



Avant-Garde and Violence

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Abstracts

Mark Antliff (Duke University)

War against War:

Anti-Militarism, Anarchism and the Vorticist Aesthetic of Henri Gaudier-Brzeska

My talk will examine a puzzle that continues to baffle scholars who have studied the Vorticist sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska (1891-1915): what compelling change in perspective would cause a self-declared anarchist and anti-militarist – whose principled opposition to the French army remained steadfast at least until January 1913 – to volunteer enthusiastically for military service when war broke out in August 1914? To answer that question I will examine the impact of two anarchist-oriented, anti-militarist journals on Gaudier: *La Guerre sociale* (1906-1915) and *Les Hommes du jour* (1908-1920). These journals propagated a theory of aestheticized violence and syndicalist insurrection which they pitted against all government institutions welding the threat of State-sanctioned violence, including the police, the judicial courts and the military. Gaudier-Brzeska's artistic production from 1909 to 1913 owed much to the ideological precepts outlined in these journals; moreover his alliance with Ezra Pound and the Vorticist movement in 1914 attests to the continued impact of French anarchism on his artistic formation following his move to London in January 1911. Though in support of radically different agendas both the anarchists and the French State sought to justify acts of violence on moral and aesthetic grounds. Ultimately these conflicting discourses became mutually reinforcing once the anarchists and socialists deployed their views on morality and culture in support of the French war effort in August 1914. As I will demonstrate Gaudier-Brzeska's own anarchist politics were fully implicated in these events.

Boris Groys (Staatliche Hochschule für Gestaltung, Karlsruhe):

Avant-garde Art Strategies: Iconoclasm as Artistic Device

It can be said that the avant-garde is nothing other than a staged martyrdom of the image that replaced the Christian image of martyrdom. After all, the avant-garde abuses the body of the traditional image with all manner of torture utterly reminiscent of the torture inflicted on the body of Christ in the iconography of medieval Christianity. In the way it is treated by the avant-garde, the image is – in symbolic or real terms – sawed apart, cut up, smashed into fragments, pierced, spiked, drawn through dirt and exposed to ridicule. It is also no accident that the vocabulary constantly used by the historical avant-garde, even in its manifestos, reproduces the language of iconoclasm. We find mentions of discarding traditions, breaking with conventions, destroying old art and eradicating out-dated values. This is by no means driven by some sadistic urge to cruelly maltreat the bodies of innocent images. Nor is all this wreckage and destruction intended to clear the way for the emergence of new images and/or the introduction of new values. Far from it, the images of wreckage and destruction themselves serve as the icons of new values. In the eyes of the avant-garde the iconoclastic gesture represents an artistic device, deployed less as a means of destroying old icons than as a way to generate new images – or, indeed, new icons.

Per Bäckström (University of Tromsø)

Music for Lettuce. The Violent Reception of the Nordic Neo-Avant-Garde

One characteristic of the avant-garde is its transnationality, which makes it hard to study the phenomenon from a national perspective – especially in the case of small countries like the Nordic states. Avant-garde activities were significant during the 1960s, especially in Denmark and Sweden, with the different avant-gardes touring between these countries, and also to Norway and Finland. The Swedish association for contemporary music Fylkingen (literally phalanx, the old notion of a Viking battle formation), for example, toured all the main Nordic countries (the tours are listed in the book *Fylkingen*, 1994). There seems to have been a considerable level of exchange between the Nordic avant-gardes, and also between these countries in general; taking newspaper reviews, essays and memoirs as my point of departure I shall demonstrate how the neo-avant-garde acted across borders with their happenings and performances. These works of art were often provocative, with an aggressiveness expressed towards the ordinary public, whom the avant-gardistes tried to shake out of their everyday lethargy. These aggressive happenings and performances turned against themselves, though, when the expectations of the bourgeois public were not realized. In this paper I shall therefore show how the reception of the neo-avant-garde in the Nordic countries was often characterized by violence and aggression, a fact that until recently has made it hard to study the interrelationship of the avant-garde in the Nordic countries.

Hubert van den Berg (University of Groningen)

Long Live Degenerate Art! Some Notes on a Forgotten Arab Avant-Garde Initiative against European Totalitarian Terror

In certain strands of post-modern criticism, the avant-garde has been associated with totalitarianism on the basis of some parallels, affinities and continuities leading from the

aesthetic avant-garde to fascism, national-socialism and Stalinism. There can be no doubt, however, that large parts of the avant-garde were opposed to totalitarian tendencies and – vice versa – met by these tendencies with repression and the ambition to extinguish avant-garde experiments. An obvious case is the Nazi campaign against ‘degenerate art’ with a large exhibition presenting and commenting the *Entartete Kunst* in 1937, preceded by the persecution of avant-garde authors and artists, the burning of books and the removal and destruction of avant-garde art from public collections.

