Contributors

Post-Avant Translation Practices: Language Poetry in Austria & The Low Countries

Michel Delville, Thomas Eder, and Hans Vandevoorde

American Language poetry can be considered a neo-avant-garde movement, at

Neo-Avant-Garde Politics and Poetics from a Transnational Perspective: The Conversation between the Beats and Labris

Vincent Broqua, Dirk De Geest, and Bart Vervaeck

Although the Beats associated with the
least if we refer to Hal Foster's definition of the term as the result of a "deferred action," a later event that recodes the original (historical) avant-garde—e.g. Dada or... avant-garde and although “[scholars] understand the Beat Generation in terms of a literary avant-garde,” historically and from the perspective of forms and gestures, they had in fact repeated, distorted and...


Inge Arteel and Sabine Müller

The present essay approaches the topic of this cluster—a Politics of Form Revisited—from a perspective that links up with current demands for reconceptualizing the relations between politics and aesthetics, based on a renewed interest...

Demilitarization of Languages: Sound Poetry in Austria, France, and Sweden (forums/posts/demilitarization-languages-sound-poetry-austria-france-and-sweden)

Johan Gardfors, Roland Innerhofer, and Isabelle Krzywkowski

As one of the paradigmatic literary genres of both the historical avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde, sound poetry should not merely be understood in terms of formal experimentation, but also as an intervention into the politics of language: to...
This cluster of essays approaches the controversial question of the political intentions, implications, and effects of the literary neo-avant-gardes by scrutinizing the topos of a “politics of form,” which is so often foregrounded in and associated with neo-avant-garde practices.

Following the assumption that the reconceptualization of this familiar explanatory figure calls for a greater consideration of contexts, the essays adopt a comparative perspective on neo-avant-garde literatures in Europe and the United States, through a series of case studies. They focus on sound poetry in postwar Europe, choric speaking in German and Austrian works, American Beat and Belgian neo-avant-garde, and on the reception and reconfiguration of Language poetry in contemporary literature. Bringing together surprisingly related literary innovations from significantly differing cultural and political contexts, the essays question and historicize the idea that radical formal devices and the breaking with social and aesthetic conventions always tend to work as “progressive” political interventions.

I.

From their earliest beginnings, avant-garde movements have been characterized by strong but complicated, contradictory, erratic, and contentious relations to the field of politics (in the narrow sense of the term). Already the historical avant-gardes—constructivism, Dadaism, futurism, surrealism, etc.—were torn between the tendency to cooperate with political parties or to support political ideologies on the one hand, and the impulse to compete with political actors through their own way of doing politics with aesthetic means on the other. As a result of this conflict of aims, political affiliations of the historical avant-gardes were followed by conflict-ridden disaffiliations and astonishing reaffiliations. The underlying ambiguity about the concepts involved (politics, aesthetics, power) also entailed that collective aesthetic programs were approved and abandoned, and that the founding of groups was accompanied by never-ending series of secessions and exclusions.

This ambivalence in the relations of the historical avant-gardes to the social subsystem of politics has not only led to numerous well-known disputes within many avant-garde movements and to manifold reinventions of their manifestos and agendas. It is also reflected in the organizational structure and self-image of many early avant-garde groups. On the one hand, they may mirror the hierarchical principles of political parties and adopt their claim to change society for the better. On the other hand, they may mock these “conventional” forms and assertions. Even—or even more so—in cases where representatives of the historical avant-gardes agreed with the aims of a political movement, the competing claims to legitimate
leadership in shaping society's future remained a constant bone of contention. Was it the political or the aesthetic avant-garde that provided the “right” interpretation of history? Who provided the more effective means to change social conditions and power relations? Who was the “better,” “true,” and therefore legitimate avant-garde?

After World War II, avant-gardes across the globe continued the programs and strategies of the historical avant-gardes and at the same time claimed to be drastically new, ahead of their time again and to renew art once more. These neo-avant-gardes were characterized by an additional paradoxical temporality, as their “newness is defined by seeming repetition, at a later date, of an earlier historical formation,” as Tyrus Miller puts it.[1] The neo-avant-garde that is central to the cluster we are presenting here, refers back to the tradition of the historical avant-gardes not only in its artistic practices, its paratexts, intertexts and in its institutional policies and affiliations.[2] It also enters the tradition of their predecessors’ ambiguity and indecisiveness about their relation to the field of politics and to the dimension of “the political,” to use a concept that became increasingly influential in the postwar decades.[3]

