

Sascha Bru

The European Avant-Gardes, 1905–1935

A Portable Guide



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Preface

I began thinking about this book a decade ago, when the field of avant-garde studies took flight in Europe. That there has been such a flight warrants a few words of explanation, perhaps, because long before this point of course countless scholars, critics and curators, both in Europe and in the USA, had turned to the so-called 'historical' or 'classic' European avant-gardes to which this book is devoted. In this respect, indeed, the study of the avant-gardes is at least as old as the classic or historical avant-gardes themselves. Yet in Europe scholars have only recently named and claimed the academic field of avant-garde studies, and this disciplinary self-assertion is of no insignificance. For one, it reminds us of the fact that it was only with the collapse of the wall dividing the former Eastern Bloc and Western Europe that the complete archive of the European avant-gardes, not in the least in that 'Other', Central Europe, opened itself up to experts from both the West and the East. Only at this point too could the truly comparative study of the European avant-gardes take off, aided by the newly found mobility of works, people and ideas. While much has changed in Europe since the fall of the Wall, everything suggests that such an ambitious comparative project is now underway. This is evidenced not only by the proliferation throughout Europe of research centres, projects and publications focusing on the avant-gardes, but also by the launch of international associations such as the Nordic Network of Avant-Garde Studies, which in 2008 expanded to become the trilingual (French, German and English) European Network for Avant-Garde and Modernism Studies.

Avant-garde studies today stand out for their diversity and arabesque nature. To begin with, the field unites art historians and literary scholars, film, media, photography, dance, architecture, music and theatre researchers as well as philosophers, cultural historians and practising artists. This is not to say that avant-garde studies go unburdened by disciplinary boundaries, yet the field is remarkably interdisciplinary. Furthermore, while its centre of

gravity is formed by the classic avant-gardes from the early twentieth century, the field also covers prior, nineteenth-century avant-garde activity and thought, as well as the later twentieth-century neo-avant-gardes, and, increasingly, contemporary cultural and artistic avant-garde practices. Avant-garde studies further home in on work stemming from a variety of cultural and linguistic traditions in Europe and beyond; traditions which often coincide with as many different research protocols and conceptual frameworks. This complex make-up of avant-garde studies of course follows from the richly interartistic, multilingual and geographically dispersed exploits of the avant-gardes themselves. Yet to students and upcoming scholars that diversity can also be daunting. *Where to start!?* Contemplating that question a decade ago, I realised that the field could benefit from an introductory book on all the arts of the classic or historical avant-gardes throughout the whole of Europe. And so the idea for this book was born.

While writing this book, I myself on occasion came to see the avant-gardes differently. After working on the avant-gardes for almost two decades, this proved one of the gratifying aspects of taking on this book project. Less cause for joy came from the burdens of selection and comprehensiveness. Yet what were burdens to me will hopefully be causes of delight to readers. Mirroring the state of affairs in avant-garde studies today, I not only selected examples that have long been canonised in the West, but also chose to disclose material that is generally less known. Moreover, while obviously not being comprehensive – how could this book mirror the archive? – I hope that the samples I do highlight will instil hunger for more in readers, while they discover that a single ‘Eurocentric’ avant-garde never existed, and that sticking to disciplinary boundaries only allows for partial understanding. As this book is punctured by lacunae, I also hope to have left enough room for potential teachers to filter supplementary content through the gaps built into the book.

Whereas one of my primary objectives has been to address an audience of Anglo-American students and young scholars, I would like to think that this book could be of interest as well to their peers studying elsewhere, not least on the European continent. Because of that, the term ‘modernism’ is mentioned only once, here in this preface. For as is well known, in various research traditions in Europe the ‘avant-garde’ and ‘modernism’ are commonly separated, if not, as in German-language scholarship, presented in opposition. Based on this artificially rigid conceptual opposition, even the late Peter Bürger made an effort to criticise some of my previous work in which I talked about the ‘modernist avant-garde’.¹ In light of such terminological turmoil, I decided

¹ Peter Bürger, ‘L’Héritage ambigu de l’avant-garde’, in: Peter Bürger, *Théorie de l’avant-garde*, trans. Jean-Pierre Cometti (Paris: Questions Théoriques, 2013), pp. 159–68, see especially pp. 159–60.

to approach only the avant-gardes, and to approach them by building not on a given frame of reference or theory, but on the material, on the avant-gardes' works and practices themselves. Having done so, I hope this book can also be of interest to more expert readers, as they trace my steps and along the way rediscover the familiar from potentially unexpected angles.

I dedicate this book to A., for who she is and what we will become.

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Translators of the texts I cite in this book are recognised in the endnotes. A special word of thanks is due to Carine Defoort, Aleš Erjavec, Brittany Paige Pheiffer, Jed Rasula, Kris Van Heuckelom and Dimitri Vanoverbeke for their assistance in translation and transliteration. For transliterations the Library of Congress system was used mainly, but occasionally other forms were chosen when these are used more frequently. Further, every effort has been made to obtain permissions and clear artistic copyright for the illustrations collected in this book. Should anyone have been overlooked, notwithstanding good faith efforts, the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.

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Introduction

Packing the Suitcase

This book revisits the art and writing of the European avant-gardes as they thrived, roughly, between 1905 and 1935. Before taking off on this book's journey through Europe in this period, readers need to know a few things.

First, as its subtitle highlights, this book is a *portable* guide. All books are portable of course, but for an introduction to the European avant-gardes such portability is especially relevant. Transportability is one of the defining features of the avant-gardes after all, whether we think of Futurism or Expressionism, Dadaism, Constructivism or Surrealism, or any other ism we will encounter in the following pages. Many artists discussed in this book travelled remarkable distances during their careers as avant-gardists. Some of them even deserve to be called globetrotters. Take Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the most important spokesman of the Italian Futurists. Born in Egypt, he spent most of his youth in Italy and France, but by the 1930s he had traversed almost the entire planet, from Russia to the Americas, always and everywhere trumpeting the feats of Futurism and stimulating others to get involved in the movement.

With such a mobile force of writers and artists came an eminently mobile set of publications and ideas. Cubist poet Pierre Albert-Birot, for example, called his first book of poems *Trente et un poèmes de poche* (Thirty-one pocket poems, 1917), signalling how important it was to him that these were small poems, easily transportable, which readers in turn could put in their pockets and stroll through like gardens, 'hands in their pockets'.¹ Or consider the trajectory of Dadaist Tristan Tzara. Born in Romania, where at a young age he had been involved in early or proto-Dadaist activities, Tzara's travels took him to the north, south and centre of Europe; yet he spent most of his time in the west of the continent. Not only did he help introduce the portable word Dada in Paris, assisting in the launch of Dadaism in France, Tzara also turned his suitcase into a moveable office as he travelled all over the continent, mostly by train. An avid user of the postal system who corresponded in various languages to communicate his views to others, Tzara utilised his case as a writing table

but also stuffed it with Dada magazines, manifestos and other publications he zealously distributed among like-minded writers and artists. By the time Tzara bid Dada farewell in the 1920s, the spread and reception of such magazines and other texts had made the movement of Dadaism a pan-European phenomenon with branches all over the continent.

This brings us to a second thing about this book that needs pointing out before we take off: this book does not deal with any specific ‘national’ avant-garde; thanks to the mobility of early twentieth-century avant-gardists it looks at the avant-gardes as they figured throughout the whole of Europe. Europe is a continent that in the West has boundaries marked by large bodies of water and the British Isles and to the East by the Urals, Ural River and Caspian Sea. That is an unruly span of ground to cover, but in so doing this book only follows the itinerary of many avant-gardists.

Like Marinetti, many European avant-gardists travelled even further. Ukrainian David Burliuk, for example, who is often called the ‘father of Russian Futurism’, set up exhibitions in Japan as well. Restricting its scope mainly to what happened within Europe – with the exception of Chapter 6, which also turns to extra-European avant-gardes in the period – this book is thus to an extent artificial, not in the least because Europe around the turn of the century was of course also a colonial power that stretched far beyond the continent. Yet there are good reasons to stick to this constraint. Practicality is one, for how could this introductory study also contain all the extra-European material while remaining portable? More importantly, restricting the scope to the continent follows from the complexity of the terrain we will cover. Europe today (as then) comes with some seventy-five official languages and at least as many national and local cultures, and avant-gardists came from nearly all these cultures and languages. While this book intends to show that, due to their mobility and their singular forms of art, the avant-gardes were in part able to cross many of these linguistic and cultural hurdles with remarkable ease, it also aims to illustrate just how complex and rich that patchwork of languages and cultures made the European avant-gardes.

The richly textured nature of the avant-gardes can be glimpsed by quickly looking at the text boxes that are dispersed throughout this book. These text boxes deal with some of the most important avant-garde movements and each box briefly discusses a number of representative and canonised artists, writers and works. These names and works will always be re-encountered by those who after reading this book decide to enjoy the European avant-gardes in more depth. Importantly, almost always these text boxes present movements in the plural; so, not Surrealism but Surrealisms, not Expressionism but Expressionisms, and so on. When discussing Expressionism, for example, it would be ill-advised to limit our gaze to the German-speaking areas of Europe. Expressionisms flourished in other regions and countries too, like

Denmark and Poland, Croatia and Flanders, and because these variants of Expressionism emerged in different cultural constellations and at other times, these other Expressionisms also tended to differ from the (in itself multifarious) German Expressionism. It is true that some of the text boxes included in this book, like the one on Vorticism, do not present a movement in the plural. Yet here too it will become apparent that it is impossible to do justice to the movement of Vorticism without also taking into account its many connections with other avant-gardes on the continent. Hence, also to gloss the complexity of the European avant-gardes it is useful to restrict ourselves to the continent's boundaries.

Third, readers are to know that this book does not focus on one particular artform, be it painting or film, literature or sculpture, architecture or theatre, performance art, dance or music. Why this should be so is made abundantly clear throughout this book: avant-gardists constantly crossed the divides between the arts which tradition and official academies imposed. As a result, it makes little sense to talk, for example, about avant-garde visual art or literature in isolation. Accordingly, when this book talks about 'art' what that really means are all the arts together.

Take the exploits of Francis Picabia. This French-born artist could be considered a painter first and foremost; his first painting was exhibited when he was fifteen years old and he later went on to study the art of painting at various institutes. However, Picabia also edited a famous magazine, *391*, which presented his own (and others') drawings and visual art works alongside his poems and essays. In 1924, another text of his would come to form the basis for a ballet entitled *Relâche* that was performed for the first time in Paris by the Ballets Suédois with music composed by Erik Satie. During the break of that ballet performance, a short film, *Entr'acte*, premiered as well, directed by René Clair with the assistance of Picabia, who also appeared in the film itself along with many other avant-gardists. In short, to call Picabia a painter would be a misrepresentation of his many activities as an artist, and more generally would amount to missing a crucial feature of the avant-gardes.

Very often too it makes little sense to talk about individual works as belonging to one artform exclusively. This is made very apparent when we consider avant-garde books. What to think, for example, of Russian El Lissitzky's *Pro dva kvadrata* (Of Two Squares, 1922, see Fig. 1)? Combining word and image, this book narrates the adventures of a black and a red square that visit the earth from outer space. To label this book plainly literature or simply to call it a work of visual art would again block from view its complex constitution. This is not to say, however, that when discussing the avant-gardes we should simply dismiss the boundaries between artforms – quite the opposite, as we will see. The avant-gardes often deliberately toyed with these differences, and in the process invented new forms, genres and techniques.

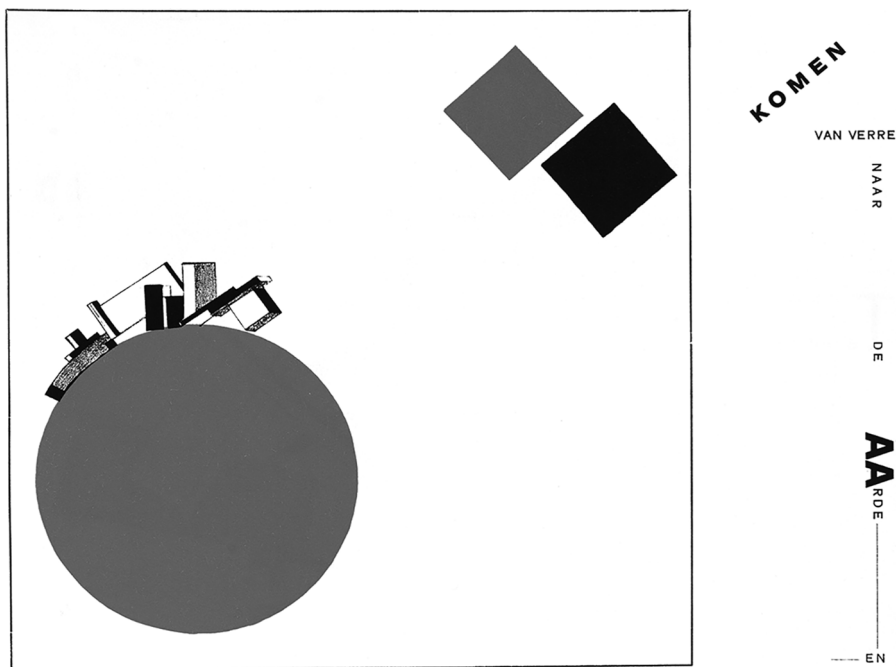


Figure 1 Page from the Dutch edition of El Lissitzky's *Pro dva kvadrata. Suprematicheskii skaz v 6-ti postroikakh* (Of Two Squares. A Suprematist Tale in 6 Constructions, 1922), translated by Theo van Doesburg with the text on the side (the original has the text below), and published in *De Stijl* (nos 10–11, 1922), n.p. The text reads: '[Two squares] come / from afar / to earth / and'.

Finally, a word is due about this book's structure, which is modelled after one of the most portable avant-garde works ever produced: Marcel Duchamp's *Boîte-en-valise* (literally, 'box in a suitcase', see cover image). From the 1930s onwards, Duchamp made a variety of such boxes or cases, which are basically portable, miniature museums folding open and containing some of his writings as well as small reproductions of certain works, including coloured prints of his paintings and tiny versions of his so-called readymade objects – one of these being his famous 1917 *Fountain* or urinal. To get to know Duchamp today there is no better place to start than one of his *Boîtes-en-valises*.

This portable book, similarly, might be read as such a miniature museum. It contains what will hopefully be just the right amount of information to get a good sense of what the European avant-gardes were about and to appreciate avant-garde works in an historically and technically informed way. In the spirit of Duchamp's *Boîtes-en-valises*, this book also gives readers the freedom to decide on how to read or use it. Whereas it is quite possible, of course, to read the book front to back, and while this may also be most rewarding, nothing

is to keep users from going at it differently. Leafing through the book for the first time, for instance, a reader can feel drawn to one of the artworks reproduced here and decide to start with that specific work. (For details about these works' materials, dimensions and current location, see the list of illustrations at the start of this book.) The text boxes, moreover, can be easily consulted in isolation, when, for instance, readers quickly need to remind themselves of certain facts. As in other books, the index as well could be the reader's point of departure. Above all, it is possible to read the different parts of the book, and even the chapters, in a random order.

This book is divided into three larger parts. The first part, 'Strategies and Tactics', aims to install a sound sense of the avant-gardes' artistic approach. What technical and aesthetic innovations did their work introduce? How are we to describe the relation between the various arts in the avant-gardes? How did their work relate to other media at the time? What aesthetic sensibilities and artistic practices need to be distinguished to properly assess the avant-gardes' work? And why is that work so important to the history of modern art? The second part, 'Spaces and Places', widens the scope and looks at the cultural and political contexts in which the avant-gardes could be found, and at how they related to their surroundings. This part tackles the issue of cultural geography already hinted at, but also looks at the cities in which we would most likely have encountered the avant-gardes, and, even, in what cafés. These contexts and settings are important to highlight for several reasons. For one, they bring out how the avant-gardes also developed a distinctly youthful counterculture of creative exuberance. The third part, 'Times and Temporalities', deals with the relationship between the avant-garde and time. The very term 'avant-garde' implies a certain temporality: by definition, the avant-garde is ahead of its time. But was it, really? Or is that the wrong question to begin with? Why were the avant-gardes so bent on innovation, rupture, the new? How, similarly, are we to conceive the spread of avant-garde isms or movements throughout Europe, and beyond? Clearly, certain isms emerged in very specific places. Take Surrealism, which first announced itself in 1924 in Paris as a literary movement. When the movement spread to other arts, and to other places, including Great Britain, did that make these other outgrowths mere copies? Last, but not least, we will see that the avant-gardes also had what might be called an obsession with time itself, with trying to capture time as such in their work.

Whatever way we look at them, the so-called 'classic' or 'historical' avant-gardes this book deals with clearly managed to survive their own time. They are 'historical' to the extent that they were very much of their own time and in part responded to very concrete historical events and changes. Yet many critics have rightfully argued that the avant-gardes at the same time also

fundamentally changed how we think about art in general. For that reason they continue to define our own moment. Given their theoretical and historical importance, the third part of this book also contains a chapter discussing some of the most important theories of the avant-gardes, which in different ways mark the avant-gardes' lasting significance. Indeed, this is perhaps the last thing readers need to know in advance: be careful, the European avant-gardes' remarkable energy and untrammelled enthusiasm are contagious.

Part I

Strategies and Tactics

A New Art, One and Undivided

Between 1905 and 1935 an imposing list of isms signalled the arrival of avant-garde currents and movements in Europe. We all have heard of Expressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Dadaism or Surrealism, but in total there were about sixty such isms. So diverse and rich was the landscape of isms that by the mid-1920s avant-gardists themselves felt the need to create an overview of the situation. Books like *Literaturas europeas de vanguardia* (European Literatures of the Avant-Garde, 1925) by Guillermo de Torre, and the trilingual *Die Kunstismen/ Les ismes de l'art/The Isms of Art* (1925, Plate 16) by Hans (Jean) Arp and El Lissitzky were part of a larger attempt of the avant-gardists to create order in what by 1925 seemed like an interminable mushrooming of movements and currents. Spanish avant-garde agitator Ramón Gómez de la Serna in his idiosyncratic book *Ismos* (1931) required almost 400 pages to make sense of it all. Isms, so these books show, were a defining feature of the European avant-gardes. For that reason, the major isms essential to a proper understanding of the avant-gardes are covered in the text boxes of this book as well. Yet a survey of canonised isms alone does not quite tell the whole story, because the real question is of course this: why were all these avant-garde movements and currents thought to be connected? What bundled this enormous amount of artistic energy circulating all over Europe? By what means could an artist, say, from the remote city of Tiflis (today Tbilisi in Georgia) bordering on the Middle East and on Asia, come to experience a certain kinship with colleagues operating on the other side of the continent? Travel was one way. But there were several other ways, as some of the most salient aspects of the avant-gardes' work illustrate.

Manifestos

With few exceptions all avant-garde movements were launched by way of *manifestos*. Throughout Europe avant-gardists used manifestos as signposts or flags to alert others that something new had started and that virgin territory in the arts had been claimed. The manifesto is a genre with a complex history and fuzzy boundaries, but it is safe to state that the avant-gardes turned it into

a distinct artistic genre, that by the 1910s was also recognisable as such. Impossible to ignore in this context is F.T. Marinetti's legendary 'Fondation et manifeste du futurisme' (Founding and Manifesto of Futurism). This relatively short text appeared in 1909 on the front page of one of France's leading newspapers, *Le Figaro*, after longer versions had featured in Italian dailies and magazines. The text is significant because it highlights several important aspects of all the avant-gardes.

