

riod" of architectural theory. Theory has handed architecture the fig leaf of autonomy and channeled architecture's libido into historical imperatives and counterideological resistances. However much these theories of autonomy are in advance of older forms of sublimation (historicism, functionalism, and the like), to read architecture as an isomorph of the categories and operations of theory can be as reductive as those readings that trace architecture to an inevitable reflection of a wholly predictable technological or economic context, that give no reciprocal force to architecture as a social production. In our successful theorizing of autonomy we have theorized ourselves out of the means to see architecture as exceeding our theories.

[See also *Architecture; and Ideology.*]

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his *Aesthetic Theory*, uses the term occasionally in this broad sense, but knows also along with it another, more specific usage, according to which the avant-garde aims for the "abolition of art." "Avant-garde disturbances of aesthetically avant-garde events are as illusionary as the belief that they are revolutionary" (Adorno, 1970, p. 372). Adorno here sets the broader concept (for "aesthetically avant-garde": that which works on the most advanced artistic material) polemically in opposition to the specific meaning of the term. This latter usage will, in this essay, be differentiated from the concept of the modern and clarified in its aporias, taking as its point of departure a short conceptual history.

Saint-Simon and his early socialist cocombatants in the 1820s were the first to apply the concept of the avant-garde to art. In the hope that the society of atomized individuals that had emerged from the French Revolution would be overcome by the utopia of an organic society, they saw in artists those who "would call out the future of the human species." "It is we artists who will serve you as an avant-garde: the power of the arts is in fact the most immediate and the fastest" (Rodrigues, 1964, p. 210). This is proclaimed, in a Saint-Simonian dialogue, by the artist against his conversation partners, a scientist and an industrialist. On the one hand, art receives the function of being the motor of social change. On the other, art becomes dependent ("who will serve") on a historico-philosophical project.

The artists in this conception are not avant-gardists because they develop artistic forms. They are in fact not so because of their works at all, but only because they bring about the reality of utopia by awakening enthusiasm for the idea of a harmonious society of working citizens. After the collapse of Christian faith, according to the belief of the Saint-Simonians, only art may again establish that unity of convictions that is necessary in order to overcome the isolation of egotistically acting individuals.

When Paul Bénichou (1977) determines that contemporary artists and poets had no interest in Saint-Simon's appeal, he overlooks Heinrich Heine (1896), who ends his report on the Paris painting exhibition of 1831 by letting political reality break into the text. The author (according to the fictive writing situation that Heine sketches here) is distracted from his art-critical endeavor by the street noise of a crowd that is mourning the repression of the Polish uprising: "Warsaw has fallen! Our avant-garde has fallen!" Avant-garde means here the political avant-garde of the democratic and revolutionary movement. Heine allows it, the "raw noise of life," to question the "undisturbed pleasure in art." He forces an opposition: confronted with the interests of social progress, art is inessential, a triviality that inflates itself. "Current art must perish, for its principle is rooted in the extinct ancien régime, in the past of the Holy Roman Empire." But: "the new age will also give birth to a new art, which will be in enthusiastic unison with the for-

AVANT-GARDE. [This essay offers a critical theory interpretation of the avant-garde and its legacy in modern and post-modern art. For discussion of avant-garde art, see Constructivism; Cubism; Dadaism; Expressionism; Modernism; Suprematism; and Surrealism.]

The use of the concept *avant-garde* is not a consistent one. Many authors use it to mean nothing more than whatever the newest literary and artistic appearances may be, insofar as they make claims to modernity. Even Theodor Adorno, in

mer." Here the Saint-Simonian motif of an art that is no longer subjectivistically divided against itself, but rather harmonizes with a new social reality, is clearly sounded. But, as one can hardly expect otherwise from Heine, this supposedly sure faith in the future of art is immediately put in doubt: "Or will there be a sad end both for art in general and with the world? That dominant spirituality which manifests itself now in European literature is perhaps an omen of imminent extinction."

