehér's essay, we can literally feel his sense of dismay at the fact that *Theory of the Avant-Garde* provides convincing arguments in support of what he terms superficial postmodern theories which seek to tear down the boundaries between "high" and "low" art and denounce modern art as an elite expression of cultural domination. A symptom of this dismay in Fehér's text is the word *consistent*. He thus undertakes no small amount of effort to demonstrate that art is not an institution in the sociological sense. To be sure, he is forced to admit that the reception of artworks is institutionalized, while arguing that this does not apply to their production, since here it is not a matter of transmissible rules but rather of highly individualized processes. It suffices to recall the institutionalization of confession in the Lateran Council of 1215, however, to recognize that individual actions can also be guided by institutions. But, above all, Fehér considers *Theory of the Avant-Garde* to be "misleading" because it ascribes a decisive importance to the avant-garde in the development of modern art and thereby promotes the avant-garde's hostility to the artwork as well as an aestheticization of everyday life. Because Fehér reads the book as a theory of postmodernism, he barely registers its thesis about the failure of the avant-garde's attack on the art institution. This thesis is, however, central for the construction of the book as a whole (I will return to this point). As a result, he fails to notice those aspects of the book with which he might have agreed. He could, for example, have read its thesis about the free disposition of artistic material as an indirect plea for the readoption of "realistic" procedures and techniques—a view that should have made sense to the student of Lukács.

In light of the threat that culture now faces, and not just through the rapid development of digital media, some of these past debates now seem Byzantine. In any event, past adversaries often seem closer to each other than they were able to see back then.

Theory of the Avant-Garde also entered American cultural criticism in 1982 through Benjamin Buchloh's essay, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art."¹⁴ Buchloh likewise applies Benjamin's concept of the allegory to decipher montage technique, yet he does not refer to *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, but rather to the above mentioned study by Hillach. This reference to Hillach is somewhat provocative in that the latter explicitly refuses to describe montage in terms of a "restrictive procedure such as the allegorical one" (A 114).

When the American translation of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* appeared two years later, Buchloh felt compelled to write a biting review.¹⁵ First of all, without giving any reasons, he denies the book any theoretical status, something he can only manage to do by not saying a single word about the theoretical introductory chapter, which elaborates on the historicity of aesthetic categories in relation to the development of objects and categories. As the concept of self-critique is also not introduced, the book's thesis about the historical avant-garde's attack on institutional art looks like a bizarre whim. Was Dalí really planning to destroy the institution of art in the early 1930s? Buchloh asks rhetorically. If this question were to be taken seriously, it would not just be a mattering of simply answering "Yes," but of looking more closely at the situation of the surrealist movement at the time Dalí was engaged with it. As a result of its turn to communism, the group around Breton had lost such extraordinary members—ones so crucial for their provocative activities—as Antonin Artaud. Dalí succeeded in filling the vacant position. For a few years, he became the driving force of the movement. In doing so, he did not simply adopt Breton's original program ("pratiquer la poésie"), but took up the call of the second surrealist manifesto to trigger a general crisis in consciousness. Searching for a more aggressive forward strategy, Dalí expanded the attack on the institution of art into an attack on society's dominant reality principle, which forms the counterpart of the art institution and makes it possible. Art can be institutionalized as autonomous, as a field exempted from the principle of moral responsibility, only to the extent that bourgeois society is ideally subject to these same principles of morality and responsibility. It is therefore quite consistent for Dalí to expand the attack on the art institution into an attack on the reality principle and for his actions, texts, and paintings to be determined by this goal. "I believe the moment is near where a thought process of an active, paranoid, character can . . . raise confusion to the level of a sys-

tem and contribute to the total discrediting of the real world.”¹⁶ To the extent that he brings a theory of irresponsibility into play, he hopes to not only encourage a general crisis in consciousness but also to inscribe multiple meanings in his “double image paintings.” This also relates to his indisputably highly problematic fascination with Hitler, whom he sees as a character who succeeded in fulfilling irrational desires and thereby undermined the sense of reality.