To begin with, Marinetti's manifesto draws attention to the *antipasséism* of the avant-gardes. All avant-gardes indeed somehow opposed artistic tradition or convention, desiring to take art further, and few texts bring this out as forcefully as Marinetti's bellicose 1909 pamphlet that appeared to defy the whole of art history: 'We wish to destroy museums, libraries, academies of any sort [...] There is no longer any beauty except the struggle.'¹ Not all avant-gardes were as radical as Futurism when it came to the past, but they were all somehow engaged in the struggle for a new type of art. The reasons for avant-gardists' dissatisfaction with the art of the past are complex, as shown in the rest of this book. Yet ranking high among them was, quite simply, the fact that most avant-gardists were tired of being told what artists were to do, either by art teachers, critics or academics, by ruling political forces, art dealers or art institutions. Remarkably young for the most part – Marinetti's manifesto claimed that Futurism's oldest members were thirty and he foresaw that by the time they were forty a new generation would 'toss us into the trash can'² – avant-gardists accordingly claimed their absolute freedom to make art as they saw fit. In a countercultural revolt they thus all embarked on a search for a new and timely art.

Manifestos offer an exciting way to gauge that common search, because of course the genre was not only used to launch new isms. In fact, when we delve into the archive of avant-garde manifestos – several hundred of them were written between 1905 and 1935 – we soon notice that the genre was employed to announce a wide palette of potential innovations and experiments in all the arts (some of which were never realised). While Marinetti's 1909 manifesto demanded that art be modern, that it was to represent machines, industry and technological advances, Vorticist Wyndham Lewis and his companions, in their feisty 'Our Vortex' (1914), claimed that for art to be modern it was not just to represent existing machines, but to design its own. Dadaist Kurt Schwitters, in his manifesto 'i' (1922), emphasised that his art used any kind of old, found objects, natural or cultural; in his hometown of Hannover, Schwitters was well known among locals for collecting waste (paper, carton, barbed and chicken wire) for his work. In their raving 'Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu' (A Slap in the Face of Public Taste, 1912), the Moscow-based *Hylaea group* (also known as the Cubo-Futurists)

around David Burliuk, Velimir Khlebnikov, Alexei Kruchenykh and Vladimir Mayakovsky argued that poets were to ‘feel an insurmountable hatred for the language existing before their time’ and were correspondingly to make nothing but ‘Word-novelty’.³ By contrast, the Russian, Ossip Mandelstam, in ‘The Morning of Acmeism’ (1913), argued for the reintroduction of what he called the Gothic, following the example of Bach. Such and other manifestos instantly give an impression of how diverse the avant-gardes were, but these manifestos also show a common thread: whether by bringing back elements from a long-gone past or by enrolling everything modern, litter included, they all engaged in a search for a timely new art.

If Marinetti’s 1909 manifesto is important because its hyperbolic stress on antipasséism forcibly brings out that common search, it is equally significant for the way in which it was composed. In many respects Marinetti’s text is exemplary for the composition of all avant-garde manifestos. The text’s action-arousing rhetoric and clever structure are the most striking. The manifesto opens with an introductory narrative that recounts how one night, accompanied by a band of friends and in a state of extreme frenzy, Marinetti drives out in his expensive motor car, crashes it in a ditch, and then witnesses enthusiastically how fishermen salvage it. Whereas this narrative is set in the first person singular, ‘I’, the subsequent section, the manifesto proper, takes off in the first person plural, ‘we’, preparing the reader for the birth of the Futurist *group* in Italy. Here, the text briefly and clearly emphasises whom and what Futurism opposes (everyone and everything that called upon the past), and compactly enlists who and what it proposes (youth, speed, violence, industry and machinery). The text concludes with a cry for attention – ‘Just look at us!’ – firmly stating the powerful presence of a new movement of combative artists and writers, and forcing the reader to take sides: ‘Do you have any objections? [...] Look around you!’⁴ In the same sweeping conclusion the manifesto announces Futurism’s total indifference to all possible criticism.

Most other avant-garde manifestos too were characterised by a hortatory rhetoric, a contrarian tone, the use of the present tense and the adoption of the first person plural in an us-against-them logic. The main elements of the manifesto were often rapidly enumerated. Sometimes examples were inserted in both word and image. Drawings, lithographic, linotype or photographic reproductions of visual art works as well as typography and page design were mobilised to illustrate the type of art professed. When in 1906 Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, for instance, carved the programme of the early Expressionist group *Die Brücke* (The Bridge) out of wood (Fig. 2), he did so in an at once personal and harsh style that would become unmistakably associated with this group, but that also captured the manifesto’s goals with acute clarity: to unite all youth against the establishment in art and to promote free, authentic artistic



Figure 2 The founding manifesto of the Expressionist group Die Brücke (The Bridge, 1906). A flysheet with a woodcut by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, its text was probably composed in collaboration with other Brücke members, Fritz Bleyl, Karl Schmidt-Rottluff and Erich Heckel. The text reads: ‘With faith in the development of a new generation of creators and connoisseurs we call together all youth; we, as youth holding the future, will work to attain the freedom to life and action against well-established, older forces. Everyone who directly and authentically expresses what drives them to creation is among us.’

expression. At times page design could say more than words. Most would not have been able to read the South-Caucasian language of Georgian Benoz Bogachvili's manifesto 'მხატვრობა' (Painting, 1924, see Fig. 3), which was written after Bogachvili had learned about many avant-garde isms already in circulation. Yet the manifesto's symmetric and repetitive ordering of squares and circles, brought to a halt by the bold 'DADA' on the bottom right, might have given avant-gardists who did not read Georgian an idea of what Bogachvili was saying. The visual pattern of this manifesto after all enacts what it wants readers to do: to design a non-Realistic (visual) language, and to do this with humour or a pinch of Dada, which in Bogachvili's mind appears to have fitted no shape but itself and was therefore also conspicuously rendered in the Latin and not the Georgian alphabet.

Manifestos of course frequently illustrated their programmes through language as well, most obviously when they dealt with literature. Kasimir Malevich, best known as the painter of the famous *Chernyi suprematicheskii kvadrat* (Black Suprematist Square, or Black Square, 1915), argued in 'O poezi' (On Poetry, 1919) for a nonutilitarian use of language in poetry that attached special value to sound. Like poets in the already mentioned Hylaea group with their so-called poetry of *zaum* – *za* (beyond), *um* (the mind); so 'beyond-sense' or 'transrational' poetry – Malevich aimed at creating a type of sound poetry that did not rely on conventional words or meanings, but that combined the sounds of letters into entirely new words that would still communicate something, an affect or feeling, a sort of linguistic music, a sensation of

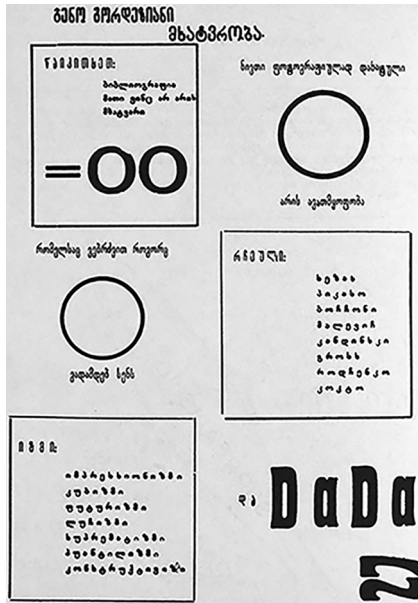


Figure 3 The Georgian manifesto 'Painting' by Beno Gordeziani, from the magazine H_2SO_4 , named after the chemical formula for sulphuric acid (Tiflis, 1924). The text reads, top left: 'read: the bibliography of those who are not painters', top right: 'an object, photographically presented, is a disease', centre left: 'which we are fighting like an epidemic', centre right: 'chosen: Cézanne / Picasso / Boccioni / Malevich / Kandinsky / Grosz / Rodchenko / Cocteau', bottom left: 'isms: Impressionism / Cubism / Futurism / Luchism / Suprematism / Poin-tillism / Constructivism'. Bottom right: 'and DADA', which is a small pun, since 'da' (და) means 'and'. (Translation courtesy of Brittany Paige Pheiffer.)

language's materiality as such. Malevich, who was a prolific poet, concluded his manifesto with an example of such poetry. (Try reading these 'words' aloud a couple of times and you will notice that a strange sensation starts to take hold of you.)

Ule Elye Lel Li Onye Kon Si An
 Onon Kori Ri Koasambi Moyena Lezh
 Sabno Oratr Tulozh Koalibi Blyestorye
 Tivo Oryenye Alizh⁵

These examples suggest that manifestos regularly blurred the boundaries between the distinct arts (here, between writing or poetry, the visual arts, and music), yet above all they show how manifestos always prescribed a new artistic programme. This is a further reason why Marinetti's 1909 manifesto is important. Most emphatically it highlights the inherently *programmatic* nature of the avant-gardes. It shows us that for avant-gardists, it no longer sufficed to express oneself as an artist or to develop a personal style, leaving matters of interpretation to critics or art historians. Expressing oneself freely was taken as a prerequisite and anyone questioning or criticising the avant-gardists' right to do what they saw fit, was ridiculed or turned into the object of scorn. Yet simply expressing oneself was no longer enough – even to Expressionists, who took subjective expression as the cornerstone of their aesthetic. What was further needed was a programme: the artist was always to come up with his or

her own theory of art as well; he or she had to be the spokesperson of his or her own work, and not someone else.

Of course, already in nineteenth-century art many had rooted their creative work in a certain theory or programme. Charles Baudelaire, among others, asserted that a poet without a theory of poetry was no poet at all. Likewise, the proto-avant-gardist Divisionists and Pointillist Georges Seurat developed theories of colour in art based on insights of scientists like Michel Eugène Chevreul, Charles Blanc, David Sutter, Hermann von Helmholtz and Ogden Rood. Seurat separated colours into individual dots or patches which, once on the canvas, interacted optically in the viewer's eye, and these scientists, along with the work of Claude Monet and Camille Pissarro, gave that practice a sound theoretical basis. Similarly, it would be hard to imagine Symbolism in literature without Jean Moréas' 'Un Manifeste littéraire. Le Symbolisme' (A Literary Manifesto. Symbolism, 1886), which launched a theory of Symbolism. Moréas' manifesto was written upon the request of *Le Figaro* and printed in its literary supplement. In 1909, Marinetti's uninvited manifesto appeared not in some supplement but on the front page of that same French newspaper. The enormous amount of avant-garde manifestos, moreover, signals that the European avant-gardes turned the coupling of programme or theory on the one hand and practice on the other into a crucial tenet of their approach.

This in part clarifies why avant-gardists frequently formed groups: not everyone was a theorist, not all avant-gardists had a ready pen, and so identifying oneself with an aesthetic programme that came close to one's own was not uncommon. The systematic coupling of theory and practice also explains why there were one-person avant-garde isms as well. There was nothing to stop those who could come up with a fresh idea for an experimental programme to start their own movement, even if it proved to be a mock ism or a hoax. French Cubist poet Pierre Albert-Birot, for instance, who ran his own magazine, *SIC* (*Sons Idées Couleurs Formes*; Sounds Ideas Colours Forms, 1916–19), became the only self-acclaimed exponent of *Nunism* – derived from the Greek 'nun' (now). In 1916, in a manifesto by the same name, Albert-Birot stated that his ism was one 'to outlast the others'.⁶ Its programme? To be of the time, and since everyone wanted to be and always had been of their time, everyone was a Nunist first and foremost. Albert-Birot was only half joking, but his Nunism shows that the systematic coupling of theory and practice, of ism and manifesto, not always lacked humour. Indeed, there often was a rift between the theory avant-gardists adhered to and their actual work; if by accident or experiment something happened in their work that no longer fitted the theory, it could always be adapted accordingly. Many avant-gardists also pledged allegiance to various isms at once. Theories and isms, in short, were always a detour to something more important, that is to the new art for which all the avant-gardes struggled.

The stipulation of new programmes in manifestos could be very detailed, minutely yet compactly spelling out how art was to be produced. In the famous manifesto-poem 'Pour faire un poème dadaïste' (To make a Dadaist Poem, 1920) – which, as a poem, hints at the fuzzy boundaries of the manifesto as a genre – Tristan Tzara presented an algorithm to promote the Dadaist collage. The poem invited the reader to take a newspaper and scissors, select an article, cut out its words and then throw them in a bag. The next step was to take the cut-out words one by one at random, copy them on a blank sheet in that random order, and 'there you are – an infinitely original author of charming sensibility, even though unappreciated by the vulgar herd'.⁷ Alternatively, the artistic programme could be left rather vague, with the manifesto mainly setting the tone and putting readers in the right mood for action. In his founding 'Manifeste du surréalisme' (1924), for example, André Breton described how a Surrealist poet or novelist had to write. Along the way he also defined *écriture automatique* – a technique for which Breton drew inspiration from psychoanalysis, among others, and which was meant to unleash the subconscious; instead of rationally thinking while writing and censoring oneself, the writer was to jot down as quickly and as indifferently as possible whatever came to mind. However, Breton was less interested in prescription than in installing the right attitude in readers. His manifesto called upon readers to share his astonishment and rage about the fact that art and writing, as human practices, had so far been limited to a conscious, narrowly rational activity while the vast realm of humanity's unconscious had remained largely untouched. If we could somehow unlock that realm through art, Breton thought, we might end up changing life for everybody, if not the concept of man. To reach this ambitious goal, he concluded, many other techniques could no doubt still be discovered, also in the visual arts. Forms of *automatism*, of making art unhindered by rational control, could undoubtedly also be discovered in other artforms. Breton thereby left room for writers and artists who did not co-sign his manifesto to join his movement and experiment with him. This proved a wise decision. By the 1930s, Surrealist groups were active throughout Europe and even in Africa and the Americas.

Relatively cheap to produce – they often came in the form of flysheets – manifestos were widely translated and easily distributed by post. Circulating manifestos was a necessity, because, as will be clear from the examples above, they were written to intervene in the world, to bring others to action, and thus they took on a form or structure that both emphasised and called to action. The best way to look at the manifesto is as a verbal act, a sort of theatrical gesture that seeks out a maximum effect. 'Today is the deed', Russian Constructivists Naum Gabo (born Naum Pevsner) and his brother Antoine Pevsner wrote in 'Realisticheskii manifest' (The Realistic Manifesto, 1920).⁸ Titles of avant-garde manifestos are always telling of this stress on action. If they do not explicitly announce the launch of an ism, then some other act is frequently

evoked or performed by them. What to think, for instance, of German Expressionist Ludwig Rubiner's 'Hören Sie!' (Listen! 1916), the threatening 'Ultimatum' (1917) by Portuguese Futurist Álvaro de Campos (pseud. Fernando Pessoa), or Ilya Zdanevich's and Mikhail Larionov's intriguing 'Pochemu my raskrashivaemsia: manifest futuristov' (Why We Paint Ourselves. A Futurist Manifesto, 1913). Polish Futurist Bruno Jasieński's phonetically spelled 'Nuż w bżuhu' (A Nife in the Stomak, 1921), which polemically demanded the right 'to pis in all colors!,'⁹ almost beats them all. Yet no manifesto created such an effect as Marinetti's 'Fondation et manifeste du futurisme'. Indeed, this is yet another reason why it is an exemplary case.

Before Marinetti's manifesto appeared, no writer or artist in Italy referred to him- or herself as a Futurist; Futurism did not yet exist in Italy. Although he had been very active as a writer and an editor, Marinetti himself did not have many Futurist credentials to show at this point either; his own work was still stuck in nineteenth-century poetics. As a verbal act or performance, therefore, his text was and did what it said: it was the space within which Futurism began, it founded a new movement through an act of language. Marinetti had no way of knowing for certain that so many artists from so many arts would join in so rapidly – nor could he have hoped that Futurism in Italy would continue to exist well into the 1930s. Still, this is exactly what happened. The manifesto was promptly republished as a four-page leaflet and translated into German, Spanish, English, Russian, Czech and many other languages. It created a big splash internationally and turned Futurism almost overnight into an incontrovertible phenomenon. Once the movement got into its stride, the few artists and writers whom Marinetti had previously been in touch with were joined by many more until Fascism in the mid-1930s brought the movement, in Italy at least, to a halt. By that time, however, Futurism had become a global phenomenon, with factions not just throughout the European continent, but in Asia and the Americas as well, as shown in Chapter 6.

All this points to a final important feature of Marinetti's manifesto: it makes us see that European avant-garde art, at least at the outset, was the product of relatively marginal (in the case of Marinetti's 1909 pamphlet, still nonexistent) artistic groups that asserted themselves. Ever since Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), the format of the manifesto had been used to voice the opinions of dissident factions who thus far had had no right to speak. People in power have no need for manifestos that call for change, and those who do write them tend to take notice of others doing so. This is one way of bringing out the sense of connection avant-gardists felt. They recognised themselves in others' programmatic manifestos and this gradually generated the formation that is now known as the 'classic' or 'historical' avant-gardes.

Magazines

Print culture in general was vital for avant-gardists, who cherished sending things by mail. While avant-garde artists shared a deep fascination for the young TSF ('télégraphie sans fil', wireless telegraphy) and the telephone, regular use of these technologies was often too expensive and did not always meet their needs. Visual art works could not be transmitted through the telegraph. Post was far more democratic and effective, and nearly everything could be put in an envelope. Manifestos here ranked among a much wider array of printed materials. Others included specially designed stickers and postcards, photographs, posters and smaller leaflets which advertised particular movements or groups, performances or exhibitions. Like many, Tzara designed his own Dada typewriter stationary of which, he claimed, 10,000 copies were printed. Tzara might have exaggerated the numbers somewhat, but to this day people discover letters of his in the far corners of the world, and there is no doubt that most avant-gardists avidly corresponded with one another.

By post they exchanged information, supported each other, or criticised each others' works. Few vehicles proved as interesting for all these purposes as the little magazine. The avant-gardes were neither the first nor the only ones to employ little magazines – between 1910 and 1914 an estimated 200 *petites revues* were founded in Paris alone and not all of these bore an avant-garde stamp. However, as with the manifesto, avant-gardists used magazines widely and turned this type of publication into their own. Many periodicals are such beautiful objects which were made with such care that they are artworks in themselves. Some of them, moreover, like the German Expressionist *Der Sturm* – which appeared from 1910 until 1932 and thereby was the most enduring avant-garde periodical – and *L'Esprit Nouveau* (1920–5) – which was edited by Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier) – were known by almost all European avant-gardists. Hence, as a medium for making connections between avant-gardists the magazine was crucial.

Magazines came in all formats and sizes, colours and prices. They are called 'little' mainly because they featured outside or in the margins of the publishing circuits of more mainstream magazines. Some, like Francis Picabia's *391*, saw their headquarters travel substantial distances along with their editors. Between 1917 and 1924 Picabia ran *391* while residing in Barcelona, New York, Zürich and Paris. Some magazines had a remarkably long life. *MA* (Today), for instance, edited by the Hungarian Lajos Kassák, appeared from 1916 to 1919 in Budapest, then from 1920 to 1925 in Vienna, to where Kassák had been forced in exile. The Dutch Constructivist *De Stijl* appeared from

1917 until 1932, when it died with its editor Theo van Doesburg. Romanian Marcel Janco's *Contimporanul* (Contemporary Man) lasted from 1922 until 1932. The German Expressionist *Die Aktion* (The Action) appeared between 1911 and 1932. Most magazines closed down after a couple of years, however, and nearly all of them appeared irregularly. Some were very short-lived, either because they were censored, or their editors ran out of money, or they just decided to do something else. The satirical Dadaist *Jedermann sein eigener Fussball* (Everyone Their Own Football, 1919), edited in Berlin by John Heartfield's brother Wieland Herzfelde, had only one issue. So too did the Ukrainian Panfuturist *Semafor u Maibutnie* (Semaphore into the Future, 1922), which was led by Mikhail Semenko. This fifty-five-page booklet called nineteenth-century Realist art dead and gone and introduced among others Semenko's 'poetry painting' *Kablopoema za okean* (Cablepoem Across the Ocean) as an example of the new, Panfuturist art.