Likewise the avant-garde has often been associated with violence and “terrorism”. Indeed, some sections of the avant-garde advocated not only a radical change in the arts but combined this aesthetic turn also with the ostentatious or real advocacy of revolutionary violence and practices, which might be labeled as “terror”, like the actions of the anarchist “propagandists of the deed”, the “illegalists” of the Bonnot gang or the brutish street violence of Mussolini’s Fasci di Combattimento. Again, in the avant-garde also other voices could be heard, which rejected such policies and did not want their part to be associated with that.

My contribution wants to focus the attention on a remarkable, yet widely forgotten initiative in this context, remarkable not least in the context of current-day politics, in which violence, terror and totalitarianism are associated not primarily with the avant-garde or with European movements, but rather with Islam, with the Middle-East and the Maghreb.

When Europe was entangled in violence, war, terror and totalitarianism of the worst kind in the middle of the previous century, an interesting initiative was developed in Egypt, by a group of Arab artists and writers in Caïro, who aligned themselves with the European avant-garde, in particular with surrealism. As a far outpost and a kind of torch-bearers of the European avant-garde, which had to go very low-profile, underground or in exile on the European continent itself, haunted by violence, terror and totalitarianism of different provenance, they presented in 1938 a manifesto signed by local Egyptian artists, writers and intellectuals from different creeds and backgrounds – Arab, Greek, Jewish, Christian, Islamic – against the totalitarian terror in Europe, “Long live degenerate art”, pursuing also in other publications and activities the combination of “art and liberty” in a period when both liberty and art had difficult times in Europe.

Joost de Bloois (University of Amsterdam)

Messianic Militancy: Political Violence and Messianism in Contemporary Italian Autobiography

In my paper, I will address the recurrent intersecting of messianic figures of thought and the notion of political avant-garde in testimonies of Italy’s ‘years of lead’ (late 1960’s to early 1980’s). In particular I propose a reading of the autobiographical and non fictional writings of former activist Erri de Luca. My reading focuses on the specific relation between messianism’s complex temporal structure and its relation to the (im)possibility of a political avant garde.

If we consider De Luca’s reminiscences as a prime example of what Giorgio Agamben calls the ‘unforgettable’ or the ‘remainder’, it becomes clear that De Luca’s conception of avant-gardist political activism and his reminiscences of past engagements coincide: they are both radically ‘uncontemporary’ and bring with them an unsettling violence (on both conceptual and textual

level). The messianic thinking that underlies the political testimonial writing such as De Luca's thus necessitates a rethinking of the very concept of writing as a means of doing justice to the revolutionary event itself. In my reading of De Luca, I will highlight this particular strand of writing in particular through Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Storyteller'.

Sylvain Briens (Strasbourg University)

The Utopia / Dystopia of Global Communication in the Swedish Literary Avant-Garde. A Peaceful Dream or a Totalitarian Nightmare?

In the 1920s and 1930s a number of Swedish writers developed a strong interest for the new possibility of worldwide communication offered by the telecommunication technology. Ludvig Nordström, Artur Lundkvist, Harry Martinson and others writers were convinced that the telecommunication media would enable to build a society based on global communication and solidarity. However the utopia turned very soon to dystopia when the Second World War showed that worldwide communication could also mean worldwide destruction. The aim of this paper is to analyse the large debate that took place in the Swedish literature of the 1940s and 1950s discussing whether telecommunication would lead to the construction of a peaceful society or of a totalitarian state. Through major literary works (such as *Kallokain* of Karin Boye or *Aniara* of Harry Martinson), the avant-garde condemned the development of a "society of control" in which the human being is meant to intellectual or physical destruction. A special focus will be laid on the lyrical debate (Karl Vennberg, Birger Norman...) in which criticism of totalitarianism has been used as an aesthetic program.

