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# Book Review of *Aesthetic Revolutions and Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements*, edited by Aleš Erjavec

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In his introduction, Aleš Erjavec lays out the central thesis of the volume: that select avant-garde movements of the twentieth century offer not only radical changes in artistic style and technique, but also aim toward transforming the destiny of the human world. Central to Erjavec's thesis are two key concepts: "aesthetic avant-garde" and "aesthetic revolution." The discussion begins with a proposed distinction between "aesthetic avant-garde" and "artistic avant-garde" movements. Aesthetic avant-garde movements (i.e., futurism) aim to transform the world by initiating or contributing to revolutionary social and political programs. Artistic avant-garde movements (i.e., cubism) are concerned with innovation and change in artistic styles and techniques relating to different stages in the

history of art. Aesthetic revolution—the other major conceptual construct in the framing of Erjavec's thesis—refers to the projected or actual outcomes that result from the historical unfoldings of the respective aesthetic avant-garde movements which are, in part, grounded in the views concerning the relation of aesthetics and politics that can be found in the writings of Friedrich Schiller and Jacques Rancière.

By linking aesthetic revolutions and avant-garde art movements together in the same volume, Erjavec, editor and contributor, draws attention to powerful motivations for change and innovation within aesthetics and the arts as they strive to influence social and political realities in the world. In addition to his own essays, which form the introduction and the conclusion, this volume includes essays on futurism (Sascha Bru), constructivism (John E. Bowlt), surrealism (Raymond Spiteri), modern Latin American avant-garde and revolutionary movements (David Craven), the aesthetic revolution in the United States during the 1960s (Tyrus Miller), the situationist aesthetic revolution (Raymond Spiteri), and NSK—a Slovenian artistic activism movement (Miško Šuvaković). The authors' writings exemplify the general thesis of the volume by offering seven different instances of the aesthetic avant-garde movement in different cultural contexts.

Sascha Bru's essay, "Politics and the Art of the Impossible," cites Italian futurism as the model for future avant-garde movements and, arguably, as the most effective movement in inflecting changes in many aspects of life, including politics. The aim, and to some degree the result, was to replace an understanding of art based merely on contemplation and sensuous pleasure with an understanding of art as action. Bru traces the engagement of aesthetics and politics initiated by the writings of Filippo Marinetti as they evolved in conjunction with Benito Mussolini's political aims for the Italian state. A central concern in this essay is to address the following question: What

is the outcome when practical politics is understood as a form of artistic practice?

John Bowlt examines constructivism in 1920s Russia which proposed to replace painting and sculpture with abstract and machine-influenced modernist art. The artists of this period preferred photography, film, and industrial design as the means to creating art suitable for the new ideology of dialectical materialism. Bowlt portrays the tensions between the differing interests of artists focused on aesthetic experiments and the everyday life interests of proletarian culture that eventually contributed to the diminishment of constructivist influence. This tension between the artists and the needs of the proletarian society, as well as the shift to the right in the Russian state, thus diminished the constructivists' hopes for changing the direction of life as Soviet leaders empowered a different model for the future of Russian society.

Raymond Spiteri's "Surrealism as Aesthetic Revolution" explores the question of how surrealism's relation to politics can be understood over against its established role as a notable art and literary movement. This essay contrasts the views of Walter Benjamin, Pierre Naville, André Breton, and Louis Aragon in an effort to clarify both the political role of surrealism and its limitations as a political force. A second essay by Spiteri, "From Unitary Urbanism to the Society of the Spectacle," traces the revolutionary efforts of the Situationist International (SI). This movement differed from the previous avant-garde movements in that its focus was mainly on active revolutionary engagement within everyday life rather than through art itself. SI advocated the abolition of politics and served as a critique of other revolutionary political groups.

The three remaining essays focus on the avant-garde aesthetic revolution in particular geographic locations: Tyrus Miller, the United States of the 1960s; David Craven, Latin America; and Miško Šuvaković, Slovenia. Miller argues that

artists, including popular artists in the United States during the 1960s, were informed by a “revolutionary social imaginary” which facilitated actions of protest. The resulting protests constituted a form of cultural revolution expressed in the actions of a counterculture with diverse interests. These interests clustered around such issues as anti-war sentiment, civil rights, multiculturalism, and gender issues. The period marked notable changes in the arts—fostering artistic as well as aesthetic revolution—that were reflected in advances in areas such as civil rights and opposition to particular war efforts.

Craven's essay examines the well-known revolutionary protest art of Mexican artists including Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco as well as the lesser known revolutionary participation of artists, such as Alejandro Canales, in Nicaragua. According to Craven, both the Mexican and the Nicaraguan mural artists participated in aesthetic avant-garde practices. Craven argues that the muralists, both in Mexico and in Nicaragua, were engaged in revolutionary protest aimed at the future—and sufficiently so—such that they qualify as aesthetic avant-garde revolutionary movements.