Magazines formed a key part of a network of travelling printed materials, which rather quickly condensed in the avant-gardes' own 'wireless system', a virtual space that cut across national, cultural and geographical boundaries. In at least four ways magazines helped to install that borderless space and facilitated the untrammelled traffic of artistic energy. First, there was their visual design. Like manifestos, magazines were most often used as a vehicle to promote the programme of a certain ism. Titles such as *La Révolution surréaliste* (1924–9) and *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (1930–3) speak volumes in this respect. Journals' design as well often told insiders about the ism of their editors. For example, a glance at the covers of the one-off Parisian journal *Le Cœur à barbe* (The Bearded Heart, 1922, see Fig. 4) and an issue of *Mécabo* (1922–3) published a year later in The Hague (see Fig. 5) instantly suggests that we are dealing with two exploits of Dada. Not so much the language as the playful page design tells us so. In both we see the famous Dada hand with index finger misleadingly suggesting that Dadaism knows the way. Both combine font types borrowed from popular culture, and both present a collage of strange, perhaps dysfunctional, machines – in part to mock what many Dadaists saw as a naïve, bourgeois belief in limitless technological progress. Both also physically challenge our habits of reading when we turn to the text. Similarly, when we hold alongside one another the covers of the Russian *LEF: Levyi front iskusstv* (Left Front of the Arts, 1923–5, Plate 18), the Czech *ReD (Revue Devětsilu)*, 1927–31, Plate 15), or the Berlin-based *Veshch. Gegenstand. Objet* (Object, 1922, Plate 17), we are immediately aware that they are different yet alike. All three tend towards geometric abstraction and objectifying simplification and accordingly breathe the air of Constructivism. All three present themselves in a visually experimental yet also functional manner. The world is as it were constructed anew on the page. The long-lasting *Der Sturm* had a

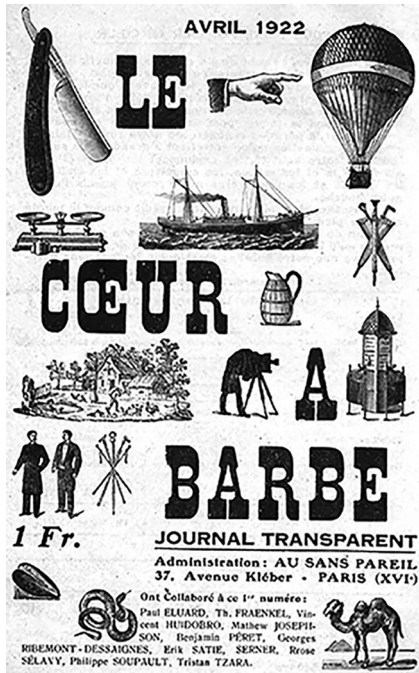


Figure 4 Cover of the sole issue of the self-named 'transparent magazine', *Le Cœur à barbe* (The Bearded Heart), edited by Tristan Tzara in Paris, 1922. With 'news' sections like 'Artichauts Nouveaux' (New Artichokes) by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes and contributions by American, German and French Dadaists, this journal is also one of the most memorably designed Dada magazines.



Figure 5 Cover of *Mécano* (nos 4–5, 1923), designed by Theo van Doesburg, with bottom right an untitled drawing of a mechanical contraption by Raoul Hausmann. The journal was based in Leiden but was also sold in a Paris bookshop. Printed on a single sheet and then folded to a size that could fit into a gentleman's suit pocket, the unfolded magazine has to be turned in all directions should a reader wish to decipher its contents.

relatively bland masthead borrowed from regular newspapers, yet underneath that masthead through the years editor Herwarth Walden presented a wide variety of visual art works that were very often unmistakably Expressionist (see Fig. 6). So iconic became this cover that Hungarian Kassák appropriated it for his journal *MA* (Fig. 7). The front page of *MA* changed over time, however, and came to display Kassák's move towards Constructivism (see Fig. 8).

Second, given these visual affinities it will not come as a surprise that as avant-gardists in Europe kept exchanging magazines, the latter also began to include (often free) advertisements for magazines with an associated artistic programme. This was another way of indicating aesthetic kinship or congeniality as well as channelling and bundling artistic energy. Third, the multilingual nature of many magazines further facilitated this. The international orientation of magazines could be made manifest by the title choice, as in El Lissitzky's and Ilya Ehrenburg's already-mentioned trilingual (Russian, German, French) *Veshch. Gegenstand. Objet*. Yet far more often it was within the columns that a multilingual orientation was accentuated. Many journals ran texts in different languages and were remarkably open to contributors from abroad. As a result, at any point between 1905 and 1935 avant-gardists in Europe could read manifestos or essays, study reproductions of visual art works, and even play the music that composers on the other end of the continent had created. (Dance was more tricky to bring across through magazines. While many joined Marinetti's 'La danza futurista' [Manifesto of Futurist Dance, 1917] in devising new theories of dance, and while experimental dance performances were widely reported on in avant-garde journals, the artform lacked a unified system of notation, as Expressionist choreographer and dance theorist Rudolf von Laban and others observed in *Der Sturm*. Because they could not fall back on a conventional system such as that of musical notation, dance pieces as a rule were discussed with greater difficulty. Laban, as shown in Chapter 2, solved this problem once and for all.)

The fourth aspect of avant-garde magazines which assisted in carrying over artistic energy was their outspoken interartistic nature. With few exceptions, all brought different arts into the limelight, and attracted artists from all art-forms, be it architecture or sculpture, painting or theatre, literature, film, music or any other type of art. Truly magnificent in this sense is Wassily Kandinsky's and Franz Marc's *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider), which had only one issue, in 1912, but which was originally conceived as an almanac or yearbook that would chronicle a selection of major events in all the arts with contributions written only by artists themselves – critics and academics were out. Like the Dresden based group Die Brücke, *Der Blaue Reiter* was also the name of a small international group of Munich-based Expressionist painters, including Kandinsky and Marc, but also August Macke, Alexej von Jawlensky and Marianne von Werefkin. Their almanac covered far more isms and arts than painting, however. Marc's introduction set the tone. Illustrated with old Chinese and



Figure 6 Cover of *Der Sturm* (The Storm, no. 20, 1910), published in Berlin, with a drawing by Oskar Kokoschka entitled *Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen* (Murder, Women's Hope). This was also the title of a play by Kokoschka, which premiered in 1909 in Vienna and is generally considered to be the first Expressionist work in theatre.



Figure 7 Cover of the Hungarian *MA* (Today, no. 2 of 1918), edited by Lajos Kassák and Béla Uitz in Budapest. The cover has a snippet from a score by composer Béla Bartók. *MA* was an important force in Hungarian Activism/Expressionism. Other members of this movement included Sándor Bortnyik, Péter Dobrovic, Lajos Gulácsy, János Kmetty, János Máttis Deutsch, László Moholy-Nagy and József Nemes Lampérth.



Figure 8 A later cover of *MA* (no. 5 of 1924), published in Vienna and designed by Lajos Kassák. Increasingly concerned with the architectural arrangement of a new living space, *MA*'s typographical layout as well progressively became a matter of spatial, almost architectural, organisation. The new design signalled the Hungarians' turn toward Constructivism.

Bavarian folk paintings, a Cubist canvas by Pablo Picasso and some drawings by children, his introduction argued that the new art was not that new but formed part of humanity's perennial struggle to express its inner being creatively. Yet 'the great problem of our generation' was that it had a hard time coming up with such a 'mystical inner construction'.¹⁰ It was to this programmatic task that the almanac and *Der Blaue Reiter* group turned; like other Expressionist painters, they strove to express themselves through the medium of colours, in the hope of setting an example for an entire generation. In about 150 pages the booklet covered the visual arts of painting, sculpture and mask design (old and new), poetry, theatre and music. Special attention was paid to the ways in which the various arts interrelated and could be connected to one another. The lyrical and idiosyncratic tonal language of Russian composer Aleksander Scriabin, for example, was analysed for its visual qualities – in Scriabin's *Prometheus* (composed 1908–10), chords (A, B, C . . .) held close ties with colours (green, whitish-blue, red . . .), and so listening to his music was also imagining a canvas being painted. Music was also present in the form of scores by members of the *Neue Wiener Schule* (New Vienna School). The leader of this Expressionist group, Arnold Schoenberg, and his followers Alban Berg and Anton Webern all delivered scores that already pointed ahead to the thick chromatic and atonal music typical of the Austrians. (Schoenberg's famous serialism or twelve-note method would be developed only later in the 1920s.) The longest contribution in *Der Blaue Reiter* was Kandinsky's *Der Gelbe Klang* (The Yellow Sound), an entire play with detailed stage descriptions that combined all the arts except film.

Other journals covered experiments in abstract film, like those by the Swedish-born Dadaist Viking Eggeling, who, before turning to actual film-making, painted geometric shapes on scrolls which, when unfolded before the audience, suggested an abstract movement of pure visual material. In the Russian *LEF*, the young Sergei Eisenstein published his now canonical essay 'Montazh attraktsionov' (The Montage of Attractions, 1923), in which his work as a theatre designer for Vsevolod Meyerhold made him anticipate the filmic technique of *montage* – a film editing process that contrasts different moving images (for instance, a superimposed or juxtaposed shot of an eye and one of water) to elicit an emotional response or an intellectual association (tears); Eisenstein put the technique of montage into practice from 1925 onwards, the year his memorable *Bronenosets Po'tyomkin* (The Battleship Potemkin) premiered. The experimental film journal *Close Up* (1927–33), edited in Switzerland by the *POOL group* (the Scot, Kenneth Macpherson, the Englishwoman, Bryher, and the American, H.D.), would later try to fuse Eisenstein's insights about audience manipulation through the moving image with ideas from Freud and psychoanalysis. Some journals published entire film scenarios. *La Révolution surréaliste*, for instance, came out with the complete

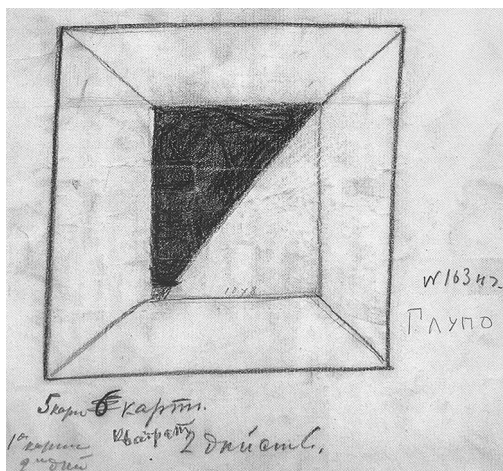
script of *Un Chien Andalou* (An Andalusian Dog) in 1929, which the Spaniards Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel had written at a staggering pace, in part following Breton's suggestion of *écriture automatique*. The film opens notoriously with a shocking scene in which a woman's eye is slit with a razor, highlighting that only the inward gaze of the dream mattered to the Surrealists Dalí and Buñuel. As Breton had professed, it was through this inward gaze that they looked outward again in order to change the world. This fitted well with the same journal's overall fondness of experiments in visual culture. Indeed, *La Révolution surréaliste* gave photography its pride of place as well, publicising work by Man Ray and Eugène Atget. Architecture, finally, was paid close attention to also in *De Stijl*, *MA* and *Veshch*, among many others.

In sum, these magazines still give direct access to the astounding artistic affluence of the avant-gardes today, as they left no stone unturned. Avant-garde journals covered all the arts, made the traditionally separate arts continuously enter into dialogue and allowed them to cross-fertilise. The magazine should therefore primarily be regarded as a venue of performance, a 'stage' upon which the European avant-gardes showcased their programmatic artistic and, above all, interartistic experiments. Their journals illustrate that the avant-gardes were concerned not just with the separate artforms but with art as such. This does not mean that avant-gardists stopped painting, composing music or writing poetry. Rather, the context in which this occurred was always outspokenly interartistic. Besides the avant-gardes' pronounced programmatic nature, their recalibration of the relationships between the separate arts is one of their most striking features. Nowhere is this aspect of their endeavour as clear as in their collaborative performances, to which we now turn, and in the way in which they presented their work in galleries and exhibitions, at which we will look next.

Performances

One of the best-known ballet performances, plays and operas created by the avant-gardes is *Pobeda nad Solntsem* (Victory over the Sun). Performed only twice at the Luna Park theatre in St Petersburg in 1913, this opera brought together some of the finest representatives of Russian Futurism who in that same year had bundled forces in the newly created Union of Youth, to which the Hylaea group now adhered as well. Painter-composer Mikhail Matyushin wrote the music, the *zaum* librettist was Kruchenykh, the choreography, costumes and stage sets were developed by Malevich, Khlebnikov wrote the opera's preface. The opera's theme was the struggle for a new art, represented by a young aviator who wants to puncture the Sun, symbol of the old and conservative forces that keep the new from emerging. At the end of the opera, the hero crashes his plane on stage and steps out unscathed. The world will die, the opera suggested, but the new art will persist.

Pobeda nad Solntsem was made with limited funds and so the production was rather poor. Nonetheless, it demanded something of its audience that seemed entirely new. The *zaum* libretto, though not entirely devoid of meaning, often deliberately ignored linguistic conventions as in the above example of Malevich's poem. As such it asked the audience to listen to vocal parts that were almost indistinguishable from the sounds of the musical instruments playing the rest of Matyushin's score. The score in turn drew close to Malevich's colourful costume and stage set designs – Matyushin, together with Kandinsky, invested a large part of his life in the study of colours' musical qualities. Finally, Malevich's designs, with their bright geometric shapes (see Figs 9 and 10), foreshadowed his later so-called *Suprematism*, a form of painting and interior architecture that, as in the *Black Square*, introduced pure abstraction. Suprematism considered art less in intellectual, social, political or utilitarian terms; it demanded an art that conveyed a sort of plastic feeling rendered on canvas. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the audience reacted with incomprehension and even violence to the opera. People failed to grasp the playful yet careful recalibration of the arts which the opera presented. The Union of Youth nonetheless had a lot of fun creating this opera, yet it also meant serious business. For the opera was bent on showing that the separate arts involved in this event were inextricably connected; all the arts could form a work that was larger than the sum of its parts.



Figures 9 and 10 Sketches by Kasimir Malevich for the set and costume design for the opera *Pobeda nad Solntsem* (Victory over the Sun, 1913). While the stage set design (for act 2, scene 5) on the left foreshadows Malevich's famous later painting *Chernyi suprematicheskii kvadrat* (Black Suprematist Square, 1915), the image on the right portrays his costume design for the New Man character in the play. Compare to El Lissitzky's later costume design for the same character in Fig. 75.

Here again the fundamental interartistic nature of the avant-gardes stands out. Yet more clearly than magazines do, a work like *Pobeda nad Solntsem* reveals how the highly diverse artistic programmes and isms converged in a more encompassing project that sought to create a Total Art which went beyond traditional divides between the arts. The avant-gardes were not the first to contemplate art in this way. Many in the nineteenth century, not least Richard Wagner, had gone there before. Following currents in Romanticism and pointing ahead to Art Nouveau and Jugendstil as well as to Symbolism, Wagner from *Die Kunst und die Revolution* (Art and Revolution, 1849) onwards developed his views on a synesthetic *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a projected synthesis of all the arts. Wagner's dream of a transfiguration of the arts cast a long shadow over the avant-gardes. Yet Wagner was Wagner; the avant-gardes came in countless groups to collaborate on their Total Art. Indeed, while Wagner was to a large extent still dreaming of a future artwork in which all the arts would finally settle in a definitive form, the avant-gardes took it as a given that there were various ways to make the arts enter into new coalitions. As such, they were not concerned with making a single or final Work of Total Art. Rather, they set out to produce several works which each in their own way explored and gave shape to this idea of a Total Art. From the start, this implied diversity and experimentation, but also the risk of failure.

The variety of interartistic performances the avant-gardes set up shows the many shapes a Total Art could take on. Take Russian theatrical innovator Vsevolod Meyerhold. In 1929 he wrote: 'There was a time when Wagner's idea of a new theatre which would be a dramatic synthesis of words, music, lighting, rhythmical movement and all the magic of the plastic arts was regarded as purely utopian.' To this he added: 'Now we can see that this is exactly what a production should be.'¹¹ Meyerhold was talking for himself of course. He had founded his own Constructivist theatre in Moscow. His acting method of 'bio-mechanics' – a system that also drew on actors' (collective) bodily movements to express emotions as well as thoughts and ideas – along with his theatre's impressive moving stage sets, led to many now classic performances of, among others, Mayakovsky's *Misteriya-Buff* (Mystery-Bouffe, written 1918–21) and Belgian Fernand Crommelynck's *Le Cocu magnifique* (The Magnanimous Cuckold, first published 1921). Yet Meyerhold's work, which is already quite different from *Pobeda nad Solntsem*, figured within a much longer list of performances fleshing out the idea of a Total Art – a list that displays great variety.

Throughout Europe, collaborative ballet performances, operas and plays were organised and afterwards documented in magazines and manifestos. These include the Bauhaus *Triadisches Ballett* (Triadic Ballet, 1922) directed by Oskar Schlemmer, with music by Paul Hindemith. This ballet became one of the avant-gardes' most famous dance pieces in Central Europe, in part because Schlemmer reduced the bodies of the dancers to puppet-like figurines, dance

itself to angular movement, and the décor to yellow, pink and black monochrome backgrounds. There was the ‘scandalous success’ of the Fauvist *Le Sacre du printemps* (The Rite of Spring, 1913) for which composer Igor Stravinsky in Paris joined forces with the Ballets Russes led by Sergei Diaghelev, stage designer Nicolas Roerich and choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky. Here, the team went back to their Slavic ‘roots’ and presented a primitivist ritual in which a young woman dances herself to death in less than thirty-four minutes. And there was the Cubist *Parade* (1913), another ballet that powerfully showcased the avant-gardes’ project for a Total Art. The libretto of *Parade*, written by Jean Cocteau, told the story of a promotional event set outside of a circus, that meant to draw the audience in. The cardboard costumes and huge stage sets designed by Picasso turned the scene with dancers into a moving Cubist painting. The musical score by Erik Satie meanwhile included snatches of jazz, foghorns and the noise of typewriters.

If some of these events attracted a modest crowd consisting mainly of professional artists and bourgeois art-lovers – most of them reacting in incomprehension, as shown in Chapter 3 – some drew rather large audiences. With *Vzятие зимнего дворца* (The Storming of the Winter Palace, 1920) the 1917 Russian Revolution was celebrated in St Petersburg. This mass play was directed by Nikolai Yevreinov and involved various avant-gardists. In the square in front of the actual Winter Palace, which the ‘red’ Bolsheviks had stormed in 1917 to overthrow the ‘white’ Ancien Régime, an enormous set was created. The audience, consisting of an estimated 10,000 spectators, was put at the centre of the square, and on different stages spread around them the action involving 8,000 non-professional actors unravelled, using huge red and white searchlights; the whole event was also filmed.