Bodil Børset (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim):

Stomp my head. Violent Radio in Emil Boyson's Poem "Loudspeaker Devotion" ("Høittaler-andakt"), March 1938

The poem "Høittaler-andakt" ("Loudspeaker devotion"), written by the Norwegian poet Emil Boyson (1897-1979), is dated March 1938, at turbulent times in European history. The lyrical "I" of this poem is listening to radio propaganda, as if participating in a tribal ritual. The propaganda minister "blob blob gobble-bluff goebbels" is described both as a bellowing cow and a shaman. Sequences of the poem like "mussostalini" and "hatatürk hadolf attila hitala hi" are phonetically sampling names of dictators such as Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin with those of Attila and Djengis Khan. Boyson's poem paints vivid and gruesome visual pictures of the military hordes. He also creates acoustic images of the sound of military boots of those marching in step and death rattles of those being executed. The poem seems to react to violence with resignation, fascination, humour, masochism, and camouflaged pacifistic criticism. Boyson is normally labelled a modernist, de-automatizing language, but traditional in form and verse. Considering its destruction of form and syntax and its paradoxical aesthetic of violence, this poem might link him closer to the avant-garde.

Irina Carabas (University of Bucharest)

“Down with the avant-garde for it has prostituted itself.” Avant-Garde, Jewishness and Totalitarianism in Romania

There are voices who consider the Romanian avant-garde as a symptom of marginality. Within this framework, marginality refers firstly to an ethnic dimension and only afterwards to a radical aesthetics as opposed to the centrality of a cultural establishment. Although this perspective can be discussed critically, the Jewish origin of the majority of the avant-garde artists in Romania remains a fundamental fact. My paper aims to investigate possible articulations between the status of being an avant-garde artist and the Jewish identity. At this point, I will confront the way the artists perceived themselves with the way they were perceived, mostly in the ‘20s when the avant-garde reached its climax. The totalitarian ideologies, and particularly Nazism, equated the avant-garde with Jewishness. Romanian modern history was marked by the experience of two totalitarian systems: right wing extremism at the end of the ‘30s and communism after 1945. Developing different strategies, but implying both artistic and ethnic identity, the two regimes persistently undertook actions which sought to obliterate the avant-garde and consign it to oblivion.

Tammy Lynn Castelein (University of Amsterdam)

Storm Troopers, Barbarians and Militarization: Walter Benjamin and Ernst Jünger on the Avant-garde

In this paper I will trace an alternative trajectory of the concept of the avant-garde in German inter-war literature. While Jünger is not commonly considered an avant-garde writer, many of his works deal with the experience of the so-called storm troopers: the First World War’s literal avant-garde troopers that were the first to attack the enemy trenches. Ernst Jünger was the prototypical warrior of the First World War. In his books, such as *In Stahlgewittern*, *Das Wäldchen 125*, and *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis*, Jünger describes his experiences as a storm trooper in the material battles of the First World War. In several of his texts, such as in his tribute to Martin Heidegger, *Über die Linie*, Jünger argues that a new man is born out of this both military and metaphysical avant-garde of the material battles of the First World War, one that would be able to overcome the age of nihilism. My paper will foreground this idea of Jünger’s and confront it with Walter Benjamin’s idea of the historical avant-garde as a counterforce to the militarization of the interwar years. In his *Surrealismus*-essay Benjamin criticizes and satirizes the continued process of militarization after the First World War; in his text *Erfahrung und Armut* he develops the notion of the ‘new barbarian’ to counter the barbarian forces of the war by a new notion of the barbarian that is informed by avant-garde art.

Kristine Danielson (Wayne State University)

The Photography of Boris Mikhailov: Post-Soviet Conceptualism and the Social Body

In this paper, I examine the work of Ukrainian photographer (living in Berlin; winner of the Hasselblad Award) Boris Mikhailov, particularly his collections *Case History* and *Salt Lake*, arguing that his brutally direct images show the relation between the collapse of collective belief, economic deprivation, and the social violence done to the bodies of post-Soviet citizens and to the natural landscape. In so doing, I discuss Jean-Luc Nancy's concept of the "unworking," which moves away from object and production-oriented ways of thinking through social relations, along with Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "flesh," which attempts to undo the strict division between subject and object while retaining the importance of materialism. Mikhailov's method of depicting bodies and landscapes shows how both the residues of hope and collectivity as well as the violence that results at a moment of social devolution can be captured without reifying or teleologically anticipated results. Mikhailov's involvement in avant-garde conceptualist circles in the Soviet 1970s and 80s, which re-thought the relation of art to the object, provides the historical context in which to understand this possibility, as will the history of the avant-garde and its engagement with social and political violence.

