

The Transformative Avant-Garde

A Manifest of the Present

Krzysztof Wodiczko

THE AVANT-GARDE IS DEAD: LONG LIVE THE AVANT-GARDE!

The term Avant-Garde feels outdated, its meaning washed out, referring to something that is of no interest to us today.¹ Indeed, in the not-too-distant past, after its deconstructive examination, the Avant-Garde was pronounced dead. Disregarding the fact that its ethical and political energy did not stop circulating in our artistic veins, we buried the Avant-Garde alive, without autopsy and proper mourning. After the last nail was hammered into its coffin we made a silent pact that there would be no more declarations (of independence or dependence), no more manifestos (like the Communist Manifesto or those of the Futurists), no more visionary projects (like Constant Nieuwenhuys' New Babylon and Victor Papanek's Design for the Real World), no more writing with bold typefaces and exclamation marks, and no more speaking with a strong tone of voice. We promised ourselves that we would stay away from new utopias and visionary designs because, as we concluded, they were all naive and they failed.

Membership and affiliation with the Avant-Garde carries a great many public expectations, and the heavy weight of responsibility for what one may say and do, how one may express oneself and why. By burying the Avant-Garde we 'liberated' ourselves from the risky task of proposing a new transformative agenda for today, and new visionary projects for tomorrow. It was easy, much too easy – a way out.

This is not a call for action. It is not a manifesto for the future. It is a Manifest of the Present. It is a statement of evidence. It is a supportive recognition of the active existence of the Avant-Garde today.

By calling it 'transformative', this Manifest points to an important facet of the Avant-Garde's contemporary function: its proactive attitude and role in intelligent, critical, post-contestational and post-deconstructive

1. This general feeling prevails in most countries but is especially evident in the United States.

engagement through social design and civic practice. This Manifest is also a reminder of the Avant-Garde's powerful historic tradition, which is part of any transformative and critically affirmative practice and theory.

The role of the Avant-Garde has been to unfold new horizons without which there would be no way for us to move beyond the point where we already are. The Avant-Garde is an indispensable force that keeps us moving against the backward entrapments of our cultures and ideologies. To survive philosophically and emotionally, to sustain ourselves as sensitive and sensible beings, to have an idea of our future, and to be able to transform ourselves and our world into something better, we must critically re-actualize and reinvent the Avant-Garde.

Without reverting to reactionary nostalgia for its simple recuperation, but expecting from it new agendas and methodologies, with its name updated to its new task and *modus operandi*, we must bring the Avant-Garde back to life as a newly transformative, intelligent and critically affirmative artistic force.

AFTER DECONSTRUCTION: TOWARDS A NEW CONSTRUCTION

What is critical today is the recognition of the need for a new, intelligent, proactive and complex civic art, as well as an art that seeks a radical transformation of social reality through design.

Beyond its role in creating acts and events of contestation, provocation, disruption and dissensus, the Avant-Garde art of today must urgently re-actualize the propositional, proactive, transformative and design side of its inherited practices.

Engaged in creating new situations, environments, equipment and networks, the new civic and design art can be at once critical and proactive, deconstructive and constructive; it can fearlessly create new needs, expose hidden ones, and propose original visions and unexpected solutions.

AVANT-GARDE ART AS DESIGN

Unless it operates in new critical and transformative ways, the design and civic work of Avant-Garde art should not respond to the repertoire of existing public expectations and market demands, nor should it necessarily be intended for mass production. Instead, it must take responsibility for creating and proposing new needs and expectations, and provide an emergency response to existing critical needs which otherwise would remain ignored, neglected or suppressed.

Being both pragmatic and symbolic, critically proactive and respectfully transformative, the new Avant-Garde art must not be afraid to radically enter the domain of design in order to challenge the ossified professional norms and limits that exist in design practice and theory.

In general, design must be understood as the process of invention and use of projects that assist and improve human environments and living experience. Design may take the form of processes, objects, spatial structures, environments, networks, bodily implements and other psychosocial and cultural tools and equipment that are at once functional and

symbolic. Art that is understood as Avant-Garde design must become a radical and fearless entry into the field by creating new conditions for a better life and new living experiences, and for acknowledging and disclosing those experiences that are unacknowledged, hidden and excluded.