Heine does not speak of an avant-garde art or literature, but under the catchword of an "end of the period of art," he considers the possibility of a political art that is involved in the reality of democratic society. The failure of the 1848 revolution puts an end to such hopes. Charles Baudelaire, the disappointed revolutionary who became a cynical anarcho-conservative, criticizes not only the idea of progress ("this grotesque idea"), but also the love of the French for military metaphors such as "the combat poets" and "the avant-garde literati" (Baudelaire, 1954, p. 1219). These metaphors point out, for Baudelaire, a spirit made for discipline and conformism. To the degree that the utopian project of the early socialists pales, the concept of the avant-garde retains only its moment of dependency. Baudelaire, who criticizes the social-reforming connotations of the concept of the avant-garde literati, himself develops the outlines of a concept of modern art. He projects an aesthetic of the sketch, which corresponds only to the ephemerality of perceptions in the life of the modern metropolis, poses the question of the representability of modern life, and insists on the inclusion of the repulsive and ugly in art. In this concept there is no question of the political engagement of the artist, but only of the capacity to make something enduring from the perishable: "to draw the eternal from the transitory" (Baudelaire, 1954, p. 892). Baudelaire's concept of modernity is conceived from the point of view of the work of art, not from that of a social function of art.

For the concept of a literary avant-garde to become important again, another revolutionary situation was necessary. During the Paris Commune, Arthur Rimbaud develops his idea of the seer (*voyant*), in which it is again a question of giving the poet a social function. After Rimbaud has devalued all of Occidental poetry as a diversion (*délassement*), an entertainment that serves convalescence, he opposes to this his idea of a poetry that intervenes: the poet would define the quantity of the unknown that awakens in his time in the universal soul: "he would be truly a *multiplier of progress*" (Rimbaud, 1960, p. 347). The early socialist hopes for a resonance between the poet and his time return here, along with the thought that a poet might become a driving force of social change. Thus Rimbaud claims for poetry the position of an advance post. Poetry will not only, as in ancient Greece, rhythmically accompany deeds, but it will be in advance of the latter. "Poetry will no longer make action rhythmic; it will be *in advance*." In one point, how-