Mikhailov's avant-garde approach redeploys Soviet codes of representation, structures of belief, and everyday life, providing a critical avenue for re-presenting and re-thinking the potential for violence in the move from collectivity to individualism. His overwhelmingly realistic depiction of the scarred, mutilated, naked, dirty, broken, traumatized bodies of the citizens of Kharkov, often set against scenes of pleasure, laughter, erotic enjoyment and camaraderie, constructs scenes that are, in this tension between forms of social belonging, productively ambivalent. Even as the body and the context in which it exists come to bear more and more of the burden of representation – both literally and figuratively – the violence of the past, present, and future revealed in Mikhailov's work opens onto what I call a "heuristics of the flesh." His stark focus on bodies and materiality is a method of investigation and/or construction, allowing us to see the violence done to the post-Soviet world as something that is real, meaningful, and open to transfiguration. Finally, I suggest that Mikhailov's work exists within a history of avant-garde approaches to violence in the sense that the method, the subject matter, and social commentary it enacts produce new ways in which an aesthetic project may transform our relations to the world. If violence has often been the subject matter for avant-garde art – from George Grosz to the Futurists to Punk Rock – in Mikhailov's work it is also opened up to renewed political investments and critiques.

Jonatan Habib Engqvist (Royal University College of Fine Arts, Stockholm)

Evil Gifts? On Bataille, Groys and Terror Economy

The main focus of this paper will be contemporary terrorism, the surrealist movement and George Bataille. Apart from Bataille's thoughts on sacrifice, what he calls the "General economy" and the concept of "Potlatch", I will discuss Boris Groys' reflections on the videofilms from the prison in Abu Grahib where he suggests an appropriation of Bataille's concepts to explicate some of the relationships between European avant-garde and contemporary terrorism (Groys, Boris, *The Bodies in Abu Ghriab*, *SITE* 15/2005).

I will go on to develop a concept of “terror economy” as a way of describing the relationship between aesthetics, economy and terror as well as complicating the role of the martyr in this relationship.

The paper is a development of my article *Gåvan och Ekonomins Gränser (The Gift and the Limits of Economy)* published in the Swedish journal *Ord & Bild* 5 / 2005 on the theme Capitalism as Religion (ed, Engqvist, Jonatan Habib & Nilsson, Christian).

Geir Svansson (Reykjavík)

[Title still needed]

The theme of the proposed paper is basically threefold: Firstly, I would like to discuss the concepts of amodernism and “sadic literature”, especially as it pertains to ur-modern or avant-avant-garde (or arrière-garde) writers such as Marquis de Sade, Lautréamont and Alfred Jarry. Under discussion will be dada, surrealism, the beat poets, Situationists and other avant-garde movements. Secondly, I would like to look at the “deeper” implications of an aesthetics of cruelty by discussing and opposing the writings/theories of Antonin Artaud, and Alfred Jarry. Here I have in mind the former’s “theatre of cruelty” and the latter’s “pataphysics”. Thirdly, having made an attempt to establish a poetics of avant-garde – or rather arrière-garde – cruelty, I would like to consider „avant-garde aesthetics and war as media event”, with reference to Jean Baudrillard’s theories of hyperreality, the total screen and an aesthetics of disappearance.

Central to my research are the concepts of amodernism, arrière-garde, cruelty, avant-garde, ‘pataphysics’ and the hyperreal. Avant-garde, (or arrière-garde?) thinker Jean Baudrillard is also centrally (op)posed and the ‘pataphysical strands of his radical theory will be examined. The comparison of Artaud and Jarry is of particular interest in analyzing Baudrillard’s theory of hyperreality and his radical comments about war and terrorism as a media event, simulation or simulacra. Baudrillard’s fondness of both writers is of interest to the proposed paper, but the fact that Baudrillard makes a clear distinction between the two has implications for my thesis. Suffice it to say that the theatre of cruelty is a space of existential angst and of a creed of the real, while ‘pataphysics’ is beyond anguish, beyond the real – being an aphysics, i.e. the concept is not in the same category as physics and metaphysics but rather a third term like amoral is to moral and immoral.

Charlotte Greve (University of Aarhus)

Friend or Foe. The Russian Avant-Garde in Retrospect

In this paper the avant-garde will be analysed as a discursive concept which is continually resituated and reevaluated in culture. Thus, in Russia, during the post-Stalinist years from 1956 to the mid 1970s, the avant-garde was seen as a guarantee for artistic autonomy, freedom and integrity. It gained an almost sacral status. However, during the period from around 1974 to 1990, a resistance to the totalitarian Soviet regime was coupled with a resistance to the avant-garde; a change occurred in the attitude towards the avant-garde among “underground” artists and writers. A radical de-sacralisation of the avant-garde took place. Thus, in 1993, a member of

what some have considered the Russian neo-avant-garde claimed that “the avant-garde is not of current interest”. The object of this paper will be an investigation of this change as it is represented in art. What are the nuances of the change, how is the avant-garde reconceptualised during this period, and what happened to the avant-garde after the fall of the Soviet Union?