THE AVANT-GARDE USER

Avant-garde artistic practice should consider the development and implementation of original long-term or short-term design projects that are developed with the input, collaboration and expertise of self-selected groups of initial Users. Avant-garde art needs Avant-Garde publics and collaborators, and Avant-Garde design art needs Avant-Garde Users. As the projects respond to critical and emerging needs, or propose new vital needs, such Avant-Garde Users and publics will emerge from the hidden and unexpected pockets of our society. As Bertolt Brecht would say, the project Users and their publics will join and respond to the project 'not without interest'.

Users choose to be part of design projects because they are intuitively or consciously ready to speak and publicly express the truth of their lived experience, not only on behalf of themselves but also on behalf of others who would like to be part of the project but cannot participate for various reasons.

Users are potentially a social front-guard, which both challenges inaction and acts in favour of complex change. They change the preconceived and misguided public image of themselves, public perception of the issue they address (and of which they know more than anyone else), and the very social change that is needed to resolve this issue. In these ways they will use the project to become projectors of truth and agents for change in the direction of proactive work and engagement in organized social movements. As a front-guard, Users feel compelled and responsible to be ahead of, in front of, leading others, and to become, using Hannah Arendt's expression, the 'vanguard of their peoples'.²

The artistic and design projects that Users join become the cultural equipment and developmental tools of expression and open transmission that they can further master to the point of communicative virtuosity. As public speech-act survivors, they are part of an Existential Avant-Garde, helping others through the projects they become a part of, and contributing with their expressive performance to the artistic Avant-Garde as such. Through their own creative and performative input they collaborate with designers as Avant-Garde co-agents – Transformative Avant-Garde co-artists.

THE AVANT-GARDE AND THE 'EXPERIENCE ECONOMY'

As described by Peter Bürger, the task of the artistic Avant-Garde, the search for and recovery of the lost 'lived-through experience', has been taken over by the art of the new commerce: the Experience Economy as today's marketing aesthetics.³

2. Hannah Arendt, 'We Refugees', *Menorah Journal* 31, 1943, pp 69–77

3. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Michael Shaw, trans, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1984

According to Joseph Pine and James Gilmore, the authors of *The Experience Economy*, a book that has been translated into more than fifteen languages:

Goods and services are no longer enough . . . Experiences have necessarily emerged to create new value. Such experience offerings occur whenever a company intentionally uses services as a stage and goods as props to engage an individual. Whereas commodities are fungible, goods tangible, and services intangible, experiences are memorable . . . The company – we will call it an experience stager – no longer offers goods or services alone but the resulting experience, rich with sensations, created within each customer.⁴

Pine and Gilmore predict that the Experience Economy will have an even greater afterlife:

Once the Experience Economy has run its course, in the decades to come, the Transformation Economy will take over. Then the basis of success will be in understanding the aspirations of individual customers and businesses and guiding them to fully realize their aspirations . . . With transformations, the customer is the product! . . . When a company guides transformations the offering is the individual.⁵

After challenging the dangers of the appropriation of our lived-through experiences by the Experience Economy, the Transformative Avant-Garde must now brace itself for a new task, the task of challenging the approaching appropriation of our very *existential transformations of ourselves* by the coming Transformation Economy.

Experience Economy goes hand in hand with the ‘creative’ appetites of the over-expanding Creative Class:

Creativity is becoming more valued in today’s global society. Employers see creativity as a channel for self-expression and job satisfaction in their employees. About 38.3 million Americans and 30 percent of the American workforce identify themselves with the Creative Class. This number has increased by more than 10 percent in the past 20 years.⁶

In the context of the appropriation of art by the Experience Economy and by the Event Economy business that orchestrates ‘urban experience’ through urban spectacles (often to attract the Creative Class to redeveloped city centres), artists today must focus on projects that challenge the commercial anesthetization and trivialization of living ‘experience’.

4. B Joseph Pine II and James H Gilmore, *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theater and Every Business a Stage*, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 2011, p 17

5. Ibid, p 255

6. See the Wikipedia entry on ‘Creative Class’. See also Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, Basic, New York, 2002, p 8.