The neo-avant-gardes tend to foreground materiality, medium, and form and to question the boundaries between word, image, and sound instead of affiliating and disaffiliating with political parties. Still, their artists and writers have had long-standing relations to politics in the sense of taking a stand on political issues, ideologies, discourses, and movements. In the context of the redefinition of postwar local and global politics, the literary neo-avant-gardes we examine engaged in politics, although not primarily through “engaged” forms of literature. The Beat poets famously raged against the death of the “best minds of [their] generation” and organized marches and protests, so that part of the beatnik movement was derived from their work.[4] Sound poets such as Isidore Isou and Gil J. Wolman or Gerhard Rühm and Ernst Jandl were involved in the explicit denunciation of several national, political projects of their times. And although the Language poets were not committed like the Beats, they had a distinct, clearcut political agenda.[5] Rather than excluding themselves from collective forms of practice, they reconfigured the relevance of literature in relation to the means and media of collectivity by subverting standardized forms of language, “official poetry and conformist entertainment.”[6] In all cases, the language created was either deliberately opaque or irritated with an exaggerated referentiality, thus criticizing the ideal of transparency inscribed in the market compliant norms of language. Yet, it does not shun communication altogether. In fact, this form of political art perfectly achieved the double effect described by the French philosopher Jacques Rancière: it offered “the readability of a political signification” while at the same time triggering “a sensible or perceptual shock caused, conversely, by the uncanny, by that which resists signification.”[7]

Several neo-avant-gardes engaged in politics, but in contrast to most of their predecessors they
did so by practicing a politics of distanced dissent towards the field of politics, accompanied by an equally great skepticism towards the media. When Allen Ginsberg used the mass media to spread and expand his political “message,” he did it from a socio- and media-critical perspective, and sound poetry and Language poetry, too, consistently used the medium of tape, radio, amplification and, later, the digital from a critical, deconstructive position. As a consequence, which has been amply demonstrated, large parts of the literary neo-avant-gardes contributed to the creation of the countercultures of the late 1950s and 1960s up to the 1980s. Against the background of these interventions into the prevailing structures of the public sphere, it was almost a matter of course to also take action against existing literary institutions and to found counterinstitutions, such as the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics in Naropa or the journal Labris (to use examples to which the following essays will refer).

In all these neo-avant-garde works and practices, a tension is at work that entails a paradoxical, but productive politics of form: the engagement in and with the public sphere is evident and yet the literary forms and the envisaged alternative forms of collectivity (countercultures, counterinstitutions, transnational networks, etc.) tend to oppose the political system as such and political meaning as a political strategy. The French sound poet François Dufrêne wrote poems in which he explicitly addressed publicly discussed political questions, and yet said that he didn’t believe in commitment. Likewise, Jandl and Friederike Mayröcker developed a radiophonic politics of form, which systematically avoided explicit references to history, society, and politics. However, via these blank spaces, they attacked authoritarian, patriarchal structures, and the denial of the Holocaust all the more radically. The double nature of the relations that the neo-avant-gardes maintained to the field of politics is also realized in the irony of all the writers and movements considered. Different as they are, Anne Waldman’s trickster feminism, Bob Kaufman’s absurdist manifestos, Bernard Heidsieck’s sound poems as well as the mixture of grotesque, parody, and tragedy in Austrian radio plays are political because of an aesthetic distance, which is paradoxically intertwined with refi gured modes of triggering intensified sensory involvements.

Although these phenomena take different shapes in the different countries we study, there are traits that many of the neo-avant-garde artworks and movements mentioned have in common, such as the idea of a politics of form. This is, above all, a tendency towards strategies and self-images that are characterized by an idea of a politics of form, which is based on a broadened understanding of politics. Whereas others approach politics and aesthetics as separate, delimitable social fields or systems (at least heuristically), expanded concepts of politics consider politics and aesthetics as inextricably intertwined. Rejecting the idea of politics as a separate field, artists and scholars who rely on expanded notions of politics and conceive “the political” as basic dimension of all social practices, structures, and processes, concentrate in their work on
the intrinsic political dimension of “the aesthetic” and on the equally inescapable aesthetic dimension of the political.

Reflections on the political significance of aesthetic forms can be traced back to Aristotle’s theory of tragedy. Yet, the intellectual environment of the neo-avant-gardes was and is still characterized by philosophical and scholarly movements that allow to understand why the idea of a politics of form based on the expanded notion of politics (as an all-encompassing politics) became increasingly important in their programs and practices. The diversity of the theories that contributed to this development had anything but a negative effect on their intense and momentous reception. Thus, it was not only structuralism with its focus on the determining character of the language system that conduced to the emergence of a new sensibility for forms and to the belief in the liberating potential of rupturing linguistic structures and semiotic conventions. It was also Theodor W. Adorno’s thesis that the “sedimentation” of historical experience in aesthetic form was the only remaining path for critical art, as well as Michel Foucault’s broadened notion of power, and Jacques Derrida’s poststructuralist epistemology, which led to a growing interest in the concept of a politics of (literary) form.

The most recent, already well-established approach to the topos of a politics of form has been developed by Rancière. In his essay “The Politics of Literature,” he considers the way literature is political as literature based on the assumption that political and aesthetic practices are rooted in a “primary aesthetics” (in the sense of aisthesis): they are anchored in social topologies of unevenly allocated possibilities and limitations of relational, sensual perception (seeing/being seen, hearing/being heard, etc.), that can be stabilized or subverted (Rancière, The Politics of Aesthetics, 13). Rancière defines politics as only one of many “form[s] of collective practice,” which contribute to the performing of social systems with all their hierarchies, divisions and inequalities.[8] In that sense, the writing, reading, staging, and circulation of literature form part of this performing of given or disrupted, but always connecting and dividing figures of collectivity.[9] To him literature is not part of an isolated field or defined by its intrinsically intransitive characteristics; it is just one way of participating in the reproduction or reconfiguration of the prevailing “distribution of the sensible” and “perceptible” (Politics of Aesthetics, 9; Politics of Literature, 14). Thus, for Rancière, literature is just a paradigmatic name for practices that are able to evoke “a different sensorium,” and this for a very specific reason: they are based on a “sensible politicity” characterized by an anti-hierarchical, egalitarian thrust, that opens up new, different ways “of linking a power to perceptibly affect and a power to signify” (Rancière, Politics of Literature, 14; Politics of Aesthetics, 14; Politics of Literature, 14).