Even rhetorical questions can be answered in detail; what cannot be answered is the charge, usually raised only by the theory-phobic, that *Theory of the Avant-Garde* forces the differences and contradictions within the avant-garde movements into unifying categories—in short that the author has not written a history of the avant-garde.

There are, of course, differences between futurism, Dada, surrealism and constructivism, for example in their orientation toward technology. A history of the avant-garde movements would have to represent these differences, which can be demonstrated by tracing the intellectual altercations between the various groupings. Theory pursues other goals; thus *Theory of the Avant-Garde* tries to make visible the historical epoch in which the development of art in bourgeois society can be recognized. To this end, it needs to undertake generalizations that are set at a much higher level of abstraction than the generalizations of historians.

Buchloh does not go so far as to grant reality only to individual phenomena. However what he offers as a definition of avant-garde practice amounts to a listing of relatively random features that are in no way exclusive to the avant-garde: “A continually renewed struggle over the definition of cultural meaning” (all intellectuals participate in such a struggle); “the discovery and representation of new audiences” (this is at once too narrow and too broad a definition); the discovery of forces resistant to the controlling power of the culture industry (these can easily be found in the camp of conservative art critics as well).

There is, however, one point in Buchloh’s critique where he does locate a real shortcoming in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. It concerns the characterization of the post-avant-garde situation of art. To the extent that Buchloh argues that I derive the free disposition of artistic material directly from the failure of the avant-garde’s intentions—which would indeed not be convincing—he draws attention to a lacuna in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, namely the missing account of the relationship between the two theses.

IV. The Post-Avant-Gardist Situation of Art

The question of the post-avant-garde situation of art is, without a doubt, the sketchiest part of my book and the one that—not just from today’s perspective—is the most in need of elaboration. On the one hand, the book claims that the “the social institution that is art proved resistant to the avant-gardiste attack,”¹⁷ on the other it asserts that because of avant-gardist production art “means are freely available, i.e., no longer part of a system of stylistic norms” (17). What remains unanswered is how we should conceive the connection between these two theses in relation to the post-avant-garde situation of art. On this question, the chapter that elaborates on the historicity of Adorno’s aesthetic suggests we should seriously consider “whether the break with tradition that the historical avant-garde movements brought about has not made irrelevant all talk about the historical level of artistic techniques practiced today” (a reference to Adorno’s theorem about the continuous development of artistic materials). Furthermore, the chapter asks whether “the historical succession of techniques and styles has been transformed into a simultaneity of the radically disparate” (63).

Here we should note first of all that the category of a break with tradition is less precisely delineated on a theoretical level than the thesis about the attack on the art institution to which it refers (see page 61). Furthermore, the position of individual avant-garde movements vis-à-vis tradition varies considerably: while the Italian futurists loudly proclaimed a break with tradition (“We want to destroy the museums, libraries and academies of every sort”) and while such hostile statements about tradition are also not uncommon in Dada, the surrealists took a different position on this question. Instead of rejecting tradition as a whole, they created a countercanon to the dominant canon of authors and works—a move that is hard to recognize today, because most of the authors favored by surrealists have in the meantime entered the canon. Rather than a break with tradition, what we find in surrealism is a displacement of the weight allotted to tradition. This particular category, in other words, is less suited to a theory of the avant-garde.

I would recommend, therefore, that we take up once more the question of the connection between the two theorems that, according to *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, condition the post-avant-gardist situation of art: the resistance of institutions to attack and the free disposition of art materials and production procedures. It is necessary, first of all, to define more precisely my thesis about the failure of the historical avant-gardes. This thesis actually consists of a number of independent aspects that need to be differentiated from each other: (1) The failure of the desired

reintroduction of art into the praxis of life. This aspect was intuited by the avant-gardists themselves and Dadaists and surrealists even made it into a component of their project. (2) The recognition of their manifestations by the art institution, that is, their canonization as milestones in the development of art in modernity. (3) The false actualization of their utopian project in the aestheticization of everyday life. Whereas some avant-gardists understood very well that their project would in all likelihood never be actualized (Breton, for this very reason, conceives of surrealist actions as an interminable preparation for an event that is continually deferred into the future), and while they were also highly conscious of the danger of being incorporated into the institution (which is why Breton, in his second manifesto, suggests an *occultation* of surrealism, a self-imposed retreat from the public sphere), the aestheticization of everyday life only develops on a large scale after the Second World War and could not therefore enter their field of vision.