Šuvaković considers the role of the NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst)—a network of Slovenian avant-garde groups known for their artistic–political activism taking place in the post-socialist culture of Slovenia. He argues that NSK exemplifies the role of aesthetic avant-garde revolutionaries in facilitating the independence of Slovenia and that it acted in collusion with other post-socialist efforts toward political change elsewhere in Eastern Europe during the 1980s. Among the NSK artist projects was their *State in Time Passport*, which was a project involving the conceptual creation of fictional state actions (i.e., the issuing of fictive passports) within an artistic frame and, in doing so, thus addressing the post-socialist artistic and political concerns of the times.

Erjavec excludes Dada from the aesthetic avant-garde on the grounds that it lacks the requisite commitment to revolution. His arguments on this point are puzzling. To make this case it is necessary to dismiss the revolutionary actions of the Berlin Dadaists, which included revolutionary protests of the Dadaist artists Johannes Baader, Max Ernst, George Grosz, and others. Their art, and related activities, included responses to the political and social upheaval of the postwar era after World War I. Perhaps a closer look at the revolutionary aspects of Dadaist artists in Zurich, Paris, and New York would reveal a similar concern over the general state of the world even where there was not a specific program for the future. Perhaps it is necessary to recognize that the Dadaists were not necessarily all focused on the same interests.

In this volume, Erjavec has assembled an informative selection of previously unpublished essays addressing both the well-known aesthetic avant-garde movements and less familiar ones. Each essay is bolstered with an extensive bibliography on the avant-garde in general and in its specific forms. The text is illustrated with black and white images portraying major figures representing the respective aesthetic and revolutionary developments. Among these images are Russian constructivist Alexander Rodchenko's *Suspended Construction*, 1920; a still from Luis Buñuel's surrealist film *L'Age d'Or*, 1930; Diego Rivera's fresco mural *Man, Controller of the Universe*, 1934; a frame from Andy Warhol's *Chelsea Girls*, 1966; Asger Jorn's Situationist painting *Paris by Night*, 1959; and IRWIN's NSK mixed media *The Enigma of Revolution*, 1988.

For the most part, the aesthetic avant-garde revolutions cited in this volume address the societal disruptions and political realignments arising, in part, from fascism, capitalism, socialism, and post-socialist solutions aimed at shaping the future of the world—or some part of it. The two world wars followed by controversial geographic realignments, with still unresolved

consequences, have contributed to circumstances inviting new solutions. National revolutions in Latin America, China, and other parts of world have also provided opportunities for avant-garde interventions aimed at shaping the future stages of civilization.

By examining a range of aesthetic avant-garde developments, Erjavec and his contributing authors both inform and raise important questions pertaining to the role of aesthetic avant-garde projects. It seems, however, that these efforts exist mainly in short-term duration and subsequently remain largely as concepts in art and cultural histories. Perhaps it is enough that such developments contribute to short-term social or political changes in a particular nation or region. But it is less clear how the aesthetic avant-gardes have succeeded in changing or becoming a part of everyday life experiences on a wider scale. It seems much easier to document actual changes in the practices of avant-garde art itself than changes following from aesthetic avant-garde social and political contributions.

The essays offered in this volume will surely motivate our interest in exploring their topics further. The question left unresolved is this: Can any of the proposals of the aesthetic avant-gardes examined here show lasting contributions toward changing the world? The essays in this volume illustrate the persistence and the scope of such efforts in the context of particular social and political developments over the past century. Less certain is how to measure the social and political outcomes of such efforts. We have the views of committed participants—but what about the effects in the broader world? And what exactly might be the role of the aesthetic avant-garde in the future? A clue to this comes in Erjavec's introduction, where he suggests that the aesthetic avant-garde of the future may be materialized in the world of discourse as opposed to change and transformation in actual historical projects (p. 16).

In any event, the contributions of the aesthetic avant-garde, as well as artistic avant-garde developments, function in

relation to other forms of cultural transitions. The dominant cultural transitions of our times, it seems, are informed by the shift from industrialization to electronic digital forms of civilization, worldwide urban growth, and globalization as well as revisions focused on racial tensions, human rights issues, and sexual and gender-based social conventions. And all of these have contributed opportunities that invite avant-garde responses into the future. With few exceptions, the concepts and practices that shape the world today come from scientific discovery, technological innovations, industrial practices, and enlightened political leadership. Perhaps it is wise to keep in mind that the role of the aesthetic avant-garde and the artistic avant-garde is to function in relation to these other developments. A more modest aim for the aesthetic avant-garde forces might be, for example, as Harold Rugg reminds us in his essay "The Artist and the Great Transition," to focus on aesthetic avant-garde ideas as a contribution to self-cultivation and the development of a personal philosophy of value-driven living. To be sure, the contributions of the avant-garde may serve as an essential part of education for those whose ideas will shape the artistic, scientific, technological, economic, and political landscapes of the future.