Nevertheless, as an ensemble of letters that have the potential to circulate freely and to be freely appropriated by anyone, the “mute speech” of literature can draw on very special means
to intervene into given figures of collectivity: “literature intervenes as literature in this carving up of space and time, the visible and the invisible, speech and noise. It intervenes in the relationship between practices and forms of visibility and modes of saying that carves up one or more common worlds” (Politics of Literature, 4). It is precisely through this interventionist (metaphorical) muteness that literature is capable of becoming an arena of democratic aesthetics: it can insist on the “equality” of all representable matters and objects; it can reject the demand to bind certain contents to certain forms; and it is free not to address itself to the “right”, selected addressees, in order instead “to bring art into the décor of each and every life” and thus to fulfill a central concern of the historical avant-gardes (Politics of Aesthetics, 14; 17). Following Rancière’s premises and concepts, neo-avant-garde literary practices can be interpreted as such (more or less successful) interventions into given “figures of community.” Beyond the explicit and diverse political claims of its authors, neo-avant-garde politics of form can therefore be defined as a project with three goals: to rework incorporated modes of participating in the performance of collectivity, to reconfigure “given perceptual forms” and to disrupt the primary aesthetics—the sensory regime—of political and social systems (63).

As different as these scholarly notions of a literary politics of form may be, they can all be used to support the thesis that formal interventions in linguistic traditions and semiotic conventions are to be understood as politically progressive. In the early postwar decades, this possibility of legitimizing form oriented aesthetic innovations served as a welcome counterweight to the numerous accusations that neo-avant-garde artists engaged in nothing more than a worthless playing around, ignoring the precarious political misjudgments of some of their historical predecessors. As the history of neo-avant-garde research also shows, it is a widespread assumption that formal experiments express or promote progressive attitudes, although this premise usually remains implicit. In the present context, however, the crucial question is not whether this assumption is scholarly right or wrong. Rather, what is relevant is the fact that the concept of a politics of form served as a means that helped the literary neo-avant-gardes reduce the danger of getting caught in the same contradictions as their historical predecessors.

The literary examples mentioned above (Dufrêne, Jandl, Mayröcker, Waldman, etc.) show that the relations of the neo-avant-gardes to the field of politics were in their basic structure no less complicated, contradictory, and erratic than those of the historical avant-gardes. Neo-avant-garde movements and representatives were also torn between the tendency to support (allegedly) progressive political groups and ideas, and the impulse to limit their engagement to pushing forward their very own project of doing politics by indirect, formal, literary means. They, too, were characterized by a conflict of aims based on ambiguities and confusions about the preconceptions involved (politics, aesthetics, power). However, compared to the vociferous discord, exclusions, and revised revolutions in the development of the historical avant-gardes,
the consequences of this inherited ambivalence towards the field of politics were much less explosive in the history of the neo-avant-gardes. As part of this containment, also the competition for leadership in shaping society's future – the question of who was the “better,” “right” avant-garde – was no longer conducted openly, although the claim to represent a social vanguard was still widespread on an implicit level.

The neo-avant-garde's strategy of a paradoxical politics of form that at the same time insinuated and suspended the “readability of a political signification,” aimed to resolve the conflict of goals inherited from the historical avant-gardes by making the contradictory relationship to the field of politics aesthetically productive (63). This strategy to cope not only with the implications of a paradoxical temporality, but also with the challenges of a paradoxical politicity, was successful in large parts of the early neo-avant-gardes. Nevertheless, the tension inherent in this constellation could not always be completely balanced and allowed the still unresolved contradictions to become visible again and again. Thus, the ignoring of politics in a narrow sense could take on elitist and cynical features that ran counter to the claimed progressiveness. And it was no less common that the vision of egalitarian conditions focused on cultural dimensions, while no need for action was perceived in the fields of gender, race, and socio-economic inequalities.