Erin S.Hanas (Duke University)

Artist or Terrorist: The Case of Steven Kurtz

In what has ironically been called the age of the “terror industry,”¹ it seems increasingly difficult for authorities to differentiate an artist from a terrorist. The indictment of Steven Kurtz, co-founder of the Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), on charges of mail and wire fraud is a perfect example. CAE, an interdisciplinary and internationally recognized artists’ collective, conducts amateur scientific experiments in an effort to demystify scientific processes and to question the relationship between private corporations and purportedly democratic institutions such as science. Importantly, the collective advocates and employs legal means of intervention. Therefore, when renowned scientists have defended CAE’s projects, one must ask what sort of violence a democratic government is perpetrating against an artist who employs creative, non-violent, and legal means to explain science to a public that is inundated with messages of fear put forth by the government and the “terror industry.”

1. This term is taken from the title of John Mueller’s book, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terror Industry Inflate National Security Threats and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

Hlynur Helgason (Iceland Academy of the Arts)

‘Déclassé’, in reference to “Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles” and “Inland Empire”.

Chantal Akerman’s 1976 film “Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles” and David Lynch’s 2006 “Inland Empire” can be said to be diametrically opposed in their procedures. None-the-less it can be claimed that in their reference to a kind of semantic violence, they share a common middle ground, Akerman’s film slowly but securely dismantling an image of bourgeois banality, while Lynch’s narrative from the outset is staged in a psychotic ‘un-reality’ which, as the film progresses, coagulates and takes on form. Informed by certain key concepts of Bataille’s dictionary-project in “Documents”, such as ‘informe’ and ‘déclassé’ I will in the paper attempt to analyse the affinities of both films in reference to their symbolic violence.

Marianne Ping Huang (University of Copenhagen)

Das Beckwerk: A Work in Progress on Democracy, War and Terror

The Danish author Claus Beck-Nielsen declared his own death in 2002 and from the date of his departure, an ongoing investigative and experimental process has evolved from the art project, Das Beckwerk, dealing with identity, democracy, art and public space – not least in the setting of global conflict and possible violation of identity and democracy.

Lately (March 2007), Das Beckwerk finished a major work in progress, *The Democracy Project*, which has – in books, pamphlets, flyers, blogs, stage performances and exhibitions, but not least through intervention and action art – questioned and investigated Western concepts of Democracy and Terror. A key concept of *The Democracy Project* has been the blurring of The World Theatre of politics and theatre, performed in global, public space – thus the actors / activists Nielsen & Rasmussen, Claus & Thomas took Democracy and Parliament, neatly packed in a catering box, to Iraq in 2004, to The US, also in 2004, and to Iran in 2006.

In my presentation of The Beckwerk's *The Democracy Project* I will focus on a reinterpretation of the utopian potential in art, which may be analysed from The Beckwerk's investigative tactics and strategically failed performatives, as these are exposed through artistic interventions in both Iraq, the US and Iran.

Bram Ieven (University of Utrecht)

Militancy of the Avant-Garde: Utopias between Lenin and Deleuze

In their final collaborative work *What is Philosophy?*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari declared that “we lack resistance to the present.” (1994: 108) This oblique statement, which in Deleuze's and Guattari's work as well as in commentaries has been insufficiently explored, will be explored in my paper.¹ I will link Deleuze's and Guattari's statement to two figures in their work which can be said to belong to a theoretical avant-garde: militancy and utopia. Both militancy and utopia trace figures of thought that border on the verge of political as well as metaphysical violence.

Explaining their statement that we lack resistance to the present, Deleuze and Guattari state that “it is with utopia that philosophy becomes political and takes the criticism of its own time to its highest point.” (1994: 99) Taking criticism to its highest point, I will argue in my paper, is the key feature of what a theoretical avant-garde should look like. Another key feature is the necessity to lift this criticism onto a political plane. For resistance to become political it requires militancy. “The militant is the one who best expresses the life of the multitude.” (Hardt and Negri 2001: 411) In the second part of my lecture I will give a reading of a “centralized, militant organization of revolutionaries” that Lenin believes necessary to lift the revolution to a truly political plane. (1987: 132) Via this analysis of Lenin I will criticize the tendency to “centralization” and the formation of an “inner party” that is related to Lenin's concept of militancy, but I hold on to Lenin's basic idea that militancy is a necessary precondition for a becoming-political. My conclusion will be that a theoretical figure of the avant-garde will oscillate between Lenin and Deleuze and Guattari.