The paradox of the failure of the avant-gardes lies without a doubt in the musealization of their manifestations as works of art, that is, in their artistic success. The provocation that was supposed to expose the institution of art is recognized by the institution as art. The institution demonstrates its strength by embracing its attackers and assigns them a prominent place in the pantheon of great artists. Indeed, the impact of the failed avant-garde extends even further. After Duchamp, not only can the everyday artefact claim the status of an artwork but the discourse of the institution is molded by the avant-gardes to a degree that no one could have predicted. Avant-garde categories such as rupture and shock gain admittance to the discourse of art, while at the same time concepts such as harmony and coherence are suspected of conveying a false appearance and a reconciliation with a degraded status quo. If idealist aesthetics had discarded the allegorical work because it believed that the work of art should appear like nature—whereas the allegorist kills off natural life, tears fragments out of the continuity of life and places them in new constellations without any concern for their original context—it is precisely for these reasons that allegory now becomes a model for avant-gardist “works.”

In other words, the failure of the avant-garde utopia of the unification of art and life coincides with the avant-garde’s overwhelming success within the art institution. One could almost say: in their very failure, the avant-gardes conquer the institution. In this regard, certain formulations in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which give the impression that the art institution survived the attack of the historical avant-garde without any significant changes, need to be corrected. While the principle of autonomy did indeed demonstrate an astounding resistance, this was

only possible because the institution opened itself to the manifestations as well as the discourse of the avant-garde and made them its own.

This success of the avant-garde—a success, to be sure, that took place only in the institution and that is, as such, simultaneously a sign of its failure—applies to the level of artistic materials as well. While modernism conceptualized its work on materials as a continuous and ongoing process of renewal, the avant-gardes broke with this principle in taking up past material forms (salon painting in the case of the surrealists) as well as the material of trivial and mass art (the collages of Max Ernst). This was a possible strategy for avant-garde artists because they were not interested in creating a work of art that would last over time, but rather in provoking attitudinal changes in the recipient (think of dadaist provocations or of Dalí's attack on the reality principle). With the failure of the utopian project of transcending the institution, the practice of a recourse to material forms that were outdated or rendered taboo by modernism fundamentally changed its significance. *A practice that aimed to have an extra-artistic impact turned into a practice internal to the institution and to art.* In admitting avant-gardist products as works of art, the institution of art simultaneously legitimates a treatment of out-dated material that was previously inadmissible. A history, as Adorno postulated it, based on the development of artistic materials is then, indeed, no longer discernible. In this sense we can say that the avant-gardes brought about, without this being their intention, what would later be characterized as postmodernism: the possibility of a reappropriation of all past artistic materials. It would be problematic, nevertheless, to hold the avant-gardes responsible for the break in the development of modern art; after all they had no intention of changing the inside of the institution, even though this is what they achieved in a de facto sense. Hegel already knew that human actions do not accomplish the intentions of those who carry them out. The avant-gardes also learned this lesson.

Thanks to the particular intellectual situation after the Second World War—where the category of the historical break became taboo in Europe as well as in the United States precisely because it had been realized by fascism and Stalinism—Adorno and Greenberg could help to again legitimate a theory of modernism that presumed continuity in work on artistic material and that consolidated once again the difference between “high” and “low” art. With the recognition of Pop Art these theories lost the basis for their validity. Soon afterwards, the post-avant-garde free use of artistic material was proclaimed as the postmodern liberation of anything goes. Of course, just how questionable this was would soon become clear in the problem of aesthetic evaluation.

To summarize: in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, the situation of the post-avant-garde, after the failure of the avant-garde project became obvi-

ous, was characterized by two theorems: the continued existence of the autonomous art institution and the free use of artistic material. The connection between these two theorems was, however, not explained. It is rendered even less recognizable by the fact that some formulations in the book suggest the art institution survived the attack of the avant-gardes without significant changes and that the categories of idealist aesthetics were again established without being diminished. In this regard, I now see the need to define more precisely, and to correct, my ideas from 1974.