CONSUMER KITSCH AND AVANT-GARDE TACTICS

What, for the Avant-Garde, was a genuine mission and struggle to create or bring us closer to ‘lived’ experience (against our experiential numbness) has become in the ‘art’ of the Experience Economy a mockery and at best a mere nostalgia and voyeuristic substitute for such experience.

Not unlike German Junker’s art, which was a nostalgic substitute for lost contact and experience with nature – the origin of Kitsch – the Experience Economy has become a substitute for lost contact with experience itself.

New Avant-Garde art should take a closer analytical look at such commercial ‘avant-gardism’ as the new cultural kitsch.

The new task is to develop methods that are effective in wresting public interest in media spectacles and in urban experience from complete control by the Event Industry and the Experience Economy. We must revert their 'experiential' perversions and appropriations back to socially ambitious art adventures and publicly meaningful events.

The new task is to create autonomous events and projects that are independent of the workings of the Event and Experience Economy, or to infiltrate and infuse them with ethically and socially radical content. Visionary projects must become one of the key transformative objectives of the Avant-Garde today.

One of the aims of the Avant-Garde today is to challenge the kitsch consumer substitutes for lived experience by bringing into the foreground the experience, performance and presence of those whose life, work and survival is relegated to the outside of privileged fields of vision. We must change our own perspectives as well as those of the entire Creative Class, including the consumer clientele, the 'performing' personnel and the aesthetic managers of the Experience Economy.

Inserting our socially and philosophically minded media and design projects into the existing programme of urban festivals and various official cultural events may be one among many advisable methods. Art must 'dis-avant-garde' the commercial and 're-avant-garde' itself in order to offer (even if only for a moment) both the pleasure and the meaning of cultural experience. In order to succeed in such work, however, we must accept, as Brecht would have it, the need to combine in our projects both the 'pleasure' of entertainment and 'instruction'.

You want experience? Here it is! You wish to be part of a real event? Here is a chance. You seek flexible work and creative business? Perhaps there is a chance here as well. You wish to be flexible in the accumulation of your capital? You have an opportunity here, but ... in an unexpected way to you, a way that will open your eyes, ears, mind and heart to something else ... something you may not 'be ready' to experience but which you should and ought to experience ...

Conscious of this critical agenda, performative, participatory and communicative media projects may involve spatial, or nomadic, wearable designs, and other potential alternative and Avant-Garde methods, equipment and armament.

AVANT-GARDE AS TRANSFORMATIVE ENGAGEMENT

My own sense (and I hope I am not alone here) is that one should stop being nostalgic for past historical Avant-Gardes' radical 'negativity', autonomy and oppositionality; stop feeling lost in postmodern deconstruction; and stop lamenting the appropriation and recuperation of our ideas by a Spectacle Industry, Event Economy and Creative Class culture. We must stop feeling lost and move on.

The new Transformative Avant-Garde must move on by forming new temporary or longer-term alliances with many partners, engage many publics, communities and social strata in its new projects, and also be inclusive of the broader Creative Class.

In approaching this task, the Transformative Avant-Garde will need to work collectively not only with social movements and oppositional action

groups, but also with other activist artists, small and large research, educational, political and social institutions, governmental and NGOs, non-profit public art agencies and, yes, with municipal and district city agencies, their officials and offices, urban public space administrations, cultural, heritage and public art agencies, urban festival organizers and curators, as well as private owners of public spaces, private cultural foundations and private agencies.

With all of its problems, issues to address, as well as new opportunities, the world is too complex for artists to work alone. In the forefront of innovative urban politics, culture and public media, Avant-Garde leaders such as Antanas Mockus, the former mayor of Bogotá, work on transforming culture and society. They are social workers, cultural and social researchers, urban geographers, investigative reporters, documentary media artists and researchers, urban designers, social and art educators, art therapists, psychological health clinicians, political theorists and philosophers, curators and cultural producers. All of these people are waiting for our involvement and potential collaboration.

THE 'FUNCTIONAL' AVANT-GARDE

There are people, groups, organizations and movements today who function as the Avant-Garde even if they are unaware of it. These are today's 'Functional' Avant-Garde. They may be too busy with their survival, resistance, proactive and transformative work to have time to even think of the Avant-Garde as a reference point for their everyday practice. Avant-Garde may sound to them like an overly charged and perhaps pretentious term and discourage them from being associated with such a label or tradition.