In 1990, Charles Bernstein, one of the central representatives of US-American Language poetry, edited a volume that documented a significant increase in sensitivity to the undesired effects of the contained but still neglected and unresolved contradictions inherent in many neo-avant-garde strategies of being political by formal means. In his preface to the book with the telling title *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, Bernstein calls for a repoliticization of the concept and the practices of literary politics, conceived as an “answer” to “the decline of public discourse in the United States,” “an urgent matter best not left to politicians and academics.”[10] His central claim is that poetry should not only be an “active arena” for “the (re)construction of discourse,” but also for “the (re)constitution of the public” and the public sphere (Bernstein, preface to *The Politics of Poetic Form*, viii). What is noticeable about this appeal is, first, that Bernstein links the already established broad concept of politics to a broad concept of form, a revision, which several neo-avant-garde movements had already anticipated in their practices, but which he calls for explicitly for the first time. Accordingly, his preface unfolds the (more or less formulated) argument that the “urgent” political change requires a literary politics of form that does not focus only (or primarily) on the reconfiguration of linguistic and semiotic systems or on undermining conventions of the use and perception of media. Responsible authors should also engage specifically in (re)shaping forms of collectivity; they should participate more strongly in the co-creation of cultural and economic power relations and in the restructuring of the relevant social (sub)systems, including the public spheres of the envisaged new (counter)cultures, (counter)institutions and (counter)networks.
What is also remarkable about Bernstein's call for repoliticization is a second point: for by adhering to the established concept of a paradoxical politics of form on the one hand, yet assuming delimitable, autonomous fields of literature and politics on the other, his call for the repoliticization of poetry simultaneously uses narrow and broad concepts of politics, aesthetics, and form. Yet, precisely this ambiguity must be understood as one of the basic contradictions of the historical avant-gardes. Relying on a decentralized concept of power and broad notions of politics and aesthetics, many of them demanded an abolition of the separation of art and life. At the same time, however, they defined themselves as a superior political force, a self-image that was based on narrow preconcepts (politics, aesthetics, form) and a hierarchical notion of power with an inherent tendency to compete for this power. Although Bernstein’s text also contains snide remarks, for example when he recommends that the problem should “best” not be “left to politicians and academics,” he does not condense these historically handed-down contradictions into an ambivalence and indecisiveness toward the social subsystem of politics (vii–viii). Rather, he places the multiple understandings of literature, politics, form, and power on an equal footing, arguing for the integration of their potentials and an end to playing them off against each other. That this solution is owed to the overarching goal of countering the perceived political backlash with literary means can be assumed. Nevertheless, Bernstein also implicitly admits that the “progressiveness” of the neo-avant-garde politics of form could or should be improved.

Based on this egalitarian approach, which renounces hierarchies between competing theoretical schools, social fields, and aesthetic strategies, Bernstein charts five important dimensions of the relationship between politics and literature: “the politics of the writing process, the politics of the reading process, the politics of poetic form, the politics of the market (publication, distribution), and the social politics of poetry (group/scene/community/individual and the relation of these to other institutions)” (vii). This enumeration shows once again that Bernstein’s “answer to the shifting aesthetic and political climate we find ourselves in,” does not consist in proposing a new poetic program or to define disputed preconceptions and premises (vii). Instead, he aims to raise awareness of the variety of possible paths of literary politics and to advocate for the pursuit of those paths.

Explicitly or implicitly, all articles in this cluster reconceptualize the literary neo-avant-garde via one or several of the dimensions addressed by Bernstein. Aiming to realize the potential of Bernstein’s new, egalitarian approach to the often contradictory, ambiguous, ambivalent, and erratic relations of the (neo-)avant-gardes to politics, we start with a reading of postwar sound poetry that considers all five dimensions equally and that, through its comparative approach, can illustrate the historical contingency of their interplay. In a second step, we take a complementary but reversed perspective. While the first essay concentrates on the literary neo-
avant-gardes under the aspect of the development from page to stage and from performance to recording, we now focus on the transformations stimulated by the postwar mass media, which deeply restructured the prevailing forms of collectivity and hereby challenged new aesthetic responses. The theoretical approach in this analysis of neo-avant-garde radio-plays also combines narrow and broad concepts of form and aesthetic politics, but this time also attempting to specify Rancière’s concept of performed “figures of community” from a medi-historical point of view. Within this framework, we interpret the selected artworks as interventions in the changing dynamics of individualization and socialization, singularity, and community, and revisit the question of explicit versus implicit, realistic versus neo-avant-garde politics of literature.

The two essays that follow also focus on the complexity of interfering dimensions of aesthetic politics, but at the same time broaden the view to postnational practices of neo-avant-garde politics of form. Against this background we reread the Beats in terms of their building new institutions and the journal Labris as the constitution of a new idiorhythmic community. Moreover, we draw special attention to the Language poets’ practices of textual translation and circulation as well as to their creation of networks and platforms, which we analyze as further strategies of performing reconfigured forms of community. As part of this broadened perspective, we reconstruct the transnational relations of the neo-avant-gardes as political interventions into given, geopolitical conditions of perception, signification, communication, and action. From the Beats to the Language poets, to Sound poets, the transnational circulation of neo-avant-gardes unfolds a politics of literature that seeks to dislocate literature from the national boundaries it is often ascribed to. The neo-avant-gardist reworking of the contradictory, conflict-laden, and contested legacies of its historical antecedents, thus also contains a transformation of how literary forms and practices circulate between the local and the global, reshaping the notions of unilateral influence and linear temporalities.