Like *Parade*, a ballet that thematically deals with drawing the audience into a creative performance, *Vzятие зимнего дворца* brings out how the Total Art of the avant-gardes was above all conceived as an *event* or act that enwraps the audience. Indeed, all avant-garde performances, despite their diversity, turned art from a space of contemplation into a site of action in which an audience could be fully immersed. This does not imply that the avant-gardes no longer demanded of an audience that it contemplate their work, as for example when we stand in front of a painting and assess its textural qualities or read a poem and contemplate its stylistic features. Some types of avant-garde art were in fact eminently cerebral. Yet like manifestos, avant-garde performances were typically conceived as interventions in the world. When the English Surrealist David Gascoyne organised the *International Surrealist Exhibition* in London’s New Burlington Galleries in 1936, which was allegedly attended by an average of 1,000 people per day, Salvador Dalí gave a lecture wearing a diving suit that nearly suffocated him. The catalogue for the exhibition opened with a programmatic piece by Breton in English translation, followed by a short essay by Herbert Read.

‘Do not judge this movement kindly’, Read wrote. ‘The Philosophers, said Marx, have only *interpreted* the world in different ways; the point, however, is to *change* it. The artists, too, have only interpreted the world; the point, however, is to transform it.’¹² One way of putting it, then, is that the avant-gardes, by making art a site of action on top of a space for contemplation, turned art from a purely subjective, inward-looking experience, into an intersubjective, outward-looking event that sought to affect the world.

Schools, Galleries and Exhibitions

In their joint attempt to take matters into their own hands in order to explore a Total Art, European avant-gardists not only came up with their own network of printed materials, isms and theories, they even created their own ‘institutions’, that is their own material infrastructure for art education, production, distribution and reception. These institutions include the loose cooperative groups and isms in which the avant-gardes worked as well as their manifestos and magazines. Yet in their countercultural revolt the avant-gardes went much further still. They organised their own multidisciplinary schools, for example, of which the most famous are the Bauhaus in Germany and *VKhUTEMAS* in Russia. The Bauhaus (literally, building house) lasted from 1917 until 1932 and was run for the most part by architect Walter Gropius. Here, the visual and applied arts as well as architecture and theatre were taught in an innovative way by avant-gardists themselves. The school was explicitly founded to promote the exploration of a Total Art. Similarly, the Moscow-based *VKhUTEMAS* (a Russian acronym for Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops), better known as the Russian State Art and Technical School, between 1920 and 1930 offered all its freshmen a basic course on aesthetics and the relations between the arts. An explicitly multidisciplinary project, the school had 100 instructors (including many avant-gardists such as Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko) and about 2,500 students. But there was more.

Because they so often blurred the boundaries between the arts that academies and official art institutions stuck to, the avant-gardes also saw themselves forced to come up with still other alternative institutions. Certain changes in the nineteenth century made this task easier. Oversimplifying, we can say that to a large extent art institutions in the previous century had been state institutions that kept the partitions between the arts firmly in check. This is most evident in Western Europe. In France, for instance, art had long been a rather bureaucratic affair with museums as well as art schools and academies that were run almost exclusively by the state – artists here were often called ‘pompiers’ (literally, firemen) by avant-gardists to suggest they were nothing but state functionaries. They were trained in one particular artform and only that artform; once they became composers, painters or sculptors, the various national and regional art institutions in Europe also gave artists little freedom. If

a painter wanted to exhibit a work around 1850 in Paris, for instance, he or she had to turn to one of the state-sponsored exhibitions or Salons that were held annually. Works selected for exhibition had to comply with a whole set of formal and thematic rules in order to get in. In the second-half of the nineteenth century artists in Paris gradually gained more freedom to set up institutions to protect their interests, to promote their work, and above all to slacken the ties between the official art that was professed and taught in state academies on the one hand and the work artists produced on the other. The number of Salons rose, some even opening their doors for everyone to exhibit in return for a fee. Stylistic diversity in the separate arts grew. Simultaneously, a parallel network of private galleries, dealers and artists' associations saw the light of day.

By the turn of the century these shifts enabled the rise of the so-called Secessionist movement: first in Paris in 1890, then in Munich, Berlin, Vienna and other cities, artists' societies broke away entirely from the state Salons and academies and went their own way. It was here that part of the foundation for the European avant-gardes was laid, because from this point onwards it was only a small step to fracture and diversify the institutional context of art even further and to create a looser and less bureaucratic pan-European artistic network with more interaction between the arts. Kandinsky's and Marc's *Der Blaue Reiter* group in Munich, for instance, broke with the Secessionists, because they felt still too confined and limited to do what they wanted. In their view, the representatives of the Munich Secession, very much like those of the older state institutions, censored certain works and constantly interfered in the ways the Expressionists were doing (or were supposed to do) their work. So, the group set up its own magazine and looked for galleries in which they could run the show and no one else.

Galleries of modest sizes were of great importance to the avant-gardes. It was here, in the margins of the large state-run circuit, that the avant-gardes abided best. In Paris, Cubists Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Juan Gris and André Derain all found a home in Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler's gallery, which opened in 1907. Kahnweiler's role in the dissemination of Cubism cannot be overestimated. In order to promote the movement he lent works to international exhibitions, took photographs of canvasses that could be reproduced in magazines and started his own series of *livres d'artistes* (artist books) for which single Cubist poets like Max Jacob and Guillaume Apollinaire each time teamed up with a painter to produce a book.

Avant-garde galleries in due course became part of the international avant-garde network as well. There was a lot of exchange between Kahnweiler's gallery in Paris and that of Herwarth Walden in Berlin, for instance. In 1910, the editor of *Der Sturm*, who also ran his own book series, the *Sturmbücher* (or Stormbooks), had set up his own gallery to boast German Expressionism and other isms. The Galerie Der Sturm in Berlin exhibited Cubists, Italian

Futurists, Fauvists and Der Blaue Reiter, among others. Like other galleries in Europe, Walden's functioned as a real venue of performance for the avant-gardes, housing many travelling exhibitions as well. In 1912, for example, Marinetti put together a large Italian Futurist show. It halted at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in Paris, the Sackville Gallery in London and Walden's gallery in Berlin. When it was Walden's turn, he put some of the Futurist canvasses on display in the street just outside his gallery, to show – literally – his awareness of the interventionist nature of avant-garde art. After the First World War, Walden expanded his gallery activities by creating *Sturmabende* (Storm evenings), during which literary works were read, and lectures and discussions on avant-garde art were held. He even went on to launch his own *Sturm-bühne* or Expressionist theatre. Walden's and Kahnweiler's operations show that they quickly adapted to the avant-gardes' penchant for a Total Art. By the outbreak of the First World War, the European avant-gardes thus became a distinct formation by all accounts. They brought a new art conceived as a site of action and as a Total Art, that looked beyond the divides between the previously separated, institutionalised individual arts. To this aim they even laid a new infrastructural or institutional foundation for modern art – as the avant-gardes developed, in fact, it became common to take almost all institutional matters in their own hands, and, for instance, to exhibit in venues completely outside of the art circuit (see Fig. 12).

Of course, neither this new institutional context nor the avant-gardes' penchant for a Total Art kept artists from practising the individual arts. Though most avant-gardists crossed the boundaries between the arts as they had been officially institutionalised in the course of the nineteenth century, some were happy sticking to just one artform, even when they had received no formal training whatsoever. Indeed, it is worth mentioning that while many avant-gardists, especially those flourishing before the First World War, had been trained in one specific artform, many others received no formal education at all. This was the case, as a rule, for writers, but also for many working in other disciplines. This occasional lack of skills thought to be essential in official art institutions only fed the avant-gardes' artistic experiment, making them look at seemingly age-old artforms with fresh eyes. But even those wishing to limit their activities to just one artform always worked within an outspokenly interartistic context. To various degrees, all avant-garde movements were interartistic, which meant that even those who kept practising only a single artistic discipline were always to some degree involved in a project of a Total Art as well.

Take the Berlin Dadaists' *Erste Internationale Dada-Messe* (First International Dada Fair, Fig. 11), organised in the Galerie Dr. Otto Burchard in Berlin in summer 1920. In the two small rooms they had at their disposal, the walls and even the ceilings were packed with works in various artforms that seemed to have come alive – the pieces on display were regularly hung elsewhere by the



Figure 11 Photograph of the opening of the *Erste Internationale Dada-Messe* (First International Dada-Fair) in the Galerie Dr. Otto Burchard in Berlin in summer 1920. By calling their exhibition a ‘fair’ (something close to the fairground), the Dadas accentuated their departure from common exhibiting practices. From left to right: Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, Otto Burchard, Johannes Baader, Wieland Herzfelde and his wife, Otto Schmalhausen, Georg Grosz and John Heartfield.

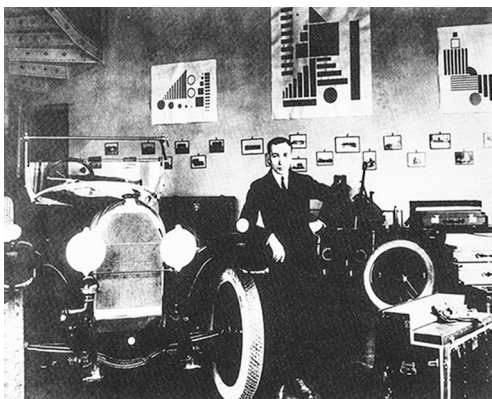


Figure 12 In 1924 Constructivist Henryk Berlewski decided to have a solo exhibition in the Austro-Daimler showroom, Warsaw. The walls were adorned with his works, manifesting his aesthetic project of *mechano-faktura*: advocating artistic asceticism (using a limited amount of colours and modern fabrics) and anti-individualism (Berlewski aimed for a universal art), the works shown were two-dimensional pictorial planes with multilayered systems of homogeneous surfaces. The location of his exhibition evinces Berlewski's aspiration to move out of conventional artistic venues altogether and to see art functionally integrated into the practice of everyday life.

Dadaists when the materials of certain works were felt to go better alongside others. Photographs of the show manifest how aggressive slogans ridiculing official art institutions and the bourgeois art-lover formed the narrative of the Dada ‘Fair’: ‘Nieder die Kunst’ (Down with Art), ‘Dilettanten. Erhebt Euch gegen die Kunst!’ (Dilettantes, Rise Against Art!). With these aggressive calls to destroy conventions in art, we have come full circle and are back at the antipasséism of Marinetti’s ‘Fondation et manifeste du futurisme’. This shows that despite their diversity, the avant-gardes clearly saw themselves as forming a new type of artist, engaged in a united effort to move beyond the status quo in art. Few things make this more evident than their collective use of the term ‘new art’ (often also termed ‘young’ or ‘modern’ art).

Box 1: Expressionisms

Expressionists were united in their revolt against all previous tendencies to simulate reality or to evoke the world external to the artist, whether it be the perceptible world represented in Realism, Naturalism or Impressionism, or a world of deeper significance hidden beyond the perceptible in Symbolism. As their name suggests, Expressionists ‘expressed’ their subjective point of view, radically distorting the world to give shape to their strong emotions and new ideas. Like all avant-garde movements, Expressionism never was intended to become a ‘school’; strict regulations for producing work in whatever artform accordingly did not exist. If at heart all means for expression thus lay open, Expressionist work across various artforms does show a predilection for grotesque exaggeration and for a vivid, jarring, violent, or dynamic application of formal elements. Thematically as well, Expressionist work shows coherence, in that it often touches either upon destructive forces (war, violence, the dangers of urban life, the loss of self, the downfall of civilisation) or upon redemptive forces (love, desire, religion, nature, madness, intoxication). Frequently both of these forces coincide in a single work, as for instance in Oskar Kokoschka’s sketch for his play *Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen* (Murder, Women’s Hope, staged in 1909 in Vienna, Fig. 6), in which a perennial battle of the sexes is fought out between two almost degenerate, tattooed bodies in violent action; with the outcome of their struggle seen as a prerequisite for others to make a new start. As Kokoschka’s work suggests, Expressionism can be regarded as the product of a young and rebellious generation of European artists who sensed they were on the brink of an uncertain but new age, which they approached with a mixture of angst and exhilaration.

Expressionism today is associated first and foremost with the German-speaking part of Europe. As a label it gathers the important artists’ groups of *Die Brücke* (founded in 1905 in Dresden by Fritz Bleyl, Erich Heckel, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, later joined by Emil Nolde, Max Pechstein and Kees van Dongen, among others) and *Der Blaue Reiter* (launched in Munich, 1911), the New Vienna School of composers Arnold Schoenberg, Alban Berg and Anton Webern, and Berlin-based magazines which published Expressionist work in various artforms, most notably *Der Sturm* (edited from 1910 onwards by Herwarth Walden) and *Die Aktion* (ran by Franz Pfemfert from 1911 on). Prominent Expressionist authors include the Czech Franz Werfel, novelist Alfred Döblin, poets Georg Trakl, Gottfried Benn, Georg Heym, Else Lasker-Schüler, Ernst Stadler and August Stramm. Famous Expressionist

drama and theatre reformers include Walter Hasenclever (see Fig. 47), Georg Kaiser, Paul Kornfeld, Fritz von Unruh, Carl Sternheim, Ernst Barlach the sculptor and Kokoschka the painter. In dance key figures were Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman, in architecture Bruno Taut, Hans Poelzig and Erich Mendelsohn – the latter's *Einsteinturm* (Einstein Tower) was built around 1920 and today still functions as a solar observatory in Potsdam. Notorious film-makers were Fritz Lang, Paul Wegener, Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau and the Austrian Robert Wiene. Important visual artists were sculptors Wilhelm Lehmbruck and Georg Kolbe, as well as painters Max Beckmann (see Fig. 62), Max Pechstein, August Macke, Heinrich Campendonk, Austrian Egon Schiele, and many more touched upon elsewhere in this book. Unique to Expressionism as an avant-garde movement is the role it set aside for the woodcut as a primary artistic vehicle. The oldest printing technique, this medium's potential for bold, flat patterns and rough-hewn effects, was exploited widely by Expressionists, among others by Otto Müller, Christian Rohlf, Conrad Felixmüller and Emil Nolde.

That we associate Expressionism today primarily with the German-speaking part of Europe is as much due to the significant contribution of German-language artists as it is to art historians' work. Important German art historians like Paul Fechter and Hermann Bahr were the first to canvass the movement in the 1910s and in their selection of artists to be included in their studies they focused mainly on Expressionist exploits in Germany and Austria. Later historians tended to follow this practice and so the view of Expressionism as being principally 'German' took root. Yet even in the German-speaking world the term was never used exclusively to denote only German exploits. Importantly, it was also employed to refer to the French movement of the *Fauves* ('wild beasts') associated with Henri Matisse, Maurice Vlaminck, André Derain and the young Georges Braque. It is not hard to see why *Fauvism* as well was labelled Expressionist, because its representatives in the 1900s too drew on an idiom and ideology close to Expressionism in the German-speaking world. The violently contrasting and slashing brush strokes, as well as the thickly outlined patches of non-descriptive colour in the work of Matisse and other Fauves were just as rife with subjective expression and emotion.

To the French Fauves, who worked largely independently from German-language Expressionists, we need to add a long list of Expressionists from other European regions. Many of these other Expressionists had visited and worked in Berlin, Munich or other important German-speaking centres of Expressionism. Stanisław Kubicki (Fig. 13), for instance, was German,



Figure 13 Stanisław Kubicki's woodcut *Ruderer II* (Oarsman II, 1917–18), reproduced on the cover of the Expressionist magazine *Die Aktion* (nos 25–6, 1918). Kubicki employed the typically rough-hewn visual language of the Expressionist woodcut here to create a stark black-and-white contrast as well as a contrast between the unmistakable physical power of the oarsman and his unclear mental state: rowing backwards, the oarsman does not know where his power is taking him.

but went on to become a key figure in the so-called *Bunt group* in Poland, around the magazine *Zdrój* (Source, 1917–22). Most members of this group of Expressionists, including Jerzy Hulewicz and Adam Bederski, had spent time in Germany as well. As they called for unfettered expression and creative freedom in expressing emotions in Polish art, their work in literature and the visual arts looked remarkably different from that of German peers. The Polish *Formiści* or *Formists* as well produced Expressionist-inspired work after the First World War. Calling themselves Formists, after initially labelling their work Expressionist, artists and writers of this group, like Leon Chwistek, Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (better known as Witkacy), Tytus Czyżewski, Andrzej and Zbigniew Pronaszko, appeared to signal that their Expressionism was perhaps unlike any other. And not without reason, it appears, as Expressionist groups could be found throughout Europe from Belgium to Bulgaria.

In Bulgaria, Expressionist poet, painter, critic and dramatist Geo Milev can be considered the principal spokesmen of the classic avant-gardes. His long poem *Septemvri* (September, 1924), published in the journal *Plamak* (Flame), is a most forceful piece of writing. In long associative rows of images it first evokes the violent repression of a Communist rebellion in 1923 in Bulgaria, to end with hope for the coming of a new society. Milev's work, which cost him his life (he was executed for his convictions), can be said to have rode the crest of Expressionist *Activism* – that is, a tendency to speak in the name of an entire generation, and to couple the freedom of artistic expression to a political programme of emancipation. Hungarian artist and writer Lajos Kassák, who was trained as a locksmith, like Milev and others in Germany especially during and shortly after the First World War, believed

that it was the task of Expressionism to usher in a new world, to intervene in the world, and not to shy away from political issues. Tellingly, Kassák's first journal *A Tett* (The Deed, 1915–16) was banned by officials for its political pieces. A similar sense of Activism marks Belgian Expressionist Paul van Ostaïjen's *Het Sienjaal* (The Signal, 1918). In Whitmanesque free verse a singular voice in this poetry volume calls on all readers to imagine the arrival of a better and more just world. Over a dozen more Belgian Expressionist poets and playwrights (such as Gaston Burssens, Herman Teirlinck, Wies Moens) as well as painters (including Constant Permeke, Frits Van den Berghe, Gustaaf De Smet) could be mentioned. Together with peers from The Netherlands, like writers Ferdinand Bordewijk and Hendrik Marsman, they made Expressionism strong in the Low Countries. All these (and more) Expressionisms add up to a highly versatile body of work that records the innermost fantasies, hopes and fears of European youth from the 1900s through the 1920s.

Chapter 2

A Total Art, Pure and Real

The new art of the European avant-gardes was partial to collective, interartistic projects as it sought to put forth a Total Art. Yet this project of a Total Art also had clear repercussions for the individual arts, be it painting, literature, film, music, dance, theatre, photography or architecture. Looking closely at the many experiments the avant-gardes conducted between 1905 and 1935, we can see that three complementary and gradually different strategies were explored. Each of these had a particular take on how the individual arts were to relate to the more encompassing project of a Total Art. A first strategy was that of *totalisation*. Here, basically, a ‘master’ artform was isolated under which all the other arts could be subsumed. Many felt dissatisfied with this, however, as it inevitably implied, even if this was unintended, a certain hierarchy among the arts, with one artform always ranking higher than all others. To remedy this, others put all the arts on the same footing by exploring a second strategy of *differentiation*. Here, it was argued that all artistic disciplines had their own value in a Total Art, but also that more energy was to go into determining what made each artform different. So, many avant-gardists set out on a quest to define the specific qualities of each individual artistic discipline. Only then, they thought, could reflection on an interartistic Total Art take off. A third and final strategy took a position in between totalisation and differentiation by opting for *combination*. The idea here was that a modern artist just was to blend artforms as he or she saw fit. Cumulatively, these three strategies produced an immensely rich body of works and techniques, as we will see, both in the individual arts and in new, compound artforms. Yet they also left one not so minor issue for debate: what was the new art to be about? What, if anything, was it to present or represent? As we attempt to answer these questions, we gradually come to understand how best to approach individual works, what to look, listen or feel for.