1. One of the few philosophers to have paid extensive attention to this quote is Isabelle Stengers (2000: 155; 2005). However, Stengers takes the quote into a totally different direction, making it bear on Deleuze and Guattari's view on science. Paola Marrati also touches upon the subject in her article “Against the Doga: Politics of Immanence and becoming-Minoritarian.” (Marrati 2001)

- Deleuze, Gilles & Guattari, Félix (1994). *What is Philosophy?* (Transl. G. Burchell and H. Tomlinson) London / New York: Verso.

- Hardt, Michael & Negri, Antonio (2001). *Empire*. Cambridge Ma: Harvard University Press.
- Lenin, Vladimir Illich (1987). *“What is To Be Done?” And Other Writings*. New York: Doover Press.
- Marrati, Paola (2001). “Against the Doxa: Politics of Immanence and Becoming-Minoritarian.” In *Micropolitics of Media Culture. Reading the Rhizomes of Deleuze and Guattari*. Pisters, Patricia (ed.) Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 205-220.
- Stengers, Isabelle (2000). *The Invention of Modern Science*. (Transl. D. W. Smith.) Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- _____ (2005). “Deleuze and Guattari’s Last Enigmatic Message,” *Angelaki*, volume 10 / number 2, 151-167.

Irma Erlingsdóttir (Reykjavík):

[Title and abstract still needed]

Jón Ólafsson (Bifröst University, Iceland):

The Concept of the Purge in Stalinist Discourse and Imagery

The concept purge (Chistka) is an important part of Soviet ideology from early on. The assumption is that in order to prevent the party from degenerating, it must regularly go through purges in which undesirable elements are flushed out of the central apparatus and even out of the party itself. During the Stalinist purges the reference to filth, vermin, insects and all kinds of revolting creatures conspicuously underlined this need in official discourse. At the same time we see a glorification of health, hygiene and sports playing a big part in social and cultural discourse. The corporeal and mental discipline of the purge will be discussed in my talk and some conclusions drawn about its relation and reference to underlying violence. I will also discuss the fate of the concept of the purge and the aesthetics of the purge in later political discourse.

Lamija Kosovic (Sarajevo)

Re-imag(in)ing of the Posthuman

[Abstract still needed]

Patricia Leighten (Duke University)

Violence vs. Creativity in Kupka’s Anarchist Art and Aesthetics

František Kupka – renowned as the first completely abstract artist in Europe – was a leading figure in the Parisian avant-garde before World War I. A prominent political cartoonist, he repeatedly attacked Church and state as authorities on behalf of capitalism, waging violent war on society and the forces of life. This paper will consider how Kupka’s art and art theories mingle anarchism, science and theosophy to unite his work as an anarchist satirist with his avant-garde abstractions. As a close associate of anarchist theorist and geographer Elisée Reclus – author of *L’Homme et la terre* (1905-06) for which Kupka did the polemical illustrations – Kupka was studiously critical of the social and political status quo. For him, society was structured to privilege not just the wealthy but *money* itself, resulting in violence at every level of experience through the combined forces of the state, the military, the Church and the ‘naturalized’ economy they protected. His work compares the Inquisition’s torture of women to the forces of poverty that create the prostitute, and opposed both to the *créatrice* as regenerative in a future anarchist utopia, in harmony with the universe. In the radical avant-garde abstractions he began around 1910, he was preoccupied with alternative images of women as generative and creative, and not in the merely childbearing sense. Themes of ‘free love’, liberated sexuality, and naturism were all part of a contemporaneous anarchist feminism of which Kupka’s art and thought is emblematic. His various artistic styles interestingly parallel these images: Kupka’s early narrative cartoons are drawn in a naturalist style, while his avant-garde works are painted in an aggressively primitivist style, evoking the natural force of his artistic vision. Sometimes quite literally inversions of the violence depicted in his dystopic cartoons, such natural forces become the ‘subjects’ of the nonobjective works, whose forms were meant to hasten the change of consciousness necessary for a new society.

Nikolaj Lübecker (University of Aberdeen)

The Politics of Masochism in Georges Bataille 1935-36

The paper will focus on Georges Bataille’s writings in 1935-36: it will set off in his political project “Contre-Attaque” (co-directed with André Breton) and then concentrate on the novel *Le Bleu du ciel*.

“Contre-Attaque” appears as an ideal example of the influence of Georges Sorel and Alexandre Kojève on French intellectual life in the inter-war period. Like Sorel the members of Contre-Attaque promoted violence as a motor for the revolutionary process, like Kojève they believed that the struggle for life and death was the experience that would reveal man to himself. It thus appears that the very “potent” discourse of “Contre-Attaque” belongs to that 20th century philosophical tradition which – according to Hannah Arendt – distorted the Hegelian system by letting *Violence* play the part which Hegel had given to *Bildung*.