The essays complement each other, however, not only through their different weighting of the questions that Bernstein’s egalitarian, integrative approach to theory and methodology raises for (neo-)avant-garde research. They also address the fact that the history of avant-gardist techniques, institutional strategies, transnational and translational activities, is deeply interwoven with the history of changes within the relation of politics and aesthetics. The simultaneously increasing differentiation and entanglement of politics and aesthetics, the political and the aesthetic, is a feature of cultural and socio-economic modernization that is conspicuously reflected in the history of the avant-gardes on their way from modernity to postmodernity (to choose just one of many possible names for the transformations of the last decades).
For the articles of this cluster, three historical stages in the interlacing of politics and aesthetics are of paramount significance. The first stage is the “aestheticization of the political” in the totalitarian regimes of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. This prehistory of the neo-avant-gardes provides the backdrop of the opening article about the “demilitarization of language” by the Sound poets of the European post-war decades. It also serves as a historical reference point in the subsequent analysis, which focuses on competing strategies to intervene into the suppression of the National Socialist past in the German-speaking area. At that time the neo-avant-garde politics of form was, however, no less shaped by the ongoing, second relevant historical stage: the significantly accelerated aestheticization of everyday life in the 1950s and 1960s. These decades produced a mass-cultural pressure to conform while simultaneously opening up spaces for subcultural and “alternative” politics of (life)style, a topic that the article about the transnational and institutional politics of the Beat movement addresses. The third stage is the one currently debated as postmodernity, metamodernity, or as “cultural logic of late capitalism,” and provides the background for the final article about the “post-avant politics of form” in contemporary Language poetry.

The collaboratively written articles thus complement each other in terms of methodology, but they also allow for a chronological reading, according to the three historical stages outlined above. Based on this twofold approach, they are conceptualized as exemplary contributions to a revisited history of literary neo-avant-gardes, addressing paradigmatic historical changes within the relation of politics and aesthetics that distinctively reconfigured the possibilities of aesthetic interventions. The underlying comparative focus on the literature of European and US neo-avant-gardes aims not only to foreground the relevance of geopolitical contexts; it also serves to consider the interplay of competing cultures and politics of modernization, modernity and modernism, including their manifold successors.

II.

Good reasons could be found to end the introduction of the present cluster at this point. However, two further points need to be addressed in this introduction. One is the question of why we use the term “neo-avant-garde” to analyze literary practices, although it is currently primarily anchored in art history, and although alternative umbrella terms (postwar avant-gardes, experimental literature, etc.) and numerous subcategories (concrete poetry, sound poetry, etc.) tend to be more common. On the other hand, it remains to be clarified how our concern to “revisit” neo-avant-garde politics of form relates to established positions of neo-avant-garde theory and research.

Both issues are closely interwoven, nevertheless the first question can be answered in advance. The present cluster of essays uses the interdisciplinary but controversial term “neo-avant-
“gardes” because it allows to address two central topics. First, it must be taken into account that the debate of the concept of “neo-avant-garde” is indissolubly and significantly intertwined with both the question of the avant-garde’s politics and the general concept of a politics of form. And second, the debate on the history of the neo-avant-gardes entails a methodological self-reflection upon the political dimension of scholarly work. It is this latter aspect that we will finally rely on to situate our suggestion for a revisited perspective on the politics of the neo-avant-gardes within current academic debates.

The history of neo-avant-garde-related research that sees itself as political already begins with Peter Bürger’s influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which, as a negative point of reference, continues to shape scholarly discussion to this day. Bürger’s denigration of the neo-avant-gardes as void and etiolated, politically backward-looking repetitions of once-progressive aesthetic practices, is widely cited.[14] However, in the present context it must be considered that his point of reference is the negative evaluation of the historical avant-gardes by the dominant research at that time. It foregrounded the failure of the historical avant-gardes, referring to their often-quoted political misjudgments, above all to their insufficient resistance to totalitarian ideologies. Bürger opposes this depreciation of the historical avant-gardes by treading a new methodological path: the reference point of his interpretation is not the explicit politics of individual actors or movements. Rather, his reading of the historical avant-gardes is conceptualized as a theory of their implicit politics of form, drawing on ideas of Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno. Seen from this perspective, Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* is a critical intervention in traditions of literary historiography that either fade out political questions (“bourgeois” tradition) or reduce literary politics to explicitly communicated content (a traditional Marxist approach). Bürger’s study thus presents both a convincing theory of the historical avant-gardes and a highly (self-)reflective approach to the question of the relationship between politics and form that combines broad and narrow understandings of the concepts (politics, aesthetics, form) involved.

With regard to the neo-avant-gardes, however, this new approach led to the judgment that the politics of form developed by the historical avant-gardes could not be repeated after 1945, because the social contexts had overtaken the original project. From Bürger’s point of view, the revival of avant-garde techniques and ideas by the neo-avant-gardes could not be more than a conservative gesture of progressiveness, neither legitimate nor worthy of support. For him, the literature of the neo-avant-gardes represents nothing more than an empty, socially decoupled repetition that turns the radical aesthetic politics of its historical predecessors into its opposite.