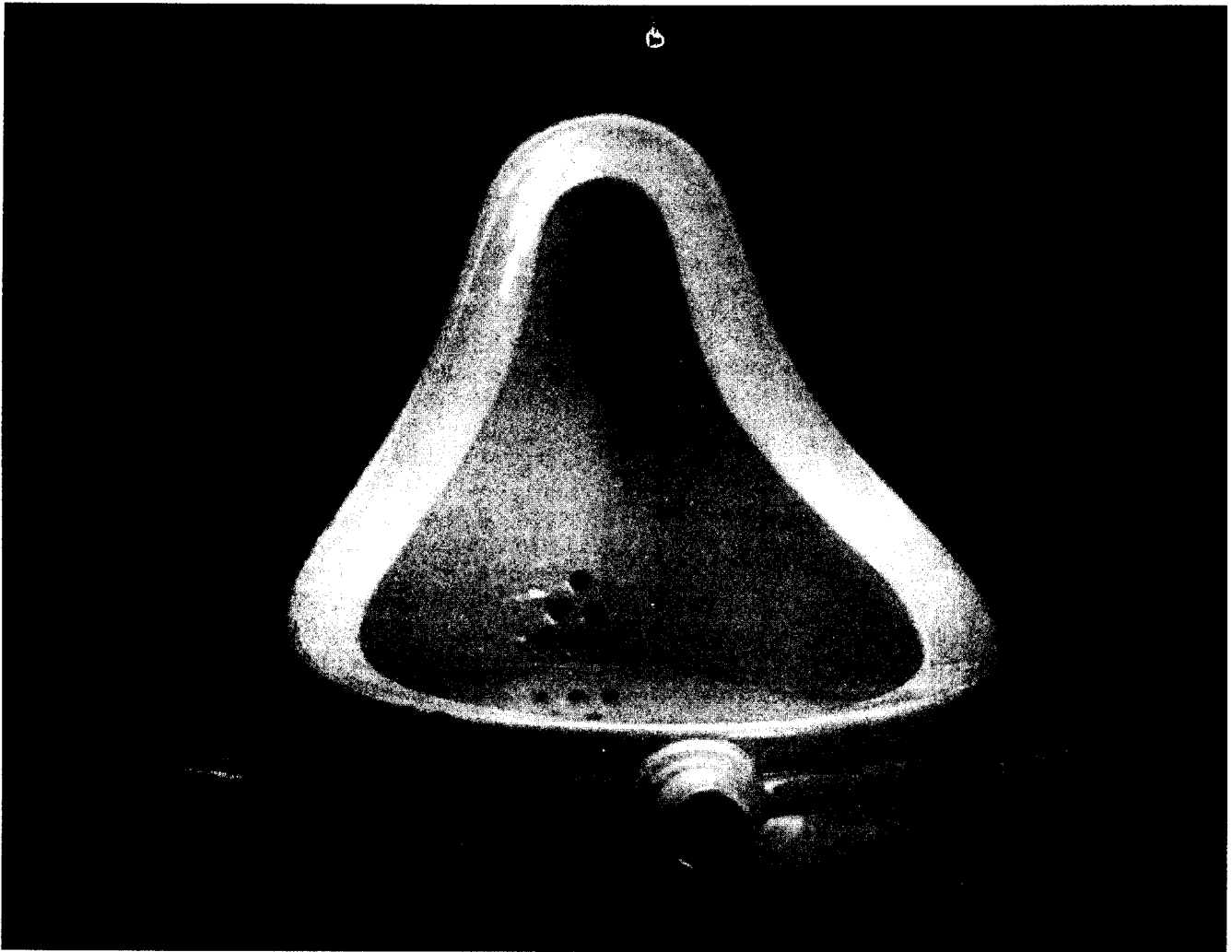
ever, Rimbaud's poet as seer (*poète voyant*) is distinct from the idea of the avant-garde artist projected by the early socialists; he is not dependent on a preexisting philosophy of history, but makes the claim to be both the great outcast and the "highest" scientist ("the great cursed one—and the supreme Knower!"). This claim is taken up by the Surrealists, who also understand themselves as a vanguard of a science that explodes the bounds of rationality.

In this sketch, one may detect *one* concept of avant-garde art that means more than just the latest and most up-to-date art of modernity. The preposition *avant* means not, or at least not primarily, the claim to be in advance of contemporary art (this is first true of Rimbaud), but rather the claim to be at the peak of social progress. The artist's activity is avant-gardist not in the production of a new work but because the artist intends with this work (or with the renunciation of a work) something else: the realization of a Saint-Simonian utopia or the "multiplication" of progress, a task that Rimbaud assigns to the poet of the future.

Inasmuch as avant-garde artists go beyond the sphere of art, they stand in a relation of tension to the principle of aesthetic autonomy. The Saint-Simonians polemicized against the idea of *l'art pour l'art*, Heine was amused by the "uprisings" of the Young Germans against Goethe, and Rimbaud condemned all of Western poetry as mere entertaining game. The avant-garde needs autonomous art in order to protest against it.

The tendencies mentioned here will develop and be radicalized in the historical avant-garde movements (Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism). From the Saint-Simonian polemics against *l'art pour l'art* and Heine's farewell to the "idea of art" of Goethe's time, there comes the direct attack on the institution of art. Out of the stress on the social function of the artist will arise either anarchist revolt or engagement for the revolution.