Among the many examples of such a Functional Avant-Garde are the immigrants who have been forced by economic and political conditions to illegally cross borders and to work illegally and resist restrictions that are set against them. A Functional Avant-Garde consists also of the groups, organizations and movements that assist immigrants in the process of becoming non-immigrants, often by liberating them from detention and retention centres and by bringing them back from the countries to which they were deported.

Among the Functional Avant-Garde are the war veterans and their families who agitate against the perpetration of wars, who give witness to the impact of war on their lives and who educate younger generations about the reality of war. They are joined by veteran health centres, housing projects and social support organizations that try to bring them back to social life.

The Functional Avant-Garde also comprises all other groups and minorities who are similarly mistreated and at best tolerated as strangers, and who act to resist and change the preconceived notions of their identity and their 'place' and role in society.

The Functional Avant-Garde may be any persons, groups, organizations or social movements, who, like their predecessors, the resisting slaves as well as those who supported and assisted them in their liberation – the suffragists, workers and labour organizers of the past – radically transform the world for the better.

Without thinking too much about the Avant-Garde tradition, the two branches of the Functional Avant-Garde are the Existential Avant-Garde and the Social Support Avant-Garde – those who engage creatively with Avant-Garde Users, who join each other through artistic proactive socio-aesthetic projects and in this way form one complex alliance of Transformative Avant-Garde.

THE AVANT-GARDE AND THE ART WORLD

We need today a recognition of the presence, and an understanding of the complexity, of the Transformative Avant-Garde, especially in the context of the sometimes fashionable and shallow endorsement of ‘social art’ by official art institutions, and in the face of the return of some aesthetically conservative intellectual scepticism towards the artistic tradition of social engagement and contemporary civic practice.

Rather than forcing emerging socio-aesthetic projects into an old art gallery and museum framework (only to predictably find out that it does not fulfil its art world-based set of criteria and expectations), art theorists and critics should seek and invent new methodologies for understanding the new Avant-Garde practices.

Conservative critical historians should keep in mind that ‘proving’ that Constructivism, Productivism, Situationism, Fluxus and other Avant-Garde movements, ideas and projects ‘did not work’ proves nothing. We would be nowhere today without them. Nothing in the Avant-Garde tradition ‘works’ in the ways one expects, including the expectations of some of the involved artists themselves.

Our sense and sensibility, our consciousness, artistic methodologies and artistic programmes keep changing in the context of changing times thanks to the contextual and propositional attitude of these historic Avant-Garde projects, and this is the way art and design art ‘works’. These projects may ‘not work’ but ‘they work’ because, rather than ‘resolving’ existing problems, they formulate and articulate new points of view; they uncover neglected and emerging issues and they do so through design.

As we see it today, both the ‘fascos’ and the ‘loss’ of artistic Avant-Garde movements, such as Constructivism, Productivism and Architectonism, are in fact its successes and victories, while the ‘successes’ and ‘victories’ of the Leninist and Stalinist Political Avant-Garde are indeed their loss and historic fiasco.

THE CIVIC AVANT-GARDE

The work of urban cultural animator Antanas Mockus, with two non-consecutive terms as mayor of Bogotá – a Colombian mathematician, philosopher and politician who became known for his surprising and humorous initiatives – is an example of successful Civic Avant-Garde work. His projects, which encouraged and helped city inhabitants to become pantomime artists, to act as traffic police, and to become artist-painters in order to visually transform their urban dwellings, were an indirect follow-up to Avant-Garde public art works, as exemplified by

Arseny Avraamov's *Symphony of Factory Sirens* in Baku in 1922. In Avraamov's project, nearly the entire city workforce as well as city maintenance workers and military personnel and their equipment became part of one collective urban sound creation, and the entire 'oeuvre' was directed by a team of Avant-Garde artist-conductors using flags and pistols.

These were proactive art and design projects, designed to counter urban alienation and create a new sense of creative togetherness – social experience as a lived process of collective use and play.