Totalisation

In 1919 over thirty Expressionist painters, sculptors and writers in Berlin joined architects Bruno Taut and Walter Gropius to found the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* (Workers’ Council for the Arts). Dedicated to bringing new developments

in the arts to a wider German audience, this Expressionist consortium sought also to unite and raise the revolutionary artists of the future. In just a few years, the Arbeitsrat was joined by almost 100 artists. It was time to put into practice the idea of a Total Art open to creators from all disciplines, Taut and Gropius believed. A single 'Art – that is the thing, if only it be there!'¹ If only, indeed. As the arts were all compartmentalised and separated in different institutions, the Arbeitsrat demanded the abolition of the Academy of the Arts and the Prussian national art commission. Yet along with Gropius, Taut also thought to have found a way to facilitate the exploration of a Total Art. If avant-gardists from all other artistic disciplines simply joined forces with architects, then a veritable Cathedral of the Future, as they termed it, could be built (see Fig. 14).

With this dream of building a Cathedral, Gropius and Taut, along with Lionel Feininger and others, displayed a longing for premodern times, when churches or basilica were produced in a collaborative process (often over centuries) that dealt with the various arts and crafts as equally vital. All the more striking, therefore, is Taut's and Gropius' seemingly casual assertion that the new avant-garde art could find its logical conclusion in the one artform of architecture. This assertion of course was not unfounded. Several others at the

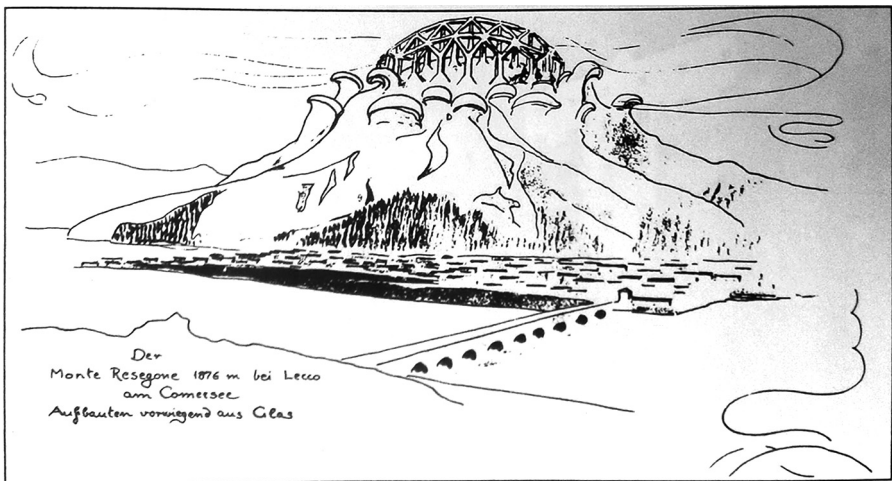


Figure 14 In 1917 Bruno Taut designed a utopian city to be built in the Alps in collaboration with locals. He documented his plans in the book *Alpine Architektur* (1919), from which this image stems. Characteristic of his designs, which as shown here also sought to replace mountaintops by architectural constructions, was the use of glass. Inspired by writer Paul Scheerbart, Taut saw glass as the most promising basic material for architecture as it was a source of light and reflection and a means of spatial and social communion, connecting inside and outside, human-made space and nature, spirit and cosmos. In 1919 Taut also initiated a year-long secret correspondence on the future of art and architecture, called the *Die Gläserne Kette* (The Glass Chain), with fellow architects and artists, including Hermann Finsterlin, Walter Gropius, Wenzel Hablik and Hans Scharoun.

time, like Vorticist Wyndham Lewis, were of a similar opinion. Architecture after all was one of the most holistic arts the avant-gardes practised, because it is by definition concerned with the space in and through which people move, interact and, above all, experience all other artforms.² Even so, many other avant-gardists claimed that a new and modern theatre as well could be the site for a synthesis of all the arts. The examples of performances given in Chapter 1 testify to this conviction, but many more can be added. In 1925, for instance, Hungarian Constructivist László Moholy-Nagy introduced his plan for a Total Theatre. Human actors in his view were to play a role no more important than that of all other elements in the composite artform of theatre: lighting, lanterns and reflectors, architectural constructions and stage sets, the auditorium, props, film projectors, and so on (see Fig. 15). The ‘poet among the painters’, as Cubist Guillaume Apollinaire was often called, held a similar view when he wrote his farcical *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* (The Breasts of Tirésias, first performed in 1917). Unlike Moholy-Nagy, Apollinaire gave more room to human actors – his play recounts how a woman loses her breasts; literally, they float up into the air as giant balloons; she thus changes sex, puts women’s clothes on her husband, and leaves him at home to give birth to 40,051 children in her stead. Yet the prologue of Apollinaire’s play made no secret of his beliefs in theatre’s potential to blend various artistic languages: ‘our modern art marries without apparent ties as in life sounds movements colours cries and noises music dance acrobatics poetry painting hearts actions and multiple decors’.³

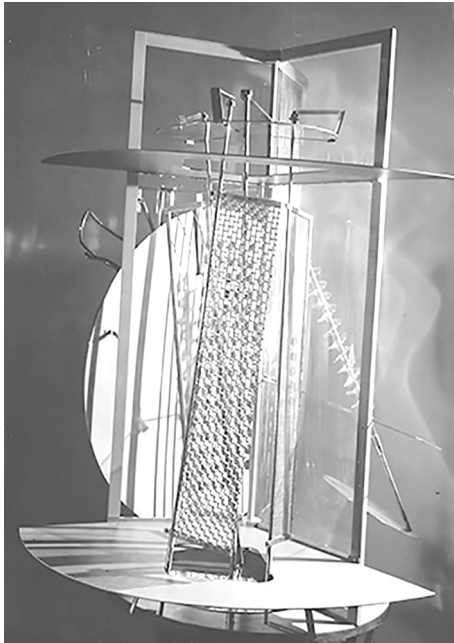
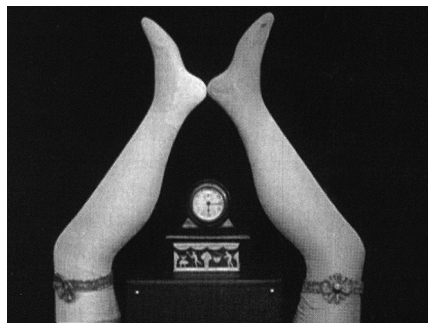
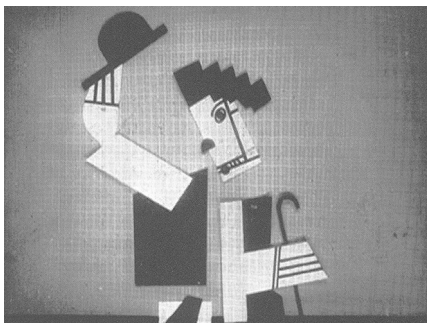


Figure 15 Photograph by László Moholy-Nagy of his *Lichtrequisit einer elektrischen Bühne* (Light Prop for an Electric Stage, 1930). The captured work is made of metals, wood, plastic and an electric motor. When set in motion its plates and shapes start to rotate. As light is projected onto them it is reflected in complex modulations onto its surroundings. Moholy-Nagy might have envisioned using this prop in a version of his Total Theatre. In the late 1960s this work became known as *Licht-Raum-Modulator* (Light-Space-Modulator), signalling how it was no longer viewed as just a prop but had gained a more autonomous status, because it came to be regarded as an early avant-garde kinetic and (artificial) light art work.



Figures 16 and 17 Two stills from the whimsical and witty film *Ballet mécanique* by Fernand Léger and Dudley Murphy. One showing an animated Cubist Charlie Chaplin or Charlot, as he was known to a francophone audience, the other taken from a sequence with the legs of a female mannequin dancing wildly to the mechanical beat of a clock.

By the mid-1920s, film began to manifest itself as yet another prime candidate to bid, along with architecture and theatre, for the status of the most promising totalising art. As avant-gardists, most often coming from other artistic disciplines, began to practise this new artform, they came to observe how film too could incorporate many other arts. In 1924, for example, Cubist painter Fernand Léger, aided by Dudley Murphy, Man Ray and Ezra Pound (in unknown degrees of involvement), produced the short film *Ballet mécanique* (1924, see Figs 16 and 17), for which George Antheil was asked to compose the music. In this film, Cubist plastic arts became cinematic, dancing and acting bodies along with mechanical and inanimate design objects were transformed into filmic material, architectural sites became sets for estranging loops, crime fiction popped up, and experimental photography was set in motion. Léger firmly believed that film, by nature a collaborative and composite art, was a liberating force for the avant-gardes. It could not only unite other artforms – it also brought something new in itself; that is, a novel way of seeing the world of objects for what it is: real and beautiful without human intervention. A film camera indeed can make us believe that we are seeing the world as it really is, even without much artistic intervention being involved.

The examples given here, despite their differences, all testify to the strategy of totalisation at work in the avant-gardes. This strategy drove on the assumption that some artforms simply lend themselves better to integrating various arts. In this respect architecture, theatre and film appear straightforward candidates. Yet seemingly less obvious artforms were promoted to this end as well. For some a Total Art was above all to appeal to the human senses: sight, sound, smell, touch and taste. All arts after all invite the participation of one or more senses. An art that can appeal to several if not all senses, then, could be considered ‘total’ as well. Thus, in 1913 Italian Futurist Carlo Carrà launched the idea of a Total Painting in a manifesto entitled ‘La pittura dei suoni, rumori,

odori' (The Painting of Sounds, Noises and Smells). 'This total painting', he wrote, 'requires the active cooperation of all the senses.'⁴ Carrá believed that sounds and smells were vibrations that entered the human body; a painter was to capture these vibrations visually, through lines, volumes and colours, so as to have the vibrations of noises and smells enter the audience again, only this time through the eye, and not the skin, ear or nose.

Members of the Czech avant-garde group *Devětsil* claimed that a new type of poetry for all the senses could be devised as well. The *Devětsil* group was founded in 1920 in Prague, involving, among others, Jaroslav Seifert, Vítězslav Nezval and Karel Teige. The last two began in the 1920s to promote what they called *Poetism*, a ludic multi-sensory project which put poetry at the centre. In the magazine *Disk* (along with *ReD* and *Pásmo* *Devětsil's* main journal), Teige in 1923 wrote: '*Art is one, and it is poetry.*'⁵ What he meant by this is not straightforward. Teige often used poetry as a metaphor to signal the 'poetic', playful and joyful aspects of life as opposed to its more regulated and 'prosaic' moments. The 'poetic', Teige believed, had to find a place in art too and by saying this he also criticised many Constructivists, whose highly formalised geometrical experiments in his mind tended to suck the humanity and life out of art. Yet the meaning of *Poetism* in a more narrow sense, as the new multi-sensory Total Art that put poetry proper centre stage, can also be made clear by a look at the so-called 'picture poems' of *Abeceda* (Alphabet, 1926, see Fig. 18).



Figure 18 Pages 18 and 19 from Vítězslav Nezval's *Abeceda* (Alphabet, 1926), designed by Karel Teige with photographs of dancer Milča Mayerová by Karel Paspá. Here shown in an English translation by J. Toman and M. S. Witkovsky. The original reads: 'ted' vzpomínat mi každý dovolí / při g na pohotovost cowboyského lasa / Na zemi říjí stádo bývolí / a já jím argentinský řízek z jejich masa'.

Teige made this book in collaboration with the poet Nezval, the dancer Milča Mayerová and the photographer Karel Pápa. Every poem in *Abeceda* consists of two facing pages devoted to a letter of the alphabet and always comprises three parts: first, large, often capitalised and specially typeset versions of a letter of the alphabet; second, a photograph of a costumed woman whose body mimics the shape of the letter; and, third, a quatrain of free associative poetry by Nezval that also references the shape of each letter. In the lines accompanying the letter G, for example, the letter becomes the lasso of a cowboy recalling silent film star Douglas Fairbanks. Each poem thus exploits the visual dimension of the letter or language. At the same time the dancer's pantomime poses also make the letter human-like and tangible, suggesting that language is a haptic phenomenon to be touched and caressed. The low-key decors and dancer's shadows in the background, finally, show how Poetism, by glancing at architecture, perhaps also tried to appropriate our sense of proprioception or movement in space. For Mayerová's body and spatial surrounding in *Abeceda* not only suggest that language or poetry lives – she after all represents a living, moving letter. Allegorically, she also emphasises that language and poetry live in space, and so that this space can be changed by poetry as well. In an intricate fashion, then, this little book invented a whole new sensory language for a Total Art.

It is tempting to confuse such wide-ranging discussions about what could be the most suitable artform for a Total Art with older rivalries among the individual, institutionalised arts. (We could think here, for instance, of the age-old controversy – which began with Simonides and Horace in Antiquity and which was continued, among others, by Leonardo da Vinci in the Renaissance and Gotthold Lessing in Classicism – of which art was superior: poetry or painting?) When we look carefully, however, we always notice that it was seldom a matter of architecture *or* theatre, painting *or* poetry. For those adopting the strategy of totalisation, it was in fact always architecture *and* theatre, painting *and* poetry, and in some cases even far beyond. Teige, for example, throughout most of his life proved a great defender of an *ars una*, a united art freed from conventional, academic constraints and divides. Or take Taut's Expressionist *Der Weltbaumeister* (The World Architect, 1920, Fig. 19), subtitled an 'architectural drama for symphonic music', which presented architecture as the main character on a gigantic, cosmic stage. This work, published in book form, consists of thirty black-and-white drawings that display various episodes of the drama Taut had in mind and which was to be accompanied by music. His drama without human actors starts out with what looks like an empty cosmos, a boundless space. Stellar bodies then clash and crash, forming a sort of architectural mass, which is then shattered in countless particles, finally to coalesce in a glass cathedral. If this work would ever be performed, Taut claimed, 'colours and form would sound' and all the arts would be united.⁶ Taut's *Weltbaumeister* was a challenge to all existing art practices. How could a work so



erblickt – aber im Spiel lösen sich die Formen ~ ~ ~ ~

Figure 19 A page from Bruno Taut's *Der Weltbaumeister. Architektur-Schauspiel für Symphonische Musik* (The World Architect. Architectural Play for Symphonic Music, 1920). It depicts a scene in which a mass of shapes and materials slowly coalesce to form what resembles a glass cathedral.

radically discarding the limits of the imagination, something as gigantic as the birth of the universe and a cathedral, be staged? We do not know if Taut saw his impossible play/building as a film scenario, but a cinematic realisation might have appeared most fitting to him indeed.

All these totalising works come to us today not just as pieces of art but also as demonstrations of a theory of art, as interventions in an ongoing debate. This debate shows that avant-gardists seemingly ranking one artform above all others were actually looking for a common language with which to communicate about the new Total Art – yet at this they proved only partially successful. Many critics have argued that this ‘failure’ came about because the avant-gardes’ project was not given enough time to ripen, as it was interrupted early on by totalitarian politics and the Second World War. Yet perhaps a more positive way of putting it would be to introduce a distinction here between *strategy* and *tactic*. Opting for the strategy of totalisation (or, for that matter, for the strategies of differentiation and combination to which we will presently turn) implied agreement on that strategy but not on the tactic, that is on the concrete modes or modalities with which to flesh out that strategy. Indeed, it is not hard to see how at heart all avant-gardists mentioned here admitted to the principle or strategy of totalisation. The different tactics they explored in architecture, theatre, film, painting and poetry only testify to this. But those same tactics also exhibit that there were always several ways of actualising the shared goal. So, instead of seeing the avant-gardes’ adventure here as incomplete or inconclusive, the distinction between strategy and tactic permits us to regard that same adventure as rather successful and productive. If anything, it leaves us today with a fascinating collection of works. Some avant-gardists, however, could not help feeling uneasy with this great variety of totalisation tactics, especially because it gave artists very little to hold on to. Some therefore suggested that before plunging head first in a project that sought to rope in various arts, a more modest yet no less complicated step had to be taken first: to differentiate the arts and to define what made them specific.

Differentiation

Know your art. This was the elementary programme Dutch avant-gardist Piet Mondrian came up with in the columns of the Constructivist magazine *De Stijl* (The Style). Mondrian, perhaps best known for his last painting, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942–3), indicated in *De Stijl* that he was fine with being just a painter. ‘Every art’, he wrote, ‘has its own emphasis, its particular expression: this justifies the existence of the various arts [. . .] Although the contents of all art is one, the possibilities of plastic expression are different for each art. These possibilities must be discovered by each art and remain limited by its bounds.’⁷ Mondrian, like other representatives of the Dutch Constructivist *De Stijl* group, believed that a Total Art could only be explored if artists in different disciplines first thoroughly investigated and then defined what determined the artform they practised. The old art institutions had done a bad job at this, he implied. They just took the differences between the arts for granted without ever seriously questioning them. Calling for a thorough investigation of the distinctions between the arts, Mondrian was not so much concerned with the thematic contents of art works. He was convinced that all the arts could deal with similar topics. It was the way in which the different arts gave shape to those topics, how they manipulated their raw material (language, sound, visual matter, etc.) into concrete form, that set them apart. What really was specific to each artform and that artform alone? What would a *pure* variant of each individual art, one untainted by the other arts, amount to? Only when these questions had been answered, Mondrian thought, could reflection on a collaborative and interartistic Total Art take off. For only then could it be determined which artforms lend themselves to combinations and how. Mondrian called this entire project *Neo-Plasticism*. Fellow *De Stijl* artist Theo van Doesburg later baptised a similar project *Elementarism*. Architects, sculptors, painters, composers and writers of the Dutch *De Stijl*, including Antony Kok, J. J. P. Oud, Bart van der Leek, Cornelis van Eesteren, Gerrit Rietveld and Vilmos Huszár, in various degrees joined their project, the multifarious results of which can be glossed today still in the articles of *De Stijl*.

De Stijl made explicit how the strategy of differentiation was designed to facilitate an exploration of a Total Art, albeit further down the line. Many other European avant-gardists from the late 1900s onwards set out to determine the specificity of their trade as well. Yet although their work often implied the project of a Total Art, this was not always pushed into the open. In fact, for some the quest for the specificity of their artform actually became the main goal. Reaching this goal, however, proved more tricky than we would assume at first. Kandinsky, looking back at the situation in 1938, noted that the ‘difference [between artforms] manifests itself by the means of each

particular art – by the means of expression. It is very simple at first thought. Music expresses itself by sounds, painting by colors, etc. [...] But the difference does not end there.’⁸ Indeed, once we move beyond the obvious, things become much more complex. The attempt to sort out this complexity is a salient feature of the avant-gardes’ exploits in the individual arts.