What begins to emerge in Rimbaud's "letter of the seer" is the longing to break out of the institution of art, and this means to make artistic production into an act that forms reality. This longing becomes the impulse of the historical avant-garde movements in the period of crisis around World War I. However divergent the programs and political positions of the individual movements may be, they all share the questioning of the autonomy of art, for example, the protest against an art that has removed itself from life praxis. The expressions this protest takes are admittedly very different. With the Italian Futurists, the breakout from the ghetto of art takes place via an aestheticization of technology and of war, and thereby also a subordination of art under the most aggressive forms of a life stamped by modernization. The Dadaists, on the other hand, who, coming from various European countries, fled from the genocide of the world war to Zurich, abandon art to laughability in happening-like performances, including their own activity in this rejection. The Surrealists, finally, develop from this



AVANT-GARDE. Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain* (1917/1918 Edition Schwarz, Milan), porcelain, 14 × 19 5/16 × 34 5/8 in. (35.5 × 49.1 × 62.5 cm); Indiana University Art Museum, Bloomington, Indiana (Partial Gift of Mrs. William Conroy). (Photograph by Michael Cavanagh, Kevin Montague, courtesy of the Indiana University Art Museum. Copyright Estate of Marcel Duchamp/Artists Rights Society, New York/ADAGP, Paris; used by permission.)

gesture of total negation the thought that the productive potential of art, which through autonomy has been severed from life, should be used for the renewal of life praxis. "One must only make the effort of *practicing poetry*," André Breton wrote in the first Surrealist manifesto (Breton, 1988, p. 322). If, at the end of the eighteenth century, the predication of art's autonomy had signified its separation from the domain of knowledge as well as that of morality, then the Surrealists claim to question the institution of art. They also claim to explore unknown areas of the human psyche and to live according to the principles of a morality that draws its strength from the refusal of bourgeois existence.

Both aspects of the avant-garde project—the attack on the institution of art and the revolutionizing of life—belong to-

gether. If one adds to this that the avant-garde movements (with the sole exception of Dadaism) never abandon aesthetic claims, despite their anti-aesthetic attitude, then one sees the aporias in which these movements had to become entangled in the process of trying to realize their project. We may distinguish between a political and an aesthetic dilemma.

The political dilemma arises wherever revolutionary engagement is serious, as it must lead to a collaboration with radical left or right parties or groups. From this there arises for the avant-gardes the dilemma of either being sublated into the political movement they support (as certain of the Italian Futurists were into fascism) or, as a result of insisting on their independence, coming into an irresolvable conflict

with the political movement (as some of the Surrealists did with the Communists).

The aesthetic dilemma is connected to the fact that the institution of art survives the avant-garde attack on it. In a text titled *From a Paris Diary*, Peter Weiss noted in 1962 about an exhibit of avant-garde art:

The revolt had been tried once, and in three simultaneous exhibitions their results have been preserved. The mere fact that they were here hung, framed, or stood on pedestals or lain in exhibition cases was opposed to their original intent. These works, which wanted to tear down the ordinary, which wanted to open people's eyes to a free way of living, which mirrored the questionability and the delirium of external norms, were here presented in well-maintained spaces and could be contemplated from the vantage point of comfortable armchairs. The order they attacked, made ridiculous, and exposed in its hypocrisy had well-meaningly taken them up into itself. (Weiss, 1968, p. 83)

In this respect, one can speak of the failure of the avant-garde. To talk of failure here leads to misunderstandings, however, not because the avant-garde project could be unproblematically renewed, but because it conceals the fact that that which has failed has not simply disappeared, but continues to exert influence precisely in its failure.

Our concepts are constructions that help us to make evident contexts and oppositions; they are not the mirror of reality. This holds true also of the concept of the avant-garde proposed here. It has been objected that this concept excludes relevant phenomena of literature and art of the early twentieth century, such as German Expressionism; yet, the concept in fact assigns Expressionism its proper place, namely, outside of the avant-garde. As opposed to other constructions (for instance, one that would emphasize the connection between Surrealism and Romanticism), the sketch presented here has the advantage of making recognizable common elements in otherwise opposing movements. Whereas Surrealism, with its critique of rationality, may actually be placed in a Romantic tradition, this is precisely not true for avant-gardes that are favorable to reason and technology, such as the Dutch de Stijl movement or Russian Constructivism. Yet the "end of the separation of art and life" belongs to the fundamental principles of Surrealism as much as it does to that of de Stijl. But whereas the Surrealists expect the realization of this project from untrammelled subjectivity, the de Stijl group demands the "suppression of subjective arbitrariness in the means of expression" (as quoted in Bächler and Letsch, 1984, pp. 55, 53).