Of course Avraamov's ambitious civic work had a questionable (especially from our present perspective) propagandist and pro-state agenda, as was the case with some Constructivist and certainly many Productivist projects. Yet it displayed an exceptionally original socio-aesthetic methodology, urban scale, transformative cultural ambition, ground-breaking aesthetic methods and design agenda, including many projects coming from the Vkhutemas design school. For us today, these must be seen as instructive and influential.

Despite their questionable inspiration and associations with state ideology, Soviet Constructivist projects may be a methodological inspiration for today's anti-state and anti-hegemonic deconstructive work, and certainly for contemporary alternative, transformative, affirmative and proactive socio-aesthetic projects.

When it comes to building theoretical foundations for such practice, where would we be without Boris Arvatov's theory of productivism? Where would we be without Brecht and Avraamov, without Augusto Boal and, before him, Paulo Freire, and today's social artists, such as Michael Rakowitz and Tania Bruguera? Where would be the works by N55, Critical Art Ensemble, Atelier Van Lieshout, without Victor Papanek, Buckminster Fuller and Vladimir Tatlin, without the Situationist International? Where would I be with my *Immigrant Instruments*, *Homeless Vehicle*, *War Veteran Vehicle*, video animations of war memorials and statues realized with and by war veterans, or my proposals for institutional and symbolic design supplements to war memorials, without Constructivism, Productivism and Fluxus, and, again, without Papanek and other chapters of the Avant-Garde tradition and its socio-aesthetic practice?

AVANT-GARDE 'FAILURES'

They all, the Avant-Gardists, seem failed in their utopian zeal. One should admit it, and I am willing to do so as well. I wish, however, that we could have more artistic 'failures' of such ethical, aesthetic and political ambition, scope and scale. Yes, each time we must be more intelligent in our attempts to not repeat the previous 'failures' of our predecessors, including those from the Avant-Garde past, yet we must risk new kinds of projects and new kinds of 'failures'. The 'failure' of an Avant-Garde project is a risk worth taking.

There is an overbearing scepticism, perhaps even a 'cynical intelligence', at work in pointing to the appropriation of the Avant-Garde by the very powers it questions or critically infiltrates and appropriates. We hear about the 'danger' of such appropriation by clever capitalist

hegemony, by authoritarian ‘communist’ (state socialist) apparatuses or by military dictatorships (as in my old country Poland under the previous regime). Sure, the Experience Economy has managed to appropriate artistic Avant-Garde tactics quite well, but each counter- or sub-movement, and each infiltration project, must be aware of its temporality. Inherent in any Avant-Garde agenda is the inevitability of appropriation by the powers it tries to deconstruct and transform. So be it. Let us dismantle our own projects ourselves just before each coming moment of appropriation. Let us be as clever as the smartest powers and the most flexible capitalist forces that surround us. Let us recognize the moment that requires a swift shift to new areas of work and that demands a change of tactics. The dialectics of the Avant-Garde method of operation and its politics must continue: action, appropriation, disbanding oneself, forming new areas of action and transformation, the coming moment of appropriation ... and so on.

We need art to design the transformation of life. We need artists to inspire, direct and design the conditions for participatory, collaborative and inventive people’s art and design. We need artists who work with people and not only for them. One of the Avant-Garde lines of thinking endorses art as design through which people are in partial or complete charge of the projects’ realization and of the processes of design, production, maintenance, distribution and use.

Mierle Ukeles’ *Touch Sanitation* (1970–1980) involved shaking hands with more than 8500 workers in the New York City Department of Sanitation while saying ‘Thank you for keeping New York City alive’.

In 1987, Suzanne Lacy staged the performance work, *The Crystal Quilt*, which featured 430 older women talking about their lives as their gathering created an eighty-two-foot-square tableau in the shape of a quilt.

In 2001–2004 in Barcelona, the *Las Agencias* (*The Agencies*) project was created, which, according to Jorge Ribalta, who was then a curator at MACBA (Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona), transformed the traditional methods of anti-capitalist movements. *Las Agencias* was based on a pedagogical model of self-transformation and self-organization, attentive to real needs and in confrontation with concrete struggles. The five ‘Agencies’, as they were called, produced posters and printed matter that were critical of the World Bank and that parodied official municipality campaigns. They produced tools for intervention in protest situations, including *prêt à révolter* fashions for safety and visibility, as well as workshops involved in the production of images and tools designed to meet the needs of groups involved in anti-globalization struggles.