Consider literature. Shots at isolating its specificity as a rule revolved around the basic material of writing: language. In their quest avant-gardists instantly made clear that the ways in which language had so far been used in writing exploited only a fraction of language’s and, by extension, literature’s potential. Take the Russian Futurist sound poetry or *zaum* (beyond-sense) by Malevich, Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh also discussed in Chapter 1. The transliteration of Kruchenykh’s first and perhaps most famous *zaum* poem, from the book *Pomada* (Lipstick, 1913), reads as follows: ‘dyr bul shschyl / ubeshshchur / skum / vy so bu / r l ez’. Like Kurt Schwitters’ Dadaist *Ursonate* (Primal Sonata, also *Sonate in Urlauten* or Sonata of Primeval Sounds), composed during the 1920s and one of the finest pieces of sound poetry ever, such texts accentuate, if not liberate, the aural or sound qualities of language. Indeed, they highlight a material aspect of language – sound – and exploit it to the full. But other writers believed that such poems made too much of sound, and that the specifics of writing or language were located elsewhere. Some, for instance, experimented with alternative types of narrative, independent of causality and psychologism. In Carl Einstein’s Expressionist novel *Bebuquin oder die Dilletanten des Wunders* (Bebuquin, or the Dabblers of Miracles, 1912) or in Daniil Kharm’s short stories, things just happen to characters in an often absurd fashion; characters are the playthings of a world in which objects appear to be just as important. In Kharm’s ‘A Story’ (1935), for example, a man goes blind for no specific reason and turns into a vagrant, ransacking people’s rubbish bins in search of food, until one day unspecified things pop out of his eyes and he can see again, becoming a great man in Russia for reasons which, again, remain unspecified. Experimentation with grammar too took a central place in the avant-gardes. In much Surrealist poetry, for instance, we find syntactically correct sentences whose meaning proves incoherent because the words combined belong to divergent semantic realms. In the following lines from André Breton’s ‘Poème’ (1924), we experience no difficulty reconstructing the syntactical structure, but we are left wondering what the lines actually mean: ‘Sachez que / les rayons ultra-violets / ont terminé leur tâche / Courte et bonne’ (Know that ultraviolet rays have finished their task short and sweet).⁹ Others, like the Italian Futurists, advocated the complete destruction of syntax and desired to liberate nouns, adjectives, verbs and punctuation signs from their subservience to the sentence, calling for *parole in libertà* (words in freedom). These linguistic elements,

Marinetti thought, formed the real core of language, and so a new or pure type of writing had to foreground them as well. In so doing, Marinetti often ended up highlighting not so much the aural but rather the visual qualities of literature. His Futurist ‘free-word tables’ (*tavole parolibere*), such as *Après la Marne, Joffre visita le front en auto* (After the Marne, Joffre Visited the Front in an Automobile, 1915, Fig. 20) – much like the famous *Calligrammes* (1913–16) by Guillaume Apollinaire, which also exploited the spatial arrangement of words on the page to generate meaning – beg the question: is this a poem or a work of visual art? The case of literature exposes, in short, how productive the avant-gardes’ search for the specifics of the arts turned out to be. Admittedly, experiments in writing opting for the strategy of differentiation did not

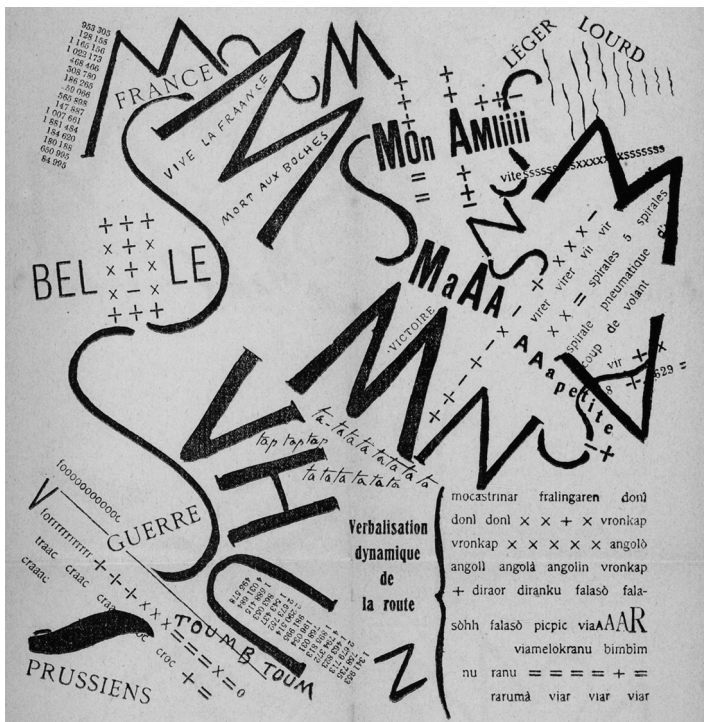


Figure 20 E. T. Marinetti's Futurist 'free-word table' *Après la Marne, Joffre visita le front en auto* (After the Marne, Joffre Visited the Front in an Automobile, 1915). This visual poem can be read as a small narrative map when we start bottom right and move diagonally upwards. It evokes French general Joseph Joffre visiting his troops by car after victory over the Germans in the Battle of the Marne. The large sloping Ss represent rivers, the capital Ms recall mountains as well as the first letter of the Marne, the columns of numbers present battalions of dispensable soldiers. We also encounter onomatopoeic sounds and shouts heard along the general's journey, and we even hear Joffre himself speak: 'Mon Ami', 'Ma petite' (My friend, My child). Later, this original broadsheet publication was often reproduced in various volumes promoting Futurist writing, amongst others in the anthology *Les Mots en liberté futuristes* (Futurist Words in Freedom, 1919).

lead to a uniform approach, but again to a plethora of tactics. However, these same tactics also considerably widened the field of the artform that was called 'literature', simply by looking closely at the fabric it is made of.

Music too did not escape this dynamic search. Common sense dictates that music, from the composer's point of view, uses the conventions of musical notation so that musicians playing instruments convert that notation into physical sound. Every aspect of this customary definition got analysed, deconstructed and then creatively reassembled by avant-garde composers from the 1900s onwards. In his book *Entwurf einer neuen Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (Sketch of a New Aesthetic of Music, 1907), Italo-German composer and pianist Ferruccio Busoni, arguably not an avant-gardist himself, was one of the first to speculate about radically new scales and even electronic instruments. The European avant-gardes proved him right. Before the First World War, Futurist composers both in the West (most notably Francesco Balilla Pratella) and the East (among them, Nikolaj Kulbin and Arthur Lourié) started to experiment with so-called microtones or *microintervals* – intervals smaller than the common semitone, which add to new types of melodies. Coinciding with similar experiments elsewhere in Europe, Expressionist composer Arnold Schoenberg in the summer of 1908 further ventured into the realm of *atonality* – in the broadest sense, music without a central key or tonal centre, resulting in a 'freeing' of each note within the classical chromatic (or twelve-note) scale, because notes in atonal music as it were come to float independently. This was a radical break with tradition, for Schoenberg here left behind the convention of tonality which had dominated European classical music for centuries. Tonal music, it appears, simply did not give the Austrian Schoenberg enough freedom to express himself. After a while, he began to ponder how to formalise the liberation of the musical note he had brought about. In 1921 he discovered a method that was to become known as *serialism*: by ordering the twelve notes on the chromatic scale in a fixed order or series, that order, as a sort of hidden theme, was to bind the whole work together as it generated its own melodies and harmonies. Neither a style nor a system, but rather a structuring guide or constraint in musical arrangement, serialism or *dodecaphony* (twelve-tone music), as it is also often termed, still gave composers a lot of freedom. It led to compositions as varied as Anton Webern's *Symphony* (1928), Alban Berg's unfinished opera *Lulu* (composed 1929–35), Schoenberg's *Third String Quartet* (1927), and countless other pieces by those who throughout the continent explored dodecaphony.

Serialism was a serious affair – although a degree of musical humour is not uncommon in Schoenberg's twelve-note compositions. More explicit bouts of fun can be found elsewhere in avant-garde musical experimentation. What to think of the 1920s *Les Six* (The Six), for example, a group of composers

including Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, Germaine Tailleferre, Francis Poulenc, Georges Auric and Louis Durey? Les Six were inspired among others by Erik Satie, whose music drew him near to Dada as he wished to strip the artform to its bare essentials but above all because he loved parody and poker-faced clownery. Satie was known for such pieces as *Choses vues à droite et à gauche (sans lunettes)* (Things Seen Right-to-Left [Without Spectacles], 1914), or *Sonatine bureaucratique* (Bureaucratic Sonatina, 1917), and for championing ‘furniture music’ deliberately composed to be ignored. Les Six, following Satie’s example, set out to mock all accepted conventions in music. This led to several flippant and gay arrangements which among others often mingled musical registers. Popular tunes and snippets of jazz simply got copied into scores, as for example in Milhaud’s *La création du monde* (The World’s Creation, 1923), which brought music for a sort of sleazy jazz ballet. Other composers, perhaps most notably Béla Bartók, turned to traditional folk music to take the art of music forward by taking it back to its roots. As European folk music was of course very rich and diverse, its many *couleurs locales* proved a treasure trove for innovative music.

While some avant-gardists experimented with alternative models of orchestration – musical genres up to this point were often strictly defined by specific instrumental combinations – others went on to utilise mechanical instruments, gradually concluding that noise too deserved its place in music. There were the ‘aetherophone’ or ‘thérémin’ (named after its Russian inventor Leon Thérémin), the ‘ondes martenot’ developed by Frenchman Maurice Martenot and the ‘trautonium’ (brainchild of German Friedrich Trautwein). These new and in part electronic instruments were used in various compositions by avant-gardists. They sounded like no existing instrument and prefigured the boom of electronic music to arrive later on in the century. It was only a small step for others also to introduce everyday mechanical objects as musical instruments. For *Pacific 231* (1923), Swiss composer Honegger had the orchestra imitate the sound of a locomotive. George Antheil’s music for Léger’s film *Ballet mécanique*, which we already encountered, used electric doorbells and an aeroplane propeller. All composers agreed, in short, that the kernel of music is sound (noise even). Yet this consensus did not keep their music from sounding rather differently as they explored a variety of tactics.

Film as well, as it consists of moving images, was often said to have a specificity of its own. In the history of film one of the first avant-garde waves often distinguished is that of the French *pure cinema* or ‘Impressionist’ film by cineastes such as Jean Epstein, Germaine Dulac, Louis Delluc and Abel Gance. Through techniques such as close-ups, slow-motion, soft-focus, image distortion and dissolve, they sought to make film a distinct artform. Pushing the concept of *photogénie*, Epstein believed that what ultimately defined film was manipulation of the camera, because this device could reveal a reality in a way

no other artistic instrument could – a world hidden from the eye (much like the world beyond symbols in literary Symbolism), which the film-maker was to bring out as effectively as possible. For example, the plastic properties of a variety of concrete objects (actors' bodies, everyday objects or buildings) could be shown to share a number of – at first sight – unnoticeable or unnoticed features, such as the same shape or texture, which in turn was to suggest a further, deeper significance. This yielded many memorable works, such as Gance's *La Roue* (The Wheel, 1922–3), Dulac's *Coquille et le clergyman* (The Seashell and the Clergyman, 1927) and Epstein's *La Chute de la maison Usher* (1928, based on Edgar Allen Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*).

These instances of pure cinema differed considerable from the *absolute or graphic cinema* of Viking Eggeling, Henri Chomette, Walter Ruttmann and Hans Richter. Developed around the same time, films here were raised to a more abstract level, leaving behind the representation of reality (hidden or not). Consider Richter's *Rhythmus 21* (1921, see Fig. 21). Today, this film still tests our linguistic ability to describe it. We cannot just say what it is about, and instead need to describe what we see appearing on the screen. *Rhythmus 21* is divided in two parts. In the first, white geometric forms appear in a black space or on a black surface. In the second part this is reversed: black forms on white. Yet perhaps already the choice of words here is wrong or ambivalent, because it is of course not the same to say that things appear on a surface or in a space when we see them on screen. This is exactly what the film seems to be getting at: how do we perceive movement in time, and how can film (and film alone) manipulate light and, by extension, perception?

If absolute cinema too still suggested that film was above all an artform that records (light, contrast, etc.), Man Ray's Dadaist *Retour à la raison* (Return to Reason, 1923, Fig. 22) went a step further by showing that the artform also has its own material system. Mingling everyday objects, texts and female nudes, Ray's film stands out mainly for its use of so-called photograms. A *photogram* (or *rayograph*, as Ray called it) is a form of cameraless photography: images here are made by placing objects directly onto the surface of photographic paper or another light-sensitive material and then exposing it to light. (German Dadaist Christian Schad employed a similar procedure in photography, calling it the *Schadograph*.) In *Retour à la raison*, Ray also applied this process to the light-sensitive film roll, sprinkling salt and pepper, nails and pins on it and then exposing the roll to light. The result is a strange sequence of dots and shapes in movement foregrounding the materiality of the art of film. Of course, Ray's *Retour à la raison* is a great film. Yet was it really more specific, more pure or more absolute, than the others discussed above?

In avant-garde dance we note a similar quest for the artform's specifics. Just as with film this did not lead to a consensus, but it certainly changed dance for good. Early dance reformers such as Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan, to

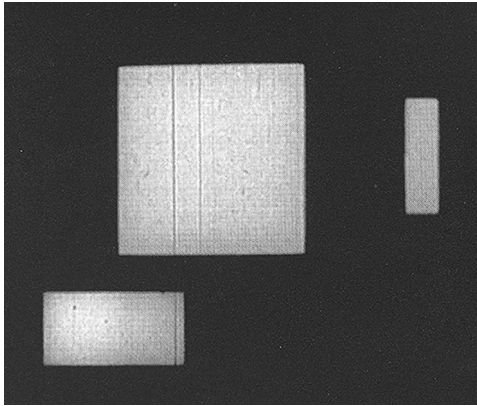


Figure 21 A still image from the first part of Dadaist Hans Richter's *Film ist Rhythmus* (Film is Rhythm, 1921), later retitled *Rhythmus 21*, with white geometrical shapes on black. This silent film was shot on 35 mm film and lasts about three minutes.

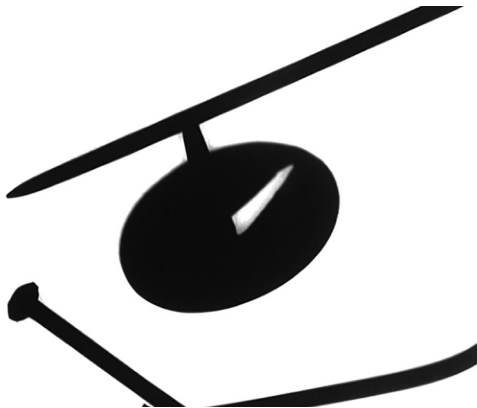


Figure 22 Still from the film *Retour à la raison* (Return to Reason, 1923) by Man Ray showing the photograph or Rayograph technique being applied to the moving image. This silent film made in France was shot on 35 mm film and lasts about two minutes. It premiered during a soirée of the Parisian Dadaists.

name but two, had already opened up new possibilities for a modern dance art. Like these reformers, avant-gardists desired to go against what they saw as the constrictive rules and the limited set of moves dictated by classical ballet. A battery of choreographers and dance practitioners – including Expressionists Valeska Gert, Kurt Jooss and Jean Weidt, Constructivists Oskar Schlemmer and Marguerite Acarin (Akarova), Futurists Valentine de Saint-Point and many others – paid attention to the rhythmic and mobile signifying material specific to dance. Unmatched in this respect was the pursuit of the objective, inner laws of dance by Rudolf von Laban from the late 1900s onwards. The moving dancer's body was the core of dance to Laban, and so he set out to analyse and objectify how the human body could express subjective experiences. His Expressionist system of *choreology* tried to show how dancers – by pulling and pushing and by deploying bodily tension and release, lightness and weight, strength and resistance, but also through interactions with other dancers in space and time – could come to represent certain archetypal human feelings,

attitudes or thoughts. One of Laban's most significant contributions to dance was his *kinetography* launched in 1928. This dance notation system, also known as Labanotation, is still used today as one of the primary movement notation systems in dance. In the 1920s, Laban thus arrived at formalising what he in turn called 'absolute' or *free dance*; free because in his model dance no longer told a narrative, it was reduced to a purely kinetic art of spatial movement.

Laban also set up his own schools and trained dozens of famous dancers throughout his life. Among his most brilliant students was Mary Wigman, who in turn launched her own dance school and whose *Hexentanz* (Witch Dance, 1914, see Fig. 23) is often referred to as a prime example of Expressionist dance as this performance managed to cast outward intense, inner emotions that appeared to have a near-universal, mythic quality. Dadaists Sophie Täuber (yet another student of Laban), Emmy Hennings, Georg Grosz and Raoul Hausmann, among others, regularly performed improvised dances as



Figure 23 Photograph of Expressionist choreographer and dancer Mary Wigman performing her *Hexentanz II* (Witch Dance II, 1926). A former student of Rudolf von Laban, Wigman was a pioneer in Expressionist *Ausdruckstanz* (dance of expression or expressive dance). Seeking to unsettle herself as well as her audience, Wigman's performances tried to externalise the spirit, mind and imagination in complete disregard of classical ballet's (gendered) conventions. In an earlier version of this dance (premiered in 1914), she performed without a mask, using only her body as a means of expression.

well. They frequently used masks as well as puppets to carve out their own version of pure dance. Here, dance was not so much conceived as leading to intense emotional expression but to questioning the body as such. Masks and puppets are abstractions of the body – which in premodern ritual also alluded to bodily transcendence and subjection to higher powers. Dada dance's move towards abstraction, and its exploration of prostheses-like objects such as masks and manipulable puppets, show how dance here was elevated to an art studying the boundaries of the self and the body's integrity, which in Laban's view went by and large uncontested.

As various other parts of this book demonstrate, in theatre and architecture, and in painting and sculpture too, the strategy of differentiation led to an intricate search for what made these arts specific. The complex theorisation of the line, geometrical shapes, colour and light in various isms manifests how the avant-gardes' exploits in the visual arts, for example, were also marked by constant calls for purism. *Purism* in fact became the name of an avant-garde ism launched by Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, better known as Le Corbusier, in their *Après le cubisme* (After Cubism, 1918). This movement demanded a return to the essentials of the visual arts, which according to the luminaries of Purism were abstract, logical and geometrical shapes as well as pure and elementary colours. As Purism evinces, tactics of differentiation often moved in the direction of *non-objective abstraction* – 'non-objective' because abstraction more generally can also signify a process whereby, for example, an image of a tree is abstracted until it comes to resemble the more structured patterns of Mondrian's early abstract tree paintings; here, a figural depiction of reality is simplified and made abstract; non-objective abstraction, by contrast, does not build on a figural image of reality, but on purely abstract visual matter. Be that as it may, in the visual arts, theatre and architecture as well the strategy of differentiation did not lead to a single definition of each art. Here too artists agreed on the strategy but then went on to explore divergent tactics.