Hal Foster’s study *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* continues Bürger’s efforts to find new ways of critical historiography and, consequently, also critically
reworks Bürger's theses.[15] His main argument is that Bürger's contrasting of a successful historical and a failed neo-avant-garde insufficiently reflects the precarious belief in progress and leadership that characterized the historical avant-gardes. Addressing this blind spot, Foster interprets Bürger's “narrative of direct cause and effect, of lapsarian before and after, of heroic origin and farcical repetition,” as a result of premises Bürger unconsciously adopts from the historical avant-gardes, instead of analyzing and revising them.[16]

It is precisely at this point that Foster hooks in, undertaking a twofold rereading of Bürger’s *Theory* based on non-linear notions of history and politics. On the one hand, this rereading responds to Bürger's history of aesthetic practices by focusing on Bürger's history of neo-avant-garde’s “repetition” of the historical avant-gardes. On the other hand, Foster reflects on the history of scholarly reconstructions of the (neo-)avant-gardes, thereby also revealing his own approach as a particular, time-bound, and subjective interaction. The epistemological foundation of his interpretation is the psychoanalytic concept of “deferred action” (*Nachträglichkeit*) in its poststructuralist shape. Following Rosalind Krauss, Foster rejects the dichotomies of original and copy, origin and repetition, as well as the ideas of linear temporality and pre-given meanings that merely have to be found. He replaces these premises with a focus on the “complex relation of anticipation and reconstruction,” characterized by the figure of deferred action (Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 13).[17] This shift can be understood as a response to the paradoxical temporality of the neo-avant-gardes, to their antinomic “newness,” which, as already cited, is “defined by seeming repetition, at a later date, of an earlier historical formation” (Miller, *Singular Examples*, 4).

In concrete terms, this means that, from Foster’s point of view, there is no way to “properly” understand the historical avant-gardes as a closed past, since they still point to a possible future that is still open. Analogous to the shock triggered by a traumatic event, the historical avant-gardes are only accessible in a reading of their “repetition” by the neo-avant-gardes. They “emerge” in countless anonymous, subjective, particular, ephemeral, and equally important acts of experiencing and interpreting (neo-)avant-garde art. It is precisely these performative reconstructions of the past by countless, equally responsible individuals that are, for Foster, the central arena of aesthetic politics and shape society's future in a non-hierarchical, decentralized, polyperspectival—and thus democratic and “progressive”—manner.

The central point of Foster’s own politics of reading is his deconstruction of Bürger’s notion of repetition from the perspective of the poststructuralist concept of a double origin: he splits Bürger's idea of *one* repetition into the reconstruction of *two* lines of the neo-avant-garde’s relation to past and future, in which “repetition” and “return” (split in “return of” and “return to”) simultaneously confront and interpenetrate each other. The first, “anti-illusionist” line, which
Foster exemplarily anchors in Minimalism, focuses on exhibiting the materiality and mediality of aesthetic representation and can also be understood as the first stage of dealing with avant-garde traditions. Its primary goal is the uncovering of the (Lacanian) imaginary, the making conscious and tangible of the irresolvable, rupturing, and conflictual dependence on given symbolic forms. Aiming at a maximum reduction of referentiality, the neo-avant-garde’s anti-illusionism is close to modernism, although it is also directed at working through the “illusions” of modernism (autonomy of art, etc.). In contrast, the second line, which Foster analyzes as “traumatic realism,” tends toward serially multiplied found footage, a thesis made clear with reference to Andy Warhol’s response to the consumer culture of the 1960s. (Foster, The Return of the Real, 127–44). For Foster, the basic figure of this second line of “renewing” the historical avant-gardes is the paralyzing overabundance of indistinguishable reproductions of reality, an analysis that in its focus on being caught in simulacra is not coincidentally reminiscent of descriptions of postmodern aesthetics.

That these two lines (or stages) compete is evident. It is equally clear that Foster hereby reconstructs the history of the neo-avant-gardes as the history of an aesthetic and political project that is marked by the (Derridean) dynamics of “differance” and that completes itself through the unfolding and handling of an inner contradiction. What conclusions can be drawn from Foster’s reading and his questioning of established epoch terms (modernism, postmodernism) is a task that the author—unlike Bürger—passes on. It is up to the countless, anonymous readers to act within the field of tension Foster outlines and thus to continue (modern, postmodern or avant-garde) politics—be it by scientific or aesthetic means, including all practices of aisthesis.

Miller’s study Singular Examples: Artistic Politics and the Neo-Avant-Gardes ties in directly with Foster’s work. He agrees with Foster insofar as he too emphasizes the political relevance of acts of reading and argues that this aspect is of special importance in the case of avant-garde artworks. From Miller’s point of view, the “artistic politics“ of the postwar avant-gardes consists of the sum of “only partially explicit social images that accrue” to their works, “both in their original historical context and our present-day remembrance of them, in our ongoing acts of reading, enjoying, reflecting on, interpreting, and judging them decades after their obstreperous entry onto the cultural stage” (Miller, Singular Examples, 4). Neo-avant-garde artworks are “performative interventions” that “unfold in time” because they only open up “alternative ways to think, act, feel and be” but do not prescribe or express these alternatives through the means of aesthetic representation (3, 7). They “exemplify not something already given in the past and in history, but rather something that the present has yet to bring forth fully and that will be realized only in the future” (9).
At this point it becomes clear that Miller brings a new aspect into neo-avant-garde research by linking the figure of paradoxical temporality with the equally paradoxical figure of “singular examples.” His main argument in this regard is that the postwar avant-gardes reinvented “exemplarity” through their radically new, “post-conventional” dealing with “existing repertoires of cultural meanings” in response to the “decay of traditional authority” (9). In Miller’s view, modern artworks reverse the “temporal direction of exemplarity” by anticipating the frames and conventions within which they will be read as exemplary. This “proleptic exemplarity” constitutes, according to Miller, a characteristic of the avant-gardes and “perhaps”—as dialectic between innovation and tradition—even of modernity in general. Nevertheless, the postwar avant-gardes would express this “singularity of the example” in an “exemplary” way, a thesis with which Miller also discloses the particularity and politics of his own rereading (9).