This much is certain: the avant-garde's revival (from the perspective of modern art) of obsolete materials (artistic procedures and techniques) succeeded because the avant-gardes did not aim to create works of art that would last through time but wanted to use their manifestations to change the attitudes of their recipients. This means that they situated their aesthetic practices outside those sanctioned by the institution. Only with the failure of these intentions does the free use of artistic material practiced by the avant-garde become an internal aesthetic phenomenon. In recognizing these manifestations as art works and acknowledging their value in the development of modern art, the art institution retracts its claim to establish norms (in this case, the principle of continuity in work on artistic material). This also occurs in other areas where aesthetic norms are set (replacing the symbolic work with the allegorical work, and so on). In retreating to its core domain of aesthetic autonomy, the art institution demonstrates a resistance to the attack of the avant-gardes, yet also adopts avant-garde practices. Seen in this light, the failure of the avant-garde's aspirations to alter social reality and its internal aesthetic success (the artistic legitimation of avant-garde practices) are two sides of the same coin.

V. The Debate over the Neo-Avant-Garde

The vehemence of the critical response to *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in American art criticism is explicable not least by what Buchloh calls my "snide comments on the neo-avant-garde."¹⁸ The argument of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* runs as follows: the neo-avant-gardes adopted the means by which the avant-gardists hoped to bring about the sublation of art. As these means had, in the interim, been accepted by the institution, that is to say, were deployed as internal aesthetic procedures, they could no longer legitimately be linked to a claim to transcend the sphere of art. "The neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions" (58). If one wants to reject this argument, it surely does not suffice to simply endorse the program of the neo-avant-garde—which, in the case of Daniel Buren, displays an

impressive acumen. This is what Buchloh does when he joins Buren in characterizing Duchamp's turn away from painting as a petty bourgeois radicalism that obscures the "ideological framework," that is, the institution.¹⁹ Here the thesis of the *Theory of the Avant-Garde* is simply reversed: in order to present the institutional critique of the neo-avant-garde as a genuine accomplishment, Duchamp is devalued.

In his critique of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Buchloh is casually dismissive. Accordingly, he emphasizes again and again that the author of the book has an insufficient knowledge of 1960s progressive art. Theory, however, relies on different criteria than does historical representation. Adorno once remarked that first-rate aesthetic theory could be developed at a great distance from the work of art as well as in close proximity. It is a matter, purely and simply, of what such a construction allows us to see. Hal Foster, who, like Buchloh, belongs to the critics associated with the journal *October*, presents a distinctly more sophisticated critique that engages with the arguments in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*,²⁰ and which I will shortly discuss in greater detail. This task is made easier by the fact that Foster accompanies his own theory construction with critical self-reflection.

The focus that Foster chooses for his critique is a Freudianism inspired by poststructuralism. In his series of objections, however, he also relies on intellectual motifs from Derrida. His argument presupposes, for instance, Derrida's deconstruction of the notion of origin in his claim that *Theory of the Avant-Garde* treats the historical avant-gardes as an absolute origin (8).

A discussion of this critique can occur on two different levels. On the one hand, one could ask whether the author of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* does in fact treat the avant-garde as an originary phenomenon. As far as I can see, the criticism is not valid; the avant-gardes are rather conceptualized as a response to, and a consequent break with, the latest developmental stage of autonomous art represented by aestheticism.²¹ On the other hand, the assumption of Foster's argument can be called into question: namely the supposition that with Derrida's deconstruction of the concepts of center, origin, and presence, any thinking about origins has lost its validity. This is also not quite accurate insofar as Derrida, as I have shown elsewhere, is not only a critic of originary thinking but is also himself a thinker of the origin.²² In fact, he designates *différance* as "the constitutive, productive and original [!] causality." If he nevertheless refuses to conceive of *différance* as origin, it is because he limits the term—diverging from normal French usage—to a *full* event, that is to say, an event in the past that is imagined as being in the present. However, if we presume that an originary event can by all means be thought of

as not present (the world-creating action of God, for example), then *différance* is precisely such an event.