However, unlike Sorel and Kojève, Bataille does not only strive for the position of the Hegelian master; he seems equally attracted to the position of the slave. This complex economy of Bataille’s desire is nowhere more visible than in *Bleu du Ciel*, a novel which invites us to reconsider the function of violence from the perspective of masochism. The paper will examine this relation between politics and masochism in the writings of Bataille in 1935-36, and it will examine if masochism is limited to Bataille or if it can also be found in other parts of the French avant-garde in 1930s.

Richard Murphy (University of Sussex)

Fiction, History and the Avant-Garde: Violence and the ‘Modernist Event’

This paper will discuss the way that the progressive art associated with the avant-garde has approached the problem of finding an adequate means of accounting for violent and unimaginable experiences, such as war, bombing, and the Holocaust. Conventional realist or documentary approaches seek to grasp the ‘facts,’ but in reducing the event to an imaginable scale, tend to sanitize the event or simply file it safely away. In this situation the avant-garde has a particular role to play with its scepticism towards empirical ‘facts’ or ‘objective’ perspectives. For through its disavowal of narrative mastery and its typical strategies of fragmentation, interruption, discontinuity and montage, it offers certain radical alternatives that resist the dangers of historical representation. In this way, the avant-garde justifies a space for the purely fictive alongside more traditional historiographic means such as the documentary. Consequently, this paper will examine how progressive culture has accounted for the violent events defining the century, and will sketch out the possibilities for an avant-garde mode of critical historiography.

Nils Olsson (University of Gothenburg)

The Literal Avant-Garde of Gertrude Stein: Warfare and Aesthetics

In her 1926 lecture “Composition as Explanation” Gertrude Stein reconnects a literal (military) with a metaphorical (artistic) avant-garde. This becomes the point of departure for a philosophy of history, in which World War I represents the absolute contemporary phenomenon that makes history catch up with itself, and thus approach the art that always lies one step ahead. For Stein, World War I signified a breakpoint where nations were forced to leave traditional ways of warfare behind, and instead had to renew warfare in accordance with new means that were at hand. And in the same way as some countries were left behind regarding military technology, traditional ideas about aesthetic beauty had become antiquated compared to the art that took the conditions of the present times into consideration. In Stein’s poetics artistic practice is something that, just like war, must be carried on according to the conditions dictated by the historical context, and not by obsolete conventions. I want to highlight some aspects of Stein’s poetics that opens, or at least prepares, an area for practice where a traditional modernist concept of autonomy is challenged; an area brought to the fore through the “theatricality” of the 1960s neo-avant-garde. But I will also propose that Stein, from a contemporary perspective, contests the art historical concepts of linearity, causality and influence that are the basis for many accounts for the history of literary modernism.

Tiina Purhonen (Helsinki University)

Emancipation Politics of Contemporary Art

In my paper I would like to discuss the tactics of antagonistic contemporary art. The artists of the historical avant-garde were vanguard, that was on the side of the depressed ones, but

contemporary artists, who stand for an emancipation, could be called – like Finnish performance artist Pentti Otto Koskinen has said – “beyond-guard”. Koskinen is an agonistic artist that Renato Poggioli has described in his book *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, who sacrifices himself for the future: Koskinen has said that he has engaged himself for voluntary poverty and loss and that this location is the supreme ethics of the present. The agonist moment of the historical avant-garde orientates towards the future, it works on the field of the utopia. My aim is to open the ethics of the present political utopia in art that reflect emancipatory political aesthetics started by the historical avant-garde. Modernism and also the historical avant-garde have been accused of fixing the identities, or the violence against the identities, and I would like to introduce contemporary art that works with these questions. Artists of the “beyond-guard” share the position where the object is made questionable and their material is identities and communication.

Torben Sangild (University of Copenhagen)

The Broken Voice – On Steve Reich’s Different Trains

Steve Reich’s work *Different Trains* (1988) for string quartet and tape is a work about holocaust, partially employing fragments of interviews with survivors from the concentration camps. This highly charged material is objectified in several ways: besides the fragmentation, the strings play the speech melodies of the voice fragments in metronomic, repetitional patterns, and the holocaust part is inserted between other interviews connected with train travel in the USA in the same period. This work inscribes itself in a tradition of what I have called “sparagmatic music” – music which employs the electronically fragmented voice as a metonymy for the traumatic and the violent. I will analyze this connection in my paper.