Miller’s concept of “singular examples” points not only to the declining importance of conventions in posttraditional societies and to the increasing importance of individual readings, remembrances and shapings of the future. What also resonates is the discussion of the political implications of the changing relationship between the individual and the collective, the particular and the general, associated with the late modern “society of singularities” and its inherent “crisis of the general.”[18] The current trend toward the “singularization of the social” is viewed very critically by sociologists, who moreover connect this development to the unexpected, worldwide return of anti-democratic and nationalist attitudes and movements. From the perspective of neo-avant-garde research, this problem can be read differently, namely by returning to the perception of this issue by the postwar avant-gardes and their intellectual context. A thinker who pointed out this problem very early on and who strongly influenced the neo-avant-gardes and countercultures of the late 1950s, the 1960s, and the 1970s, was Herbert Marcuse. In Eros and Civilization (1955) and One-Dimensional Man (1964), he argues that the violent commodification and systemic repression of the individual in advanced industrial society had reached a level that undermined any possibility for collective political action.[19] According to Marcuse, the leading force of social change could no longer be the social “class”; rather, the only remaining starting point for a “revolution” was the isolated individual. The vital drives and needs of this enslaved individual, however, could not be liberated by progressive politics, technology, or science; from Marcuse’s point of view, the only means that enables the unfolding of a radical, “revolutionary” subjectivity were art, aesthetics, and bodily, sensual experience.

Marcuse’s position is relevant in the present context because it makes visible that the valorization of the singular and particular, which began in the postwar years and underlies both numerous neo-avant-garde politics of form and the broad concept of politics (advocated by Adorno, Derrida, Foster, Miller, and others), has a dangerous downside. For the Marcuse-
reception shows that countercultural and poststructuralist slogans such as “the private is political” and “everything is political” (lifestyle, linguistic structures, etc.) went hand in hand with a devaluation of collective action. Although undoubtedly advancing individualization, pluralization and democratization, the abandonment of social utopias and the loss of faith in the power of political action (in the narrow sense of politics) also contributed to the very depoliticization that Bernstein opposed with his call for a new, repoliticized politics of form. To counter this, Bernstein argued for an egalitarian alliance between the representatives of competing theoretical schools and between the proponents of differing neo-avant-garde movements. We previously proposed Bernstein’s integrative understanding of neo-avant-garde politics of form as a common thread for reading the essays in the present cluster. Against the background of the (exemplarily reconstructed) scholarly debate on the politics of the neo-avant-gardes (Bürger, Foster, Miller), however, we would now like to suggest a second way of reading.

For this, we follow up on Foster’s thesis of two strands of the neo-avant-gardes that were (and still are) equally necessary, although the second line should be understood as reworking of the first, anti-illusionist line. Both strands are regarded as equally important options of reading and “doing” culture, politics, and history, which only in their mutual complementarity allow the neo-avant-gardes to emerge as (genuinely split) “deferred action.” If one considers Foster’s interpretation of the neo-avant-garde’s double origin from the perspective of Miller’s figure of “singular examples,” including the problems of the crisis of the general and the singularization of the social in the present “society of singularities,” two questions arise. The first is whether Foster’s approach to the paradoxical temporality of the neo-avant-gardes can be helpful to elaborate the thesis of their paradoxical politicity formulated above. Second, there is the question of what kind of anti-illusionism needs to be worked through in this case and is to be “completed” by a line of reading that seizes contradictions as opportunities.

It is not by accident that only against this background a central, but cryptical part of Rancière’s text *The Distribution of the Sensible* becomes comprehensible and meaningful. In this passage Rancière reflects on the relevance of the categories of modernity, avant-garde, and postmodernity for his reconceptualization of the relation between politics and aesthetics (*The Politics of Aesthetics*, 20–30). With regard to all three terms, he initially expresses deep skepticism. Interestingly, however, his line of reasoning is based on and leads to an interpretation of the historical avant-gardes. In the present context, three aspects of his rereading of (neo-)avant-garde theory and history are crucial. First, it is important that his approach reduces the broad field of manifold literary politics of form addressed by Bernstein to two basic figures. Second, it is significant that Rancière understands these figures as both a basic contradiction and a double origin, an (implicit) strategy that seems to draw equally on Bürger’s and Foster’s concept of neo-avant-garde. Third, it is decisive that he defines these two figures as
“two ideas of the avant-garde which are in fact two different ideas of political subjectivity” (30).