During the summer of 2013, Thomas Hirschhorn worked with the residents of Forest Houses in the Bronx in order to create a monument to Antonio Gramsci, which, according to its publicly stated mission, was designed to ‘Establish a new definition of monument, to provoke encounters, to create an event, and to think Gramsci today’. The residents were inspired and employed in a collective creative process of editing and producing the Gramsci Monument Newspaper, Gramsci Monument Radio Station, Gramsci Theatre, Gramsci Seminar, Gramsci Poetry Sessions, Gramsci Art School, Gramsci Field Trips. They created and organized the extensive and comprehensive Gramsci Library-Archive, edited

the daily newspaper, and organized lectures and other pedagogical cultural events and workshops in order to immerse themselves in Gramsci's thinking and to reinterpret and re-actualize Gramsci's intellectual and political work in the context of present-day existential and political situations.

These and many other artists' projects are original in the ways in which they are at once disruptive and transformative, deconstructive and constructive, in the ways in which they are both proactive designs and performative actions.

Where would these socio-aesthetic public projects be without the groundwork that was paved by the Proletkult, Productivist and Avant-Garde work of the 1920s?

We could also ask the opposite question: why would we recall the Proletkult, Productivist, Avraamovist and other Avant-Garde histories if not because of the work by Joanna Rajkowska, Rakowitz, Ukeles, Lacy, Ribalta and Hirschhorn? It is precisely the Avant-Garde character of these contemporary art projects that points to and informs our thinking about Avant-Garde predecessors. We are today rediscovering the historical Avant-Gardes because the projects of contemporary Avant-Gardes are projecting new meanings onto the past.

Speaking like Walter Benjamin, one could say that the present is here as if in 'anticipation' of the past. When new artistic work encourages new historical, critical and theoretical discourse that engages a particular tradition, such new work becomes a true continuation of such tradition, because by way of a critical re-actualization of the past, art creates conditions for extrapolating it into the artistic future.

AVANT-GARDE AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

Conflict is a vital life force as long as it is creative rather than malignant and bloody. The task for us today is to transform such malignant conflicts into creative ones by inspiring a paradigm shift through which the new more common problems, rather than the old irresolvable ones, will be at the centre of public democratic discourse.

One must keep in mind that the work of the Transformative Avant-Garde can be especially indispensable in the areas of conflict transformation.⁷ Artists can contribute to finding new forms and aesthetic means of expression and creation and in these ways inspire, provoke and assist in the development of the symbolic (rather than bloody) exchange of positions, collective memory and communication. They have already done so through the development of rituals, performative dramatic therapy or communicative cultural-prosthetic projects. Art can work in post-conflict situations in order to help people live with and overcome post-traumatic psychological, social and cultural conditions.

In one example of such projects, Joanna Rajkowska worked with Palestinian youth in performative workshops. The project was aimed at the recognition, creative articulation and symbolic communication (through invented bodily expressions and rituals rather than violent actions) of their complex patterns of emotional behaviour.

Another work, *Airways* (2008), is a dramatic and humorous attempt to physically displace, even if for only a memorable moment, a malignant

7. I speak here of conflict transformation, rather than conflict management or conflict resolution. See, for instance, Hugh Miall, *Conflict Transformation: A Multi-Dimensional Task*, Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2004, available online at http://www.berghof-handbook.net/documents/publications/miall_handbook.pdf, accessed 15 September 2013.

social and political conflict. Rajkowska organized purposefully rough airplane flights for an assemblage of passengers who represented extremely divided political views, beliefs and positions. At the end of such frightening flights, the project ‘passengers’ landed together not only safe and relieved, but also touching a new common ground – the experience and the memory of *surviving together* the flight itself.

In 2006 Joanna Warsza conducted a project with the mostly Vietnamese immigrant population in Warsaw to establish a communicative and performative bridge between them and the alienated majority of the city. Hers is a good and early example of transformative socio-aesthetic work in Poland.