The aim here is not to define a supposedly "correct" concept of the avant-garde against "false" ones, but only to direct attention to the fact that our concepts are constructions. Thus, simply to ask the question of the relation between modernity and avant-garde would be naive. Rather, one should reformulate the question: How does the concept of avant-garde outlined here relate to the construc-

tion of modernity that is familiar to us from Adorno's aesthetic theory?

Adorno's concept of modernity is centered on the category of the work of art. The work—and not its producer, nor its recipient—is the acting center of the artistic process. In it, mutually exclusive positions, such as mimesis and rationality, chance and calculation, meet in a unity that may not be theoretically anticipated and that is nevertheless necessary. The work of art is neither object nor subject, but in a peculiar way both at once, for its thing-like quality allows a subjective moment to appear within it that is not identical with the subjectivity of the artist, but inheres rather in the work itself. In short, the artwork is a bit of metaphysics that we ourselves have effected: the last form of metaphysics after the death of God.

The avant-gardes seek to break through the aporias that, in this concept of the modern work of art, arrive at an equilibrium that is both charged with tension and precarious. These movements want to take seriously the promise that autonomous art always contained, and they want to actively intervene in the real world. The avant-gardists do not understand their own texts and images as works of art, but either as actions meant to effect something or as protocols of an experience. It is a question of revolutionizing life, not of creating forms that are destined to become the object of aesthetic contemplation. When the artwork is at the center of artistic modernity, then at the center of the avant-garde is the action of those who no longer understand themselves as artists, but rather as scientists and revolutionaries.

These remarks might mislead one into seeing the avant-gardes as a movement opposing artistic modernity. That would, however, be wrong, for the avant-gardes not only draw their force from the critical potential of modernism, but they also base their revolutionary hopes on the assumption that the aesthetic metaphysics of modernism may be historically realizable. Breton's strong statement that it is a matter of practicing poetry—of living according to the principles of fantasy and not those of purposive rationality and strategic action—expresses this. It would be both simplistic and inappropriate to see only a pretty illusion in this idea. The work of Joseph Beuys shows what force one may still release even from the failure of the avant-garde project. Beuys takes up the project of the avant-garde after its failure in full consciousness of the aporia in which he thereby is caught. As an avant-gardist, he cannot define himself as an artist; but because the avant-gardes have failed, he cannot define himself outside of their project either. He may find a place neither within the institution of art nor outside of it, but only in an impossible realm "in between." He may only link his work back to the historical avant-gardes, and thereby remain on a level with his own time, in the paradox of constant self-contradiction: "I have really nothing to with art, and this is the only possibility to do anything for art."

The radicality of the avant-garde critique of the existing order is the result of an unbroken confidence in the possibility of living without anxiety and restructuring social reality. Wherever this confidence—which, however fragile, still stamps the work of Beuys—is lost, whenever the future is darkened, the avant-gardes enter a zone of extreme peril. This is shown in the suicides of Vladimir Mayakovsky and René Crevel. It is no accident that today authors such as Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Lacan should be at the center of the interest of young intellectuals who keep a wakeful eye on our own time. All three of these authors attempt to realize something like a Surrealism without illusions, which circles around the impossible experience of one's own death. Where one has recognized that the hope of "a finally inhabitable world" (Breton) is an illusion, the avant-garde project has lost its compass and gets lost in ecstasy (Bataille), in the endless movement of writing (Blanchot), or in the insane recognition of the paranoia of all knowledge (Lacan).

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AVERROËS. See Ibn Rushd.

AVICENNA. See Ibn Sīnā.