Rancière’s account of the first, the “strategic conception” of avant-garde begins with familiar observations. He argues that this line is based on the “topographical and military” notion of a “force” that embodies and unites the intelligence and power of an (aesthetic or political) movement and determines the direction of historical development. Less familiar is his argument that this understanding of avant-garde ties to a particular “form”: it is interwoven with the “form” of the party, understood as vanguard (or “advanced detachment”) that “derives its ability to lead from its ability to read and interpret the signs of history” (29). Rancière contrasts this first, strategic understanding of avant-garde with a second, “aesthetic” conception of avant-garde. It is an “idea” that, following Schiller’s concept of an “aesthetic state,” “is rooted in the aesthetic anticipation of the future,” in the “invention of sensible forms and material structures for a life to come” (27, 29).

According to Rancière, both avant-garde understandings are based on their own, contrary ideas of political subjectivity. The “strategic” notion of avant-garde is linked to the “idea of a party,” conceived as “a form of political intelligence that sums up the essential conditions for change.” The “aesthetic” line is connected to “the metapolitical idea of global political subjectivity, the idea of a potentiality inherent in the innovative sensible modes of experience that anticipate a community to come” (30). In Rancière’s view, the contradiction between these two double-layered concepts (strategic/aesthetic and archipolitical/metapolitical) not only shaped the program of the historical avant-gardes, in that the latter combined the (hierarchical) claim to leadership with the (egalitarian) demand for the abolition of the boundary between art and life. Persistently triggering “confusions” between the two competing models (of avant-garde and political subjectivity), this contradiction, rupture or “division” also characterizes the subsequent, checkered history of the (neo-)avant-garde’s relation to politics and—not least—the history of its scholarly study.

With these brief observations, Rancière concludes his reflections on the significance of the avant-gardes for his theory of political aesthetics. However, they contain enough hints how to interpret his theses with regard to the two questions above. For there is no doubt that Rancière’s metapolitical, aesthetic line of understanding avant-garde and political subjectivity not only refers to his own theory of the “distribution of the sensible,” but that Foster’s and Miller’s approaches can also be placed here. Likewise, the terms strategic and archipolitical are become reasonable against the background of Gayatri C. Spivak’s concept of “strategic essentialism,” with which she argues for maintaining certain essentialist illusions that are indispensable for successful, collective, political practice and the struggle for equal rights. In the present context, the idea of helpful, strategic illusions does not, as in Spivak, refer to the supposed “identity” of
social or ethnic minorities. Rather, it points to central premises of early (neo-)avant-garde research that have been criticized as illusory by subsequent poststructuralist work. These devalued, deconstructed illusions include the belief in progress, leadership, and politically-guided social change, in linear notions of history and politics, in separated fields of politics and aesthetics, in non-performative concepts of power and form, as well as in pre-given meanings, that only have to be found.

Taking into account Spivak’s and Foster’s arguments that anti-essentialism and anti-illusionism should not dominate the thinking and doing of politics, science, and art as privileged points of view, Rancière’s conceptual pair of archi- and metapolitics takes on a new, different meaning. From this strategic-essentialist perspective it becomes visible that Rancière’s interpretation of a divided avant-garde and a split politics allows to understand the poststructuralist critique of Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* as anti-illusionism, which needs to be supplemented by a further, second line or way of reading. It also comes to the fore that Rancière’s concept of archipolitics addresses the basic conditions of modern democracies. Modern democracies not only depend on individualization and pluralization, they also depend on structures and practices of political representation; they require parties, parliaments and governments. And they are, at least until today, not viable without hierarchical political associations based on necessary illusions that enable democracy as an exchange about alternative ways of reading the past and shaping the future.

This background reveals that Rancière does not play off the political-strategic and the political-aesthetic dimension of avant-garde art, meta- and archipolitics against each other. Rather, he presents them as a paradoxical, antinomic politics, which must be kept conscious, as it supplements the paradoxical temporality of the neo-avant-gardes and the logic of deferred action. For the recipients of neo-avant-garde art and research, this means that each of them must find his or her own particular ephemeral path anew at every moment; each individual is challenged to act in this field of tension between two competing and interfering, archi- and metapolitical lines of thinking and doing politics, art and history. What is certain, however, is that the yardstick for both equally important policies of form is not an abstract, ahistorical idea of progressiveness, but the progress of equality and democracy that they make possible.

**Notes**


1–30.


[4] Allen Ginsberg, Howl and Other Poems (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1956), 9. While Allen Ginsberg famously took an active role in the Democratic National Convention Protest in 1968, he also protested against the arrest of Living Theatre Company members in 1971; moreover, he and Anne Waldman formed with others the Rocky Flats Truth Force, a nonviolent grassroots movement that protested the Rocky Flats Nuclear Plant installations. The movement organized protests and, most famously, Waldman and Ginsberg were arrested on one occasion; more recently, Anne Waldman participated in the Occupy Wall Street movement as one of the active participants in Occupy Art.


[9] We refrain from elaborating on Rancière’s distinction between politics and “police” because it responds to theses by Michel Foucault, a connection that can be neglected in the present context.