Even if one only refers to Derrida indirectly, it is necessary to engage in such subtleties. It is certainly not acceptable to simply take Derrida's deconstruction of presence, center, and origin as truth. The conclusions of Derrida's thought are hedged around with too many provisions; after all, he concedes, after deconstructing the category of the center, that we are unable to do without it: "I believe that the center is a function, not a being—a reality, but a function. And this function is absolutely indispensable."²³

Of course, a possible response would be to say that I likewise took over a Marxist model of history writing from the *Grundrisse*. However, I did not simply assume Marx's conclusions but explicated his model. In the same way as Derrida's and Lacan's thought shape Foster's style of thought, so, twenty years earlier, Marx's methodology, as mediated by Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, shaped *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

We now come to Hal Foster's decisive argument. It concerns what he calls my "residual evolutionism." "Thus for him [Bürger] a work of art, a shift in aesthetics, happens all at once, entirely significant in its first moment of appearance, and it happens once and for all, so that any elaboration can only be a rehearsal" (10). Here too, the argument depends on Derrida's critique of origin and immediate presence, but Foster relies primarily on Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* or deferred action. For Freud the term refers to a revision of past events after the fact and it is only because of this revision—and this is the decisive point for Foster—that these events acquire meaning and psychic significance.²⁴

Far be it from me to reject the application of the category of deferred action to historical events. On the contrary, in my 1988, book *Prosa der Moderne*, though admittedly without referencing Freud, I presented deliberations along the same lines as Foster suggests. With regard to the time around 1800 in Germany, which Friedrich Schlegel characterized as "our unromantic epoch," the book notes that "the epoch becomes romantic for us only once we define it [one could add: through deferred action] in terms of a small group of intellectuals in Berlin and Jena."²⁵ And a little later, the book explains that it is only the shock of the French Revolution that gave rise to the illusion that in traditional society the subjective "I" was able to find a safe harbor in the world. The methodological reflections in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* are also based on a conception of deferred action; namely, that the adequate recognition of an object requires the thorough differentiation of a field of objects as its precondition.

Every narrative, including a historical narrative, assumes an end point from which it is told and constructs a sequence of events on the basis

of this end point. A representation differs from an actual event in at least one decisive point: while the event is open towards the future, the narrator/historian already knows this future. This makes it possible for him or her to present a contingent sequence of events as a "logical" development. The awareness of the gap between the sequence of events and its representation is an important corrective; it does not, however, devalue the construction from a fixed end point but exposes it for what it is: a construction. If the historian wanted to make the always present openness of the event to the future the guiding principle of his own work, he would quickly lose himself in the multiplicity of possibilities. Such a history would be, in a strict sense, unreadable.

I mention these problems because they cast light on Foster's proposed narrative of the relationships between avant-garde and neo-avant-garde in terms of the Freudian model of deferred action. The idea of deferred action, like the knowledge that historical processes are open to the future, is a corrective to historical representation, but it is not a model that can replace historical construction predicated upon an end point. This becomes evident, for instance, in the fact that Foster keeps repeating his thesis that the historical avant-gardes did not create meaning (that is, make the art institution recognizable and open to criticism), but that this project was first carried out by the neo-avant-gardes, while otherwise remaining at the level of bad generalization, where there is much talk of "questions of repetition, difference, and deferral: of causality, temporality and narrativity" (32).

The use of deferred action as a general category of reflection, which I am glad to endorse, needs to be distinguished from an adoption of the Freudian model of trauma and repetition. I consider it objectionable to transfer concepts used by Freud to describe unconscious, psychic events onto historical processes undertaken by conscious, active individuals. In referring to repetition compulsion, Freud defines it as "an ungovernable process originating in the unconscious. As a result of its action, the subject deliberately places himself in distressing situations, thereby repeating an old experience, but he does not recall this prototype."²⁶ It is perfectly clear that the repetition of avant-garde practices by the neo-avant-garde cannot be understood in this manner. It does not happen unconsciously nor does it contain elements of unconscious compulsion; we are dealing, rather, with a conscious resumption within a different context. We need, therefore, to distinguish more sharply than Foster between unconscious repetition and conscious resumption.