Needless to add, perhaps, it is of key significance that we keep in mind that the strategy of differentiation, as it unfolded in all the individual arts, figured within the more encompassing, interartistic project of a Total Art. Indeed, even those advocating non-objective abstraction often entered into collaboration with others or practised various arts. It is no coincidence, for instance, that the Purist Le Corbusier, while best known today for his architectural designs, was also a prolific painter. Rudolf von Laban, to give just one more example of an artist discussed above, was trained as an architect and moved to dance, without any formal education in the discipline, because he became interested in bodily movement through space. In short, exploring tactics of differentiation did not exclude interartistic experiment; quite the opposite as from its inception differentiation was part of the Total Art adventure. Nonetheless, the intrinsic

value of the avant-gardes' concerted effort to circumscribe the arts by their specific materials cannot be stressed enough. By grace of this effort the European avant-gardes to this day play a vital role in the history of all the individual arts. Put simply, they ended up testing both the internal possibilities as well as the external limits of the fabric of each individual art. Above all, their exciting journey thereby raised awareness about the basic components of each artistic discipline, and even of each individual work. Indeed, all avant-garde works to some degree estrange us by making us aware of the materials they are composed of (language, colour, sound, etc.) – elements we thought to know rather well as they also fill our everyday lives but which avant-garde works challenge us to scrutinise anew. This in turn teaches us a lesson about how to approach an avant-garde work when we first encounter it.

Some avant-gardists stated that the aim of their investigation was to maximally foreground the material *surface* of each artform (as opposed to its contents or depth, the underlying meaning). The first thing to do when confronted with an avant-garde work, then, is not to ask what it is about but to simply give free reign to the senses, to see, to listen or to feel the work, and to trace how it manipulates its material. In his seminal *La Deshumanización del Arte* (The Dehumanisation of Art, 1925), one of the first theories of the avant-gardes, José Ortega y Gasset pitted the avant-gardes against nineteenth-century Realist art. When we read a novel by Honoré de Balzac or look at a painting by Gustave Courbet, Ortega claimed, we approach these works as windows onto a world. As in an illusion we look through the work at the world it evokes. The avant-gardes, Ortega noted, dissuade us from looking *through* the window and demand that we first look *at* it. They ask us to focus on the pane of glass itself, as a medium or texture that generates its own meanings. All good interpretations of avant-garde works, in sum, take off with what we could call a *formalist moment*: we read for form and contemplate how it works the fabric or material. The more we practise our sensibility for formal technique, the better interpreters we become. But of course that is not the whole story.

Combination

It is important to observe that the avant-gardes' strategy of differentiation was in part prompted by the many new media and technologies that became available in the first decades of the twentieth century. The period in which the avant-gardes thrived was marked by the introduction or proliferation of many new media which also questioned complacent artistic categories. Photography, for example, had been around for almost a century but it was only commercialised from the turn of the century onwards in most parts of Europe. As this new technology spread into culture at large, it came to challenge both painters

and art photographers. For painters the question was obvious: why paint ‘realistically’ if photography already does that? Put differently: what was the surplus value of the art of painting in light of the possibilities photography offered to laymen? Avant-garde photographers like Man Ray, similarly, began to wonder how the *art* of photography was to look now that the medium was also available to a growing group of amateur photographers. Experiments with photograms from this perspective proved a clever response to this question. Sometimes, new technologies led to vaguer responses. Gustave Eiffel’s still magnificent tower in Paris became an instrument of wireless telegraphy (TSF) in the 1900s, making André Breton, among others, contemplate the possibility of one day communicating his art through airwaves as well. (And, sure enough, the avant-garde radio play was to make this happen.) While the phonograph and its successor, the gramophone, had been invented already in the nineteenth century, in most parts of Europe these sound recording media only became affordable and thus widely accessible in the first decades of the twentieth century. The phonograph confronted people with the possibility of severing the age-old link between the human body and the voice, making sound an autonomous and reproducible entity. That at exactly the same time avant-garde writers started to experiment with pure sound in poetry is no coincidence. Radio found a proper place in culture only from the 1920s onwards, the same decade in which the talkies gradually began to push to the background the popular pastime of silent film. All these media, in short, recalibrated sensory experience and further led to a growing awareness of the autonomy and malleability of the material with which artists worked on a daily basis.

Yet the same media also made felt how porous the divides between the different arts really were. Phonographs could record music, drama and poetry readings. Film registered everything visible. Radio waves, like electricity, were invisible, but they could traverse all of space unhindered. In the face of such new technological syntheses and possibilities, many thought that it made little sense to hold on to the partitions between the arts. In their *Buch neuer Künstler* (Book of New Artists, 1922) Hungarians Lajos Kassák and László Moholy-Nagy implied as much. A visual essay taking stock of the most important achievements of the avant-gardes so far by way of photographic reproductions of works, the book also gave a place to new technologies, further including photographs of film cameras, power pylons and more. In his short introduction to the book Kassák observed how technological advances had further ‘knocked the precision scales of aesthetics out of the artist’s hand’,¹⁰ showing how hybrid and at times heterogeneous is the material that all artforms are made of. Combination, a search for a productive middle ground between totalisation and differentiation, accordingly proved inevitable.

The Ukrainian-born Alexander Archipenko offers a good example of the strategy of combination. Already in the early 1910s he began to consider what Cubism in sculpture could look like and launched the notion of *sculpto-painting* (see also Fig. 25). Leaving behind the conventions in sculpture of modelling and carving (instead nailing, gluing and stitching sculpture parts together), and introducing unusual materials like Bakelite and Formica, Archipenko created three-dimensional Cubist representations of human figures which appeared to come out of paintings. Interestingly, the figures often left the space of limbs blank, sketching only contours, or they fractured the body parts into various panes so as to bend perspective and to suggest movement. In various of his sculpto-paintings, moreover, Archipenko used several colours of paint, further introducing different coloured patches on flat, concave and convex surfaces. From Archipenko it is only a small step to El Lissitzky's Suprematist *Proun*, probably an acronym, in Russian, for the 'project for the affirmation of the new'. Lissitzky, like Archipenko, desired that painting gained three dimensions. He used the term Proun for works that expressed his ideal, and for him this meant moving from painting into architecture. For the *Great Berlin Art Exhibition* in 1923 he designed a *Prounenraum* or Proun-room, which was filled with exemplars of his project (see Fig. 24). Looking closely, we see how paintings here intervene in architecture, literally intruding and affecting the space that surrounds them.

Clearly at work here is the view that all arts, when we look at their basic elements, tend to have fuzzy boundaries that always make the arts overlap

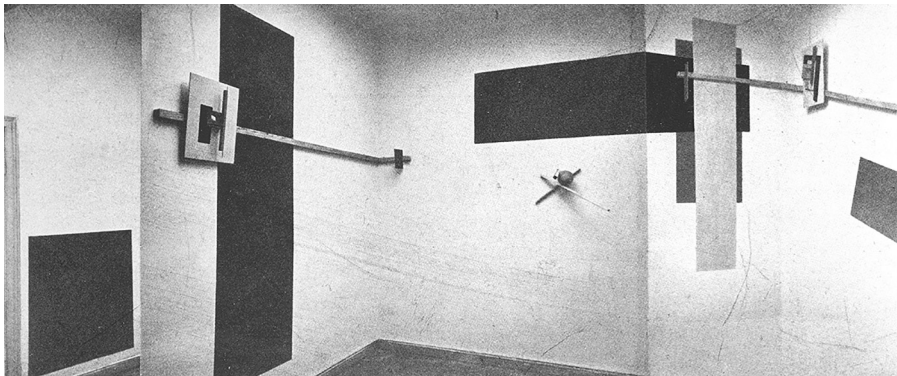


Figure 24 Period photograph of the *Prounenraum* (Proun-room) which El Lissitzky created in 1923 for the *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung* (Great Berlin Art Exhibition). The *Proun* (pronounced *pro-oon*) works are refined, non-objective abstractions consisting of different colours, shapes, lines and materials. Here the Prouns end up upsetting viewers' experience of space; extending around corners and intruding the room, the works lead us to believe that gravity no longer holds.

partly with one another. This insight brought Archipenko and Lissitzky to blending two artforms which had been around for a long time (painting and sculpture, architecture and painting). Yet the avant-gardes' strategy of combination stands out the most perhaps because it also ended up advancing new genres, protocols and techniques, which often incorporated novel media and technologies as well. Take the many instances of *assemblage*, a term launched only in the 1950s by Jean Dubuffet to denote both a technique and a distinct visual art genre that already figured widely in the artistic production of the European avant-gardes. Assemblages are three-dimensional artworks or sculptures that are composed of 'found' objects (*objets trouvés* in French) arranged in such a way that they create a new piece of art. The objects used can be anything from man-made to organic material. Only a minimal amount of manipulation of the separate objects is often involved; assemblage is above all the art of arranging and assembling the parts as they are found. Cubists Picasso and Georges Braque already delved into assemblage in the early 1910s. The Dadaists excelled at it as well. A rather famous Dadaist assemblage is that of Austrian Raoul Hausmann: *Der Geist Unserer Zeit – Mechanischer Kopf* (Mechanical Head [The Spirit of Our Age], ca. 1920, see Plate 9). Hausmann, it should be noted, was a true master when it came to combination. We already saw that he was also a dancer, but he was a poet and a visual artist too. He further invented the so-called *optophone*. First announced in 1922, the optophone was to be a machine that could convert, not unlike primitive television, sound into light and vice versa. Hausmann patented his intricate plan for such a machine in 1936 after years of research. Although he never quite managed to realise his plans, Hausmann exhibits how the use of new (in this case even inexistent) technologies and media amounted to a tactic of combination as well. For people like Hausmann, an artist was to be free from any concern with the officially institutionalised arts. Machines, media, mechanical contraptions, literally everything, could be used to innovate art.

If Hausmann's *Mechanischer Kopf* is of a modest size, the assemblages of Kurt Schwitters often gained architectural proportions. Schwitters called his assemblages *Merzbilder*, derived from the German word 'Kommerz' (commerce, as in trade) which had been on a fragment of an advertisement in his first work, and *Bilder* (pictures). *Merz* also became the name of a periodical Schwitters used to promote his views. This magazine was launched in 1923, the same year that work began in his house in Hannover on what he called *Merzbau*: in several rooms he started to decorate his house with assemblages that not only consisted of found materials carefully arranged but also of artworks by Dadaists Hannah Höch, Sophie Täuber and Hausmann. Photographs of this adventure (see Plate 11) show what it must have been like to live in this impressive assembled artwork.

Collage was another genre and technique promoted by examining the strategy of combination. The (sometimes subtle) difference between a collage and an assemblage is a spatial one: collages are two-dimensional. Take Slovenian Srečko Kosovel's wonderful *Leteča ladja* (Flying Ship, ca. 1926, Plate 23). As this work demonstrates, collages are made of flat materials glued onto a surface – the term derives from the French 'coller', to glue. In Kosovel's collage, cut-out snippets from newspapers and red and green coloured paper shapes are combined to form a visual poem. Yet collages do not necessarily amount to poetry or literature. In Georges Braque's so-called *papier-collé*, a special variant of collage labelled as such because it uses only paper, text is often of little significance. In his *papier-collé* *Compotier et verre* (Fruit Dish and Glass, 1912, Plate 5), for example, the words 'Bar' and 'Ale' are clearly visible and guide our interpretation, but what strikes first and foremost is Braque's use of the texture of faux-bois paper to suggest a sort of Cubist *trompe-l'oeil*. Another type of collage often distinguished is the so-called *photomontage*, which primarily uses photographs. Hannah Höch's famous photomontages illustrate how the avant-gardes elevated this protocol or technique as well to a veritable genre in its own right. Höch's impressive *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser Dada die letzte weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands* (Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany, 1919–20, Plate 13), which spans almost a square metre, is an amazing exhibit. Here, we encounter Albert Einstein, modern technologies, headless dancers, the floating head of Käthe Kollwitz (the first woman teacher of art in the Berlin Art Academy) and other images taken from newspapers of modern, independent women. A true battle of the sexes and perhaps also a programme for a new gender politics is represented here, as shown more elaborately in Part II of this book.

By leaving behind the search for the individual arts' specificity and by letting go of the perhaps all too ambitious plan of subsuming all the arts under one artform, those exploring the strategy of combination often ended up innovating art the most. The 'minor' visual art genres, as we could call them, of assemblage and collage, were matched by at least as many 'minor' genres in literature, for instance, many of which sought to combine literature and music or poetry and the visual arts. There were, in random order: the avant-garde children's book (represented, among others, by El Lissitzky's *Pro dva kvadrata* [Fig. 1] and *Die Scheuche* [The Scarecrow, 1925], made by Kurt Schwitters, Käthe Steinitz and Theo van Doesburg), countless typographical advances (from Herbert Bayer's work in the Bauhaus, which led to the Universal and Bauhaus typefaces, to Jan Tschichold's balanced page designs), Marcel Duchamp's early mail-art, the artist book (such as *Pomada*, illustrated by Mikhail Larionov, or *La Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jehanne de France*

by poet Blaise Cendrars and painter Sonia Delaunay), the early ‘photo novel’ (as presented by André Breton’s novel *Nadja* [1928], illustrated by photographer Brassai), the early graphic novel (inaugurated, among others, by Max Ernst’s Surrealist book *Les femmes 100 têtes* [100 Headless Women, 1929]), the avant-garde radio play (as developed by Bertolt Brecht, Robert Desnos and others), and the declamation of texts as made into a separate and highly codified artform by Marinetti.

As this extraordinary list reveals, collaboration between artists from different backgrounds only added to the success of the strategy of combination. Indeed, we could easily produce similar lists of ‘minor’ genres combining other arts and creators. The strategy of combination thus proved perhaps the most productive, not least because a degree of combination is always present in tactics of totalisation or differentiation as well. Hence, if the strategies of totalisation, differentiation and combination are obviously distinct, they also partly overlap. It is imperative to specify this, because while these strategies allow us to order the total of the avant-gardes’ production in all the arts, they should also be treated with caution when it comes to individual artists. Certain creators tried out all three strategies at different stages, or simultaneously explored tactics of differentiation in one art, advocated totalisation through another, and combined still two other artforms or media. For avant-gardists the main thing was to stay on the move, and to keep at the quest for specimens of the Total Art. Their work correspondingly demands agile and flexible students who love a good surprise.

Types of the Real

At least two figures looked rather sceptical at all this experimental energy criss-crossing Europe: Marcel Duchamp and Georges Bataille. For Bataille, editor of the Surrealist magazine *Documents: doctrines, archéologie, beaux-arts, ethnographie* (1929–31), avant-gardists, whether opting for totalisation, differentiation or combination, focused far too much on form. Many things in the universe do not have a fixed or concrete form, Bataille argued: ideas, spittle, the universe itself . . . Most things, in sum, are *informe* or formless. The task of avant-gardists, according to Bataille, was thus to represent the formless, not to give it a definitive shape but so as to emancipate it from the dictate of form, at all cost and by all means. For Duchamp fellow avant-gardists focused far too much on the fabrics and media they worked with, always putting the material first and only then contemplating the ideas they wished to flesh out through that material. Duchamp flipped this order on its head. The idea had to come first, he averred, and only then was an artist to select his or her material or medium. Skills and techniques specific to the individual arts or even

to their combination, accordingly, were of secondary importance. With this view Duchamp prefigured the conceptual art that would get into its stride only after the Second World War. His conviction also made him produce one of the masterpieces of the avant-gardes: *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even), also known as *Le Grand verre* (The Large Glass, see Plate 12). In 1923 Duchamp called this work definitively unfinished. Ideas just kept coming and so the work could never settle in a final form. To our present purpose, Bataille's and Duchamp's critiques of the avant-gardes' logic (form and material first, then the formless idea) are of special interest because they unearth a final issue that needs to be tackled in closing: with all the talk about material and form, what were the ideas, the contents of avant-garde Total Art? Was there consensus on what the new art was to be about?

Avant-gardists agreed on one thing: the new art had to be timely and real. Superficially this meant a (by no means universal) preference for distinctly modern topics (technology and machines, metropolitan life, etc.), but at a deeper level this agreement in turn yielded three gradually different positions. First, a minority upheld the radical view that works should not at all refer to the outside world surrounding art. Works were just to signify themselves. Unsurprisingly, this was a view upheld especially by those promoting the strategy of differentiation and specifically those artists who championed non-objective abstraction. In 1930, the group *Art Concret*, founded in Paris by Theo van Doesburg after De Stijl disbanded, organised an exhibition in Stockholm entitled *AC: Internationell utställning av postkubistisk konst* (International Exhibition of Post-Cubist Art). It was curated by Swedish painter Otto Gustaf Carlsund. In the founding manifesto of this short-lived group, 'Base de la Peinture Concrète' (The Basis of Concrete Painting, 1930), the signatories claimed that 'concrete' or abstract art did not derive from nature, but from the human spirit or mind. Consequently, art did not have to represent the world at all; it was to draw attention only to itself as an autonomous entity (see Plate 19). Less radical were two other groups launched in Paris: *Cercle et Carré* (Circle and Square, founded in 1929 by Belgian Michel Seuphor among others) and *Abstraction-Création*, which absorbed the former when established by Belgian visual artist Georges Vantongerloo. Founding members of Abstraction-Création included the Czech František Kupka, former Cubist Albert Gleizes and former Dadaist Hans Arp, yet by the mid-1930s Abstraction-Création counted about 400 visual artists, all producing non-figurative art. Their views differed widely, and many believed that the Art Concret group had been wrong in presuming that even the most abstract art does not represent anything beyond itself. Did the Art Concret manifesto not say that their painting sprang from the

mind? And so, did their painting not also represent certain thoughts or affects? Are not all artworks, even a monochrome, inevitably subjected to interpretation and reference of some kind?

If this first, *non-representational* position, in sum, argued that the new Total Art could be real only by referring to itself as real and present, others believed that works were above all to represent those aspects of the world which were imperceptible through other technologies, media or the human senses. Avant-garde art was not to show the world as it could be or had been seen, but as it really was at a deeper and hidden level. As Swiss avant-gardist Paul Klee put it in ‘Schöpferische Konfession’ (Creative Credo, 1920): ‘Art does not reproduce the visible; rather, it makes visible.’¹¹ This second and by far most common position among artists was grounded on the suspicion that the world is not what people made it out to be. Put differently, existing modes of representation (in conventional art, other media but also within culture at large) never really unearthed reality as such. Obviously, this conviction was a stimulus to many artists to come up with novel modes of representation and thus often fuelled experimentation. This position took on various guises, many of which are discussed elsewhere in this book, ranging from works informed by advances in science (the so-called fourth dimension), the occult and the esoteric, as well as by philosophy. For the sake of brevity, however, let us here limit ourselves to the representation of the unconscious and subconscious as a case in point. Making these invisible aspects of human nature tangible was a major concern for many avant-gardists, and not just within literature, where the novel of course had long granted readers a peek at characters’ roaming thoughts. How could art work its material to make these aspects concrete?

Expressionists had their answer at the ready. Their basic, late-Romanticist view was an expressivist one, that is they believed that all art was to be an intense expression of its maker’s emotion. A successful work, accordingly, was attained when an artist could mould his or her material so that a viewer, witnessing the end result, could trace the unique and intense emotion through the form it took. No one confronted with a painting by Oskar Kokoschka, for example, will fail to recognise the intense anguish and disgust on display. Kokoschka’s 1909 play, *Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen* (Murder, Women’s Hope, see Fig. 6), often termed the first Expressionist drama, similarly overloads us with an excess of emotion. The play portrays a battle between a man and a woman, with the man ending up slaughtering everyone around. Reducing characters to archetypal, mythic types, and deploying declamatory dialogue and choral effects, *Mörder* conveys as much through visual effects as it does verbally. The play, moreover, aspired to universality as well in that its mythic composition implied that, unconsciously, all men and women are part of the same perennial, emotionally violent struggle of the sexes. (Compare

Kokoschka's view of gender relations with that of Hannah Höch discussed above, and you will instantly know what Höch thought of Kokoschka.) Inchoate emotional patterns aspiring to universality equally abound in the Expressionist poetry of Else Lasker-Schüler, Georg Heym, Franz Werfel or Georg Trakl. Casting teenage angst and hope for salvation in a powerful verbal mould, their work at times reads like a gush of affect, half consciously worked through, in part left latent, unsaid, but felt nevertheless.