My own projects in Europe and the USA with undocumented immigrants and returning soldiers from contemporary wars may also be included in a long list of examples of performative and media art projects by artists today that engage the public domain in an attempt to contribute to conflict mediation and transformation.

As part of his projects designed to help people to live in healthier non-violent ways with tragic post-conflict memories, in 1992 artist-designer Cristóvão Canhavato manufactured his *Thrones of Weapons*. These sculptures were pieces of furniture built with ingeniously appropriated gun parts and other weapons left behind after a bloody civil war in Mozambique. This was a truly transformative project of cultural and psychosocial disarmament. His art helped people to learn that in moving on with one’s life one cannot change the tragic and traumatic past but one can change his or her relation to it and live with such an overwhelming past in a creative and even playful way.

AVANT-GARDE AND WAR

War is a sanctioned collective madness. Armed with nuclear weapons, it leads humanity to global annihilation. The culture of war idealizes war and orchestrates war psychosis. It mobilizes and unleashes our paranoid, grandiose and aggressive behaviour, and makes us believe that killing and dying in wars is a just and justified mission – an honourable duty.

Building a war-free civilization demands dismantling the workings of the culture of war, disarming its symbolic arsenal, exposing war’s human toll and fallout, and confronting our drive to enter war situations. An even more important task is to create and disseminate new and effective peacemaking and peace-securing projects.

The Transformative Avant-Garde can become a generative and active part in such war-un-making and peace-building processes.

Some peace researchers propose that peace is not simply a state of non-war. ‘Positive peace’, they say, is ‘filled with positive content such as restoration of relationships, the creation of social systems that serve the needs of the whole population and the constructive resolution of conflict’. Positive peace means the non-violent unfolding of conflict in a constructive way.⁸

Avant-garde design can contribute to such positive peace. Artistic means are irreplaceable when it comes to helping to publicly express human experiences that are unspeakable, and to challenge and transform

8. These are the words of Johan Galtung, the originator of ‘peace studies’ who distinguished between positive and negative peace. See ‘Negative versus Positive Peace’, from the Irenees Peace Workshop, 2007, available at http://www.irenees.net/bdf_fiche-notions-186_en.html. See also the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, The Centre for Conflict Resolution, *Skills Development for Conflict Transformation: A Training Manual On Understanding Conflict, Negotiation And Mediation*, 1997, available at <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan001363.pdf>, both websites accessed 15 September 2013.

the culture of violence into a culture of dynamic, honest, inclusive, critical, passionate and emotionally articulate communication.

AVANT-GARDE BEYOND CONTESTATION AND DECONSTRUCTION

In the face of environmental catastrophe and the unknown consequences of globalization, continued armed and bloody conflicts, civil wars and hunger, poverty and epidemics, proliferation of nuclear weapons and other large problems, we must develop methods and practices that learn from and go beyond the work of our interventionist Avant-Garde ancestors. We must go beyond the work of our postmodern and post-structuralist predecessors as well as their deconstructive critical analysis and critiques of representation.

While continuing to contest and deconstruct, we must also focus on construction and act proactively in transformative ways, critically and in an affirmative spirit, but all of this on condition, as Chantal Mouffe would prefer, that we do so in an 'agonistic-pluralist' and radically democratic mode.

A PERSONAL NOTE

Being ahead of oneself, ahead of one's own upbringing, ahead of acquired and outdated norms and values, and thinking beyond one's own conditions of life is an indispensable psychosocial and ethical imperative for changing such norms, values and conditions in the outside world around us all.

To transform the world one must transform oneself. Transforming the world helps in self-transformation. This I have found is as true for myself as for those who have chosen to join the projects of the Transformative Avant-Garde.

Art is an indispensable, developmental, psycho-aesthetic, communicative, socio-expressive tool and transformative magical force.

The Transformative Avant-Garde is born from within oneself, from one's own existential social, political and ethical motivation and will.

It is a true task to match our Avant-Garde predecessors in the ambition, scale and scope of their transformative projects, in the impact they have had on public consciousness, and in their fearlessness and proactive challenge to our conservative thinking and feeling.

I am not afraid to call myself, and to be called, an Avant-Garde artist. I am only afraid that in my attempts to respond to the present world in critical and transformative ways, I may not be or have not been Avant-Garde enough.