Furthermore, the category of repetition and the compulsion to repeat is one of Freud's least defined concepts and remained something of a riddle for Freud himself. It is always delicate to transfer a category already

loaded with problems within the scholarly context in which it was developed (Freud ultimately could not explain the repetition compulsion) to another context. What could it contribute to our understanding of processes that are clearly not of an unconscious nature?

Foster seems to be aware of the problems he has taken on with the adoption of psychoanalytic categories, but thinks he can avoid these problems by appropriating the Freudian model with all of its entailments (28). Indeed, he conceives of the historical avant-gardes as a trauma and the neo-avant-garde as its repetition. This looks at first like a clever chess move. After all, one of Freud's interpretations of the trauma concept locates the decisive event in the act of repetition rather than at the origin of the traumatic fixation. "The trauma's import is reduced and at the same time its singularity diminishes."²⁷ This is precisely Foster's intent: to position the neo-avant-garde as the ultimate event that establishes meaning.

But for whom could the historical avant-gardes have been a trauma? Foster avoids giving any answer to this question and contents himself with an image: they were "a hole in the symbolic order of [their] time" (29). In other words, the avant-gardes broke through the symbolic order with their actions and manifestations. If this were accurate, then they would have attained their goal of arousing a general crisis in consciousness. This, however, is precisely what did not occur.

Foster's assertion that the manifestations of the historical avant-gardes were not immediately legible is less open to debate. As far as surrealism is concerned, this thesis is countermanded by the texts of Drieu and Bataille, who were never members of the surrealist movement but observed it with an ambivalent attitude of sympathy and resistance. Their texts testify to the legibility of the surrealist message in the 1920s.

I distinguished earlier between an unconscious, compulsive repetition and a conscious resumption. A third process needs to be distinguished from these two: return. A later event illuminates a previous one, without there being a demonstrable continuity between them. Here we are dealing with what Benjamin called a *constellation*. May 1968 made surrealism legible in a manner that it had not been legible previously. However, the connection between these two events cannot be understood according to the model of a repetition of which the subject is not aware or of a self-conscious resumption. In fact, it cannot be thought of in terms of a model derived from the subject at all: rather the second event, which possesses its own context of emergence, illuminates the first. This constellation underlies *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. From the standpoint of the utopia of 1968, whose failure was already unambiguously sketched out, the author read the historical avant-gardes and saw the failure of

the May '68 movement prefigured in them. Thus, in the Benjaminian sense, he holds onto a singular image from the past. The author does not need to deny that it is an image marked by melancholy.

While Foster, in adopting the Freudian model of trauma and return, presents his own theoretical concept against which he sets the construction of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, other points of critique are strung together in a rather impressionistic manner. I would like to answer some of them in what follows.

"Bürger takes the romantic rhetoric of the avant-garde, of rupture and revolution, at its own word" (15). Indeed he does, and for good reasons. Despite all their contradictions and self-posturing, the revolutionary context (in Russia), as well as what artists interpreted as a revolutionary context (in France) lent a moral seriousness to the statements of the Russian Constructivists and French surrealists, which should in turn be taken seriously by critics. The accusation that the author of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* judges the neo-avant-gardes "from a mythical point of critical escape" points in a similar direction (14).²⁸ That the historical avant-gardes were not beyond critique at the time the book was conceived can be deduced from my previously mentioned surrealism study of 1971. Later, I was to read—admittedly not without an inner struggle—Michel Tournier's *Le roi des aulnes* as a successful parody of surrealism.²⁹

Like many other critics, Foster wants to prove that *Theory of the Avant-Garde* over-values the historical avant-gardes in comparison to the neo-avant-gardes. In methodological terms the argument thus reads as follows: the relationship between historical avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes is conceived in Bürger's book according to a model of cause and effect (10). This mechanical interpretation is inaccurate insofar as the relationship under discussion is characterized as one of resumption. There are, however, two moments that enter into the category of resumption that have no place in a cause-effect model: the intention of the acting subject and the context. While the historical avant-gardes could rightly consider the social context of their actions to be one of crisis, if not revolution, and could draw from this realization the energy to design the utopian project of subverting the institution of art, this no longer applied to the neo-avant-gardes of the 1950s and 1960s. The aesthetic context had also changed in the meantime. While the historical avant-gardes could still connect their practices with a claim to transgression, this is no longer the case for the neo-avant-gardes, given that avant-garde practices had in the meantime been incorporated by the institution.