Kimmo Sarje (Helsinki)

Weapons and Machines as a Work of Art

In the Nordic context, the architect and writer Sigurd Frosterus (1876-1956) was one of the leading essayists and protagonists of art, aesthetics and violence in the beginning of the 20th century. In 1903, he wrote a brilliant essay about the London underground railway system, which he considered a work of art. He published together with his colleague Gustaf Strengell a machine romantic but rationalist manifesto on architecture in 1904. Frosterus's first booklet in 1906 was about H. G. Wells, and in he wrote 1907 a cynical essay about the modern "dreadnought" battleship, which he also evaluated as a work of art in contrast to Pre-Raphaelite painting, and soon after essays on aeroplanes and Atlantic ocean lines. His "futurist" writing culminated in his book "Moderna vapen" (Modern Weapons) in 1915. Frosterus was not a militarist but an extreme techno-futurist. Later on, he became a critic of technology in his books of the 1930s.

Úlfhildur Dagsdóttir (Iceland Academy of the Arts)

From *Night of Steel* to *Lovestar*: Avant-garde and Cyberpunk

Around the late eighties and early nineties four Icelandic avant-garde/cyberpunk novels appeared: *Night of Steel* by Sjón, *The City of the Midnight Sun* by Jón Gnarr, *The Building* by Jóhannar and *City* by Ragna Sigurðardóttir. All novels focus on the carnal or corporeal, often with overtones of violence. Symptoms of the avant-garde in these novels will be discussed in comparison with two more recent SF/cyberpunk but non avant-garde novels, *LoveStar* by Andri Snær Magnason and *Mister Universe* by Hallgrímur Helgason.

Many theorists claimed that cyberpunk was a kind of postmodern avant-garde in the eighties as the authors (the best known are William Gibson, Pat Cadigan and Neil Stephenson) stretched both form and language to accommodate modern (future) digital technology. The paper will examine the Icelandic works in this context

Barrett Watten (Wayne State University)

Bad History Redux: Language Poetries and the Iraq War

My book-length prose poem *Bad History* (1998) dealt with the relationship between nonnarrative, language-centered writing and the incomplete social narratives of the ‘Vietnam Syndrome’ and the Persian Gulf War. A critical literature has developed on *Bad History*, notably Philip Metres’s account of the positioning of this work between Jean Baudrillard’s notion that the Gulf War “did not exist” as a postmodern simulacrum, and an opposing perspective, typified by Christopher Norris, Noam Chomsky, and Ramsey Clark, that focuses on war’s material history and criminality. In this paper, I will bring *Bad History*’s synthesis of postmodern hyper-reality, traumatic materiality, and nonnarrative into the present moment of postmodern war, to assess the possibilities of avant-garde formal mediation of simulation and trauma in the representational economy of the Iraq War. At our current political moment in America, avant-garde and language-centered responses to the Iraq War have not been consistently engaged with new critical possibilities, tending to rely on already existing formulations. I want to survey the responses of Language poets to the Iraq War, as well as a new generation of performance poets who employ “Flarf” techniques of redeploying Google samples (many of whose performances are available on YouTube). What are the conditions of production of critical nonnarrative as an oppositional strategy to war, and is there an argument for a partial return to narrative framing in avant-garde representations of war as an entailment of the new cultural logic we are in?

Mikkel Bruun Zangenberg (University of Southern Denmark, Odense)

Belligerent Aesthetics

If we distinguish between, respectively, the alleged death and possibly obsolete status of the avant-garde in a contemporary setting, we are perhaps entitled to suggest that the sheer, ubiquitous force of terrorist and medial appropriations of (certain formal elements of) the stock-in-trade of the historical avant-garde, have in fact made impossible any meaningful, present-day use of that term. This would not constitute a fatuous Hegelian claim, but much rather function as a sober registering of a massive change in the relational positions between the spheres of politics and aesthetics. We are thus obliged to attempt to reinvest the very notion of ‘aesthetics’ with a new content. The purpose of the paper

will be to outline a few of the defining coordinates of the ways in which part of the current media-apparatus and particular terrorist formations combine in distributing novel forms of a belligerent aesthetic.

Tania Ørum (University of Copenhagen)

Revolution as Personal or Discursive Practice in the Danish Avant-garde of the 1960s

Revolution is a term which recurs in the texts and statements of the Danish avant-garde in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Many artists envisage a large-scale transformation of society, already anticipated or taking place within youth culture, the art scene and everyday life in communes and other collective bodies. Revolution figures as a utopian concept of justice, equality and harmony, but is often expressed with considerable aggressiveness and violence. For some artists the revolutionary spirit leads to their abandoning art in favour of collective or utopian enterprises, while for others it turns into a discursive art practice.