Hal Foster is too honest a critic not to concede that, even from his own perspective, the thesis of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* ("The neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thereby negates genuine

avant-gardist intentions”) applies to a not inconsiderable number of neo-avant-garde works: Jasper Johns’ painted beer cans as well as Arman’s assemblages and Yves Klein’s neo-Dadaist provocations (11). He later adds the names of Kaprow and Rauschenberg (21). Foster does, though, outline a way of saving those artists whom he sees as belonging to the first neo-avant-garde: its reified treatment of the historical avant-garde’s artistic materials was necessary so that the second neo-avant-garde (above all Buren, Haacke, Broodthaers) could criticize these practices. With the help of this model, to be sure, almost any artistic approach can be legitimated after the fact once it has found its critic. We can therefore maintain that *Theory of the Avant-Garde* did call attention—admittedly with a polemical sharpness and a high level of generalization—to the problem of the neo-avant-gardes, namely their deployment of procedures and artistic materials that were designed to transcend the institution of art for internal aesthetic purposes. I am happy to concede that not all artists who have endeavored to resume the program of the avant-garde are covered by my polemically constructed concept of the neo-avant-garde (as my Beuys essay tries to show).³⁰ Whether there are more artists who elude my verdict is not a theoretical question, but a question of evaluating the artistic work. With regard to Buren, who along with Broodthaers occupies a prominent position as a critic of the art institution in the estimation of Buchloh and Foster, I have shown elsewhere why I do not see things in the same way but believe, rather, that he has been temporarily overvalued by a criticism that does not want to let go of the concept of advancement.³¹

What follows from what I have said for our contemporary engagement with the texts and objects produced by the avant-garde? To begin with, we must admit that the avant-garde is now far removed from us. How far is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the fact that the concept is nowadays increasingly applied to very different things, for example, as a prestige-bearing designation for a new consumer product. Seen in this light, the nonspecific use of the concept, which simply makes it a synonym for progressive modernization, is an expression of a deep alienation from what the avant-garde desired.

The starting point for an investigation of the avant-garde that does not fall short of the level of reflection possible today would have to be the paradox represented above: that the failure of its project (the sublation of the art institution) coincides with its success within the institution. This means that every positivistic treatment of the texts and objects of the avant-garde that slots them into the history of art and literature without further critical reflection misses what is specific to them. We have to accept that avant-garde texts have become literature, but we

should also not lose sight of their originally intended effect, that is, to draw out the claim to authenticity in the seemingly most unserious products. A nonpositivistic treatment of the products of the avant-garde would have to keep both perspectives in mind without playing them off against each other. The difficulty of fulfilling this demand underscores how far removed the avant-garde's impulse to transform real social relationships is from us today. This does not exclude, but rather includes, the possibility that the avant-garde could gain a renewed relevance in a future that we cannot imagine.

TRANSLATED BY BETTINA BRANDT AND DANIEL PURDY

NOTES

- 1 G. W. F. Hegel, "Wer denkt abstrakt?" in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. Eva Modenhauer and K. M. Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 2:579.
- 2 See for instance, Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil, 1992). For a critique of this nonspecific concept of the avant-garde, see W. Asholt, "La notion d'avant-garde dans *Les Règles de l'art*," in *Le symbolique et le social*, ed. J. Dubois (Liège: Les Éditions de l'Université de Liège, 2005), 165–75.
- 3 On this point, see my sketch with the problematic title, "Pour une définition de l'avant-garde," in *La révolution dans les lettres*, ed. Henriette Ritter and Annelies Schulte Nordholt (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 17–27.
- 4 In what follows I address only the critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, not the many substantial works that extend the book's approach. Examples thereof include two essays by Walter Fähnders and Wolfgang Asholt about the "Project of the Avant-Garde" in *Der Blick vom Wolkenkratzer: Avantgarde—Avantgardekritik—Avantgardeforschung*. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 69–95 and 97–120. Fähnders suggests that the "Avant-garde Project" can be derived from the Romantic fragment, which, despite and because of its fragmentary character, is held to be perfect. Asholt elaborates on how self-criticism is an important moment in the "Avant-Garde Project."
- 5 Hans Sedlmayr, *Art in Crisis, The Lost Center*, trans. Brian Battershaw (Chicago: H. Regnery, 1958).
- 6 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 759.
- 7 Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism," in *Selected Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Belknap, 1999), 2:215.
- 8 Theodor W. Adorno, "Looking Back on Surrealism," in *Notes to Literature*, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1991), 90.
- 9 Heiner Boehncke, "Überlegungen zu einer proletarisch-avantgardistischen Ästhetik," in *"Theorie der Avantgarde": Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft*, ed. M. Lüdke (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976) (hereafter cited in text as A).
- 10 Benjamin, "Experience and Poverty," in *Selected Writings*, 2:732.
- 11 Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity—An Incomplete Project," in: *The Anti-Aesthetic*, trans. Seyla Ben-Habib (New York: The New Press, 2002), 11 (translation slightly modified).
- 12 Pierre Naville, *La révolution et les intellectuels* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 120.
- 13 Ferenc Fehér, "What is Beyond Art? On the Theories of the Postmodern," *Thesis Eleven* 5/6 (1982): 10.

- 14 Benjamin Buchloh, "Allegorical Procedures: Appropriation and Montage in Contemporary Art," *Art Forum* (Sept. 1982): 43–56.
- 15 Buchloh, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," *Art in America* 72 (Nov. 1984): 20ff.
- 16 Cited in *Salvador Dalí Retrospektive 1920–1980* (Munich: Prestel, 1980), 276f.
- 17 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984), 57. The page numbers that follow in the rest of the text refer to this edition.
- 18 Buchloh, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," 20.
- 19 Buchloh, "Parody and Appropriation in Francis Picabia, Pop, and Sigmar Polke [1982]," in *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 353.
- 20 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) The page numbers that follow in the text refer to this book. Charles Harrison has presented an interesting discussion of Foster's book. The title "Bürger Helper" indicates that the reviewer sees Foster and the author of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* as standing closer together than they think, for both participate in the turn from "interstitial text to institutional frame" (Foster). Harrison sees in this type of critique the danger of blending together the art world and academic discourse: "One cannot know a work of art without being in the know." *Bookforum* (Winter 1996): 30f and 34.
- 21 As regards the concept of autonomy, the discussion of the *Theory of the Avant-Garde* suffers from the fact that its critics refer in a sweeping manner to a false notion of autonomy (Buchloh). This covers over the contradictory nature of the concept of autonomy, which signifies both art's relative detachment from life and the hypostatization of this historically created condition as the "essence" of art.
- 22 See the chapter, "Von Nietzsche zu Derrida. Die Frage nach dem Ursprung," in Bürger, *Ursprung des postmodernen Denkens* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2000), 179–84.
- 23 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in *The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man: The Structuralist Controversy*, ed. R. Macksey and E. Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1970), 271.
- 24 See J. Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1973), 111–14 (article on "deferred action").
- 25 Bürger (in conjunction with Christa Bürger), *Prosa der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), 143 and 145.
- 26 Laplanche and Pontalis, *Language of Psychoanalysis*, 78 (article on "Compulsion to Repeat").
- 27 Laplanche and Pontalis, *Language of Psychoanalysis*, 468 (article on "Trauma").
- 28 See the chapter "Surrealism as Ethics" in the second edition of my book, *Der französische Surrealismus* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1996), 191–208.
- 29 See, "To Think Madness: The Postmodern Novel, Surrealism and Hegel," in Bürger, *The Thinking of the Master: Bataille between Hegel and Surrealism*, trans. Richard Block (Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2002), 24–55.
- 30 Reprinted in the volume *Das Altern der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001), 154–70.
- 31 See Bürger, "Zur Kritik der Neo-Avantgarde," in *Jeff Wall Photographs* (Cologne: Walther König, 2003), 174–98.