The Surrealist technique of *écriture automatique*, building on the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, sought to bring out the invisible workings of the human subconscious. Kindred techniques were developed to this aim in the Surrealist visual arts as well. Max Ernst in particular upheld that painting too could bring to the fore the subconscious, in 1925 introducing the technique of *frottage*. Frottage (from the French 'frotter', to rub) is an elementary procedure: the artist takes a drawing tool and rubs it on paper over a randomly chosen, uneven surface. The result on paper can be left as such, cut out and used in associative collages, or it can simply be used to look at: the longer we stare at an indeterminate shape, the likelier it becomes that our gaze starts to see (or thinks to be seeing) vaguely familiar shapes, which Surrealists believed to emanate from our subconscious. The so-called *paranoia-critical method* put forth by Salvador Dalí in the 1930s (see Plate 21), and of later significance in the development of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, offers an extreme case of this conviction. Dalí believed that by putting his own self-induced delirious associations on canvas he could in turn achieve a sort of mental disintegration of the viewer's subjectivity, tapping into his or her subconscious state as well. Experiments in film, such as those by POOL group representative Kenneth Macpherson, similarly tried to manipulate the moving image in such a way as to bring out the invisible, subconscious mental life of characters. In the film *Borderline* (1930), for example, Macpherson among others employed stroboscopic image flickering to alert viewers that they were about to witness a character's mental state.

For some, however, this second position – which sought to bring out the *unrepresented* and maintained that avant-garde art was to be real by bringing out what could not be registered without artistic intervention – did not go far enough either. A small group, mainly those associated with the late avant-garde phenomena of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, Precisionism or Verism, advocated that the avant-garde was to deploy techniques from its experimental repertoire to the aim of representing everyday reality as it readily could be perceived, but with more exactitude and without emotion. Whether we consider the Verist paintings of Otto Dix, Ilya Ehrenburg's 'industrial novel' *10 PS. Das Leben der Autos* (10HP. The Life of Cars, 1930, original in Russian in 1929), or Austrian Georg Wilhelm Pabst's film *Die freudlose Gasse* (Joyless Street, 1925), the world

evoked here leaves little to the imagination. Often adopted by artists wishing to explicitly criticise forms of social injustice, works informed by this third position of *mimetic* representation at best leave us with a desire to live in a better or more just world. Too real, perhaps, showing us with precision what is wrong, such works appear to have been designed to prod us into action.

As with the three strategies discussed earlier, we should be careful not to reduce the oeuvre of individual artists in whatever artform(s) to one of these three positions. More than once we find that their experiments incited them to adopt various positions on this scale ranging from uncompromising non-objective abstraction to the hyper-mimetic. More importantly, these three positions also give us a set of tools with which to move beyond the formalist moment in interpreting individual works. Once we have scrutinised the material turned form, or, using Ortega's metaphor, have looked closely at the window pane and at how it constitutes its own meanings, the next step in interpreting involves a *critical moment*. As will be clear by now, it is no exaggeration to say that the avant-gardes' formal experiments and their recalibration of the individual arts in a Total Art amounted to a modification of the very modes with which we perceive the world through art. Articulating our senses in hybrid coalitions, avant-garde works ask us to consider the world anew. In all the artforms they practised they criticised convention and in an assortment of ways they sought to put forth an alternative language for their discipline. As a rule, therefore, the trick is, as the French say, to be on the *qui vive*, that is, to be alert and vigilant. Interpreting a work beyond its confines requires that we internalise some of the suspicion of the work itself, try to ascertain what exactly its formal design opposes, and what it offers as an alternative instead. For, ultimately, all avant-garde works, the entire project of a Total Art, manifest that art is never neutral terrain. It is indeed a window onto the world, it affects our perception and experience of reality, and thus by changing art even those advocating abstraction believed to be changing the world as well.

Box 2: Cubisms

The various Cubisms in Europe shared a particular way of imagining (visual) perception. A movement begun in painting, Cubism rejected the time-honoured tradition to imitate nature's forms, textures, colours and spaces, and, instead, embraced the idea that painting can present a reality of its own. (In so doing, it was in part responding to the rise of art photography, which was able to copy nature with great accuracy.) Following the example of, among others, Paul Cézanne, this translated itself in the rejection of traditional linear perspective, which had dominated ever since the Renaissance and which Cubists thought to be artificial. Instead, they set out to show objects as they really are when seen from a multitude of angles or viewpoints. Cubist painting broke up subjects (be it an object, a person or a landscape) and reassembled them so as to turn them into partly abstracted forms, flattening the picture plane to a two-dimensional surface while also representing subjects in a greater context. The simultaneity of multiple viewpoints and a mobile perspective can be encountered in all Cubist works.

After a group exhibition in Paris generated public controversy in 1911, the term Cubism became widely used throughout Europe and beyond. Two important texts assisted in the spread of the name. First, the elaborate manifesto *Du 'cubisme'* (note the quotation marks) written by Cubist painters Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger. This text was first published in 1912 and a year later was translated into English and Russian; other languages soon followed. Second, poet and art critic Guillaume Apollinaire's collection of essays, *Les peintres cubistes* (The Cubist Painters, 1913).

If the term Cubism began to be used widely only in the 1910s, the first signs of Cubism can be located earlier. Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907, Plate 4) is often called a proto-Cubist work, as its five female nudes appear fractured and angularly shaped. Picasso's work from this point onwards, along with that of Georges Braque and Juan Gris, is often said to have inaugurated the *analytical phase* of Cubism (1907–12), during which a limited (dark) colour palette was used with minor tonal variation to give shape to subjects whose facets were carefully studied, then broken up into parts, and finally reassembled in a flat grid or diagram that frequently resembled a crystal-like surface. After 1912 the same Cubists took a new direction, entering a more playful, so-called *synthetic phase*. Here, brighter colours and much simpler lines and shapes were introduced. Subjects were now most often constructed from the imagination or memory, and collage was introduced alongside the use of paint and charcoal. Often, these mixed media were employed to mimic the surface of objects to a *trompe-l'oeil* effect.

This resulted in multi-textured collages, such as Braque's *Compotier et verre* (Fruit Dish and Glass, 1912, see Plate 5).

These two phases do not hold for most other Cubists, however, who during the 1910s and 1920s in Paris followed different routes that were nonetheless related to those taken by Picasso, Braque and Gris. From 1911 onwards, the *Puteaux group* (named after the Parisian district of Puteaux and also known as the *Section d'Or*), with Metzinger, Gleizes, Fernand Léger, Robert Delaunay, Henri le Fauconnier, Marie Laurencin, Pica-bia, the brothers Jacques Villon, Raymond Duchamp-Villon and Marcel Duchamp, ventured into simultaneous multi-perspectival experimentation, as did painters André Lhote, František Kupka, Léopold Survage, Diego Rivera, Gino Severini and María Blanchard, among others. Together with sculptors Alexander Archipenko (Fig. 25), Ossip Zadkine, Henri Laurens and Jacques Lipschitz, this highly international set of artists put forth a variety of Cubisms. Apollinaire in his above-mentioned book recognised how some of these Cubists, for instance, contrary to Picasso, Braque and Gris, also explored abstraction, coining the label *Orphism* for these artists, who included Robert and Sonia (Terk) Delaunay and Kupka (see Plate 6). Focusing on the perception and function of colour rather than subjects themselves, the lyrical abstraction of the Delaunays – also called *Simultaneism* – according to Apollinaire drew entirely on the imagination of its makers who like Orphic bards fleshed out an alternative reality.

Apollinaire was well placed to make such an assertion, as he was not only friendly with most Cubists in Paris but, like poets Blaise Cendrars,



Figure 25 Alexander Archipenko's bronze sculpture *Tête. Construction aux plans entrecoupés* (Head. Construction with Crossing Planes, 1913). In the early 1910s, Archipenko, a member of the Puteaux group, experimented with ways of making Cubism three-dimensional in sculpture. In this work Archipenko began with the salient visual features of a woman's head viewed from various angles, subsequently reducing them to a limited number of planes intersecting in a forceful whole.

Max Jacob, Pierre Reverdy, André Salmon and Jean Cocteau, he also developed a poetic variant of Cubism himself. In line with Cubist collages, for example, Apollinaire explored the *calligram* – a form of graphic poetry in which the visual organisation of language on the page forms an image that is also expressed by the words that make up the image. Other poems by Apollinaire brought verbal collages of postcards, telegrams and letters. An example of poetic Orphic Cubism is Cendrars' poem 'Contrastes' (written ca. 1913, yet published in the poetry volume *Dix-neuf poèmes élastiques* [Nineteen Elastic Poems], 1919). Composed in free verse, this short poem collates a variety of unusual perspectives on Parisian city life – it describes, for instance, a small child playing with the immense Arc de Triomphe – and every phrase in the poem relates to the previous one by contrasting associations – one colour leads to another, things seen turn into sounds, drinks become solid foods, etc. The poem as a whole evokes a city in which all things are sensed simultaneously, and a new experience of time and reality takes root.

Already in the early 1910s, Cubist groups could be found throughout Europe, and as with all other isms these groups clearly made Cubism their own. Around 1910, large contingents of artists from Prague travelled to Paris and upon their return began to flesh out a distinct Cubo-Expressionism in their work. This entailed a concern with typical Expressionist themes and experiences expressed in the formal language of analytical Cubism. The sculpture of Otto Gutfreund or the painting of Bohumil Kubišta, for example, were committed to the anxious expression of the psyche using Cubist techniques. The Prague-based Cubist Skupina výtvarných umělců (Fine Arts Group), by contrast, was primarily concerned with architecture and explored how façades, interiors and furniture could be developed along Cubist lines. This brought about, among others, highly ornamental, crystal-like, seemingly 'diamond-cut' façades that recalled late Gothic architecture, and newly shaped doors as well as hexagonal windows. After the First World War, artists here also launched what they called *Rondocubism*, an architectural style that further introduced round shapes in Cubist architecture. Uniting their experiments was a striving to make a dynamic living environment that always looked differently depending on people's viewpoint and location in space.

Shattering or fragmenting perception, rendering multiple perspectives, orienting the observer towards the surface and material of the artwork, moving in and out of recognisable representation, Cubism by the 1920s had spread to the far corners of Europe, from the Riga Artists' Group in Latvia to Britain, where Ben Nicholson almost singlehandedly

advanced Cubism's penchant for abstraction. Cubism moved into film with Fernand Léger's famous *Ballet mécanique* (1924) and, early on, into the performing arts with the ballet *Parade* (1913), both discussed elsewhere in this book. Cubism's seemingly boundless growth and proliferation were questioned already in 1918 by artists Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret (Le Corbusier) in their book *Après le cubisme* (After Cubism). In their journal *L'Esprit nouveau* (1920–5) they went on to argue for a clean and pure Cubism, dubbed Purism, which had to restore order and steer away from the overly strange as well as complete abstraction. Demanding precision, the Purism of Ozenfant and Le Corbusier marked how Cubism in France had lost momentum by 1920, yet this did not stop the Cubist project from further expanding and mutating elsewhere in Europe during the 1920s and beyond.

Chapter 3

Anti-Art, Non-Art, Art!

Shortly after Marcel Duchamp arrived in the USA in 1915, he went to a hardware store, bought a snow shovel, and added an inscription: *In Advance of a Broken Arm* / [from] Marcel Duchamp. He then hung the snow shovel from the ceiling of his New York studio (Fig. 26), and so created what was to become known as the first American *readymade* – Duchamp had produced several before in Paris. People visiting his studio either ignored the shovel – his workspace was notoriously untidy – or, when they took notice of it and asked the artist about it, were told that it was of no importance. Duchamp, it seems, felt uncertain about this work, and perhaps even feared that people would not consider it worthy of the label ‘art’. To us today, there is no doubt that such and other avant-garde works are important *as art*. Yet the audiences that originally responded to the avant-gardes were rather divided about the matter. While some instantly recognised the revolutionary nature of the avant-gardes’ work, others plainly characterised it as rubbish. This chapter aims to show that much is to be gained from returning to the public’s original response to the avant-gardes. For not only does this allow us to better understand how the avant-gardes related to and dealt with their historical audiences, but the public’s mixed reaction also permits us to highlight these young artists’ joint and incredibly ambitious project of transforming the whole of life through their new art.

Audience Responses

From the very beginning the European avant-gardes were able to fall back on a body of wealthy collectors, bibliophiles and maecenases. These included the German Harry Graf (Count) Kessler, the Austrian Wittgensteins, the Czech Vincenc Kramář, the Spaniard Santiago Segura, Jacques Doucet in France, Sergei Shchukin in Russia, and the Steins and Arensbergs in the USA. At a time when big European museums like the Louvre still turned up their noses at avant-garde art, Shchukin, for instance, bought about fifty works by Picasso and in total acquired about 260 Post-Impressionist and Fauvist pieces which all came to decorate his palatial home in Moscow. French fashion designer Doucet, to take another example, was an avid collector of modern art and one

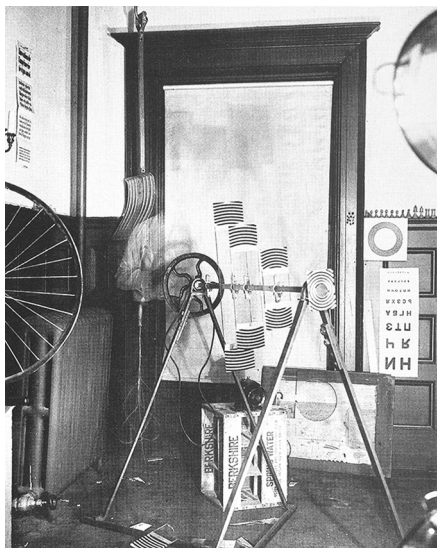


Figure 26 A 1920 photograph by Man Ray of Duchamp standing behind his *Rotary Glass Plates*, an early work of kinetic art (centre). While capturing a spectral image of Duchamp in his studio in New York, this photograph also shows various other works by the artist, including his 1913 readymade *Roue de bicyclette* (Bicycle Wheel), left. Hanging from the ceiling a shovel: the readymade with the humorous title *In Advance of a Broken Arm* / [from] Marcel Duchamp (1915).

of the first to recognise the value of writers' manuscripts – he bought them in large numbers. Like philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein did with German-language Expressionist poets, Doucet also financially supported French avant-garde writers such as André Breton, Louis Aragon and Max Jacob. Doucet acquired many works directly from artists, and at the end of his life donated most of his vast collection of (artist) books and paintings to the French nation. Patrons such as Doucet in various ways helped avant-gardists to develop their careers. Like other collectors Doucet of course also speculated that some of his investments would one day yield a profit on the art market. In 1924, for instance, he bought Picasso's proto-Cubist *Les Femmes d'Alger* (Plate 4) in the artist's studio for about 25,000 French francs, paying Picasso in monthly instalments of 2,000 Francs. About ten years later the painting was sold for 150,000 Francs – a sum even a well-educated office clerk would have had difficulty saving in a lifetime.

It goes without saying that such profits were exceptional at the time and that not all artforms practised by the avant-gardes could yield the same amounts of money. While only a handful of artists, such as F.T. Marinetti and Francis Picabia, came from a wealthy background, most during their early years as avant-gardists struggled to make ends meet and took on other jobs – and some never met with financial success during their lifetime. Yet avant-gardists as a rule played the market and added to financial speculation through their newly established network of galleries and publications. This is noticeable in many exploits they put forth. In 1916, for example, Dadaist Hugo Ball produced what he called a 'propaganda magazine' for the Cabaret Voltaire,

which he had opened in the Swiss city of Zürich that same year as a venue for experimental, interartistic performances. Suitably entitled *Cabaret Voltaire*, the publication comprised a substantial sample of now canonised artworks and texts, not least Ball's short introduction, which criticised the nationalism that had led to the First World War then raging just outside Switzerland's borders, and which famously ended with the words: '(Dada) Dada Dada Dada Dada.' Today a key document in the history of Dadaism, *Cabaret Voltaire* originally appeared in French as well as in German, and only 500 copies of it were published. Moreover, these were sold at different prices and in varying forms: there was a cheap format on low-cost paper, there was a more expensive, bound version with a cover that was decorated with gold foil and that featured a woodcut by Hans Arp, and finally there were plans for fifty 'luxury editions' that additionally were to contain one of five original prints and were to be numbered, hand-coloured and signed. This third format of *Cabaret Voltaire* would be sold at fifteen Swiss francs, which at the time was the cost of a night in a first-class hotel in Zürich. While we do not know if Ball actually managed to produce this deluxe edition – no such copy has surfaced – his plans show that he was well aware of there being a market for the avant-garde. Who else than financially gifted collectors, whether genuine art-lovers or cynical speculators, would have had that money to spend in the middle of war?

It is important to note that from the outset there was a market for avant-garde works, because this demonstrates that to connoisseurs the historical value of avant-garde art, regardless of its diversity, was instantly clear. For rich collectors and their advisers the avant-garde produced serious art, and potentially valuable art at that. What reasons they had for thinking so, beyond personal tastes, is at first sight less clear. Surely it was not simply because the avant-gardes were radical iconoclasts who overnight broke with what had come before in art? If that had been the case, then how at all could such connoisseurs still recognise that this was art? What historical precedents or points of reference, then, did those experts have in mind?

The wider public – that is, mainly students, bourgeois art-lovers and intellectuals, and to a much lesser extent the petty bourgeois and working class – most often struggled to recognise any such historical references or precedents. Many found the avant-gardes too radical, too hard to grasp, and accordingly failed to understand how they got away with calling their work 'art' at all. In 1910, for example, Wassily Kandinsky, future founder of the Expressionist Blaue Reiter group, co-organised an international avant-garde exhibition in Munich at the Galerie Thannhauser. The public's reaction to the work of Kandinsky, Picasso, Georges Braque and the Russian brothers David and Vladimir Burliuk was one of outrage and incomprehension. Almost all local newspapers portrayed the exhibition as a scandal, the artists as dangerous lunatics, and many called for the show to be closed. No place in Europe was

entirely free of such reactions. Even in Paris – a city that could pride itself on a long tradition of tolerance of new art movements – a municipal councilman in 1912 objected to a government building being used for the display of what he saw as Cubist rubbish in the annual Salon d'Automne. Similarly, during a screening in December 1930 of Luis Buñuel's *L'Âge d'or* (The Golden Age), one of the first sound films in France, perpetrators ransacked the theatre and slashed Surrealist paintings simultaneously on exhibition. The outrage of the (mainly young) perpetrators was caused by the film's blasphemous nature, and its ridicule of the sexual values and conduct of the bourgeoisie. (As a result the film was officially banned in France until 1974!) All over the Western world and beyond, from the famous Armory Show in New York, which in 1913 presented a sample of European avant-garde art, to the exhibition a year earlier of the Cubo-Futurist group, Donkey's Tail, in Moscow, similar responses to avant-garde works as being obscene, shockingly bad or plain non-art were recorded.

It is a cliché to say that avant-gardists always deliberately sought to shock the audience – they in turn often were astonished by the hysterical responses they received. As a result, quite a few avant-garde writers and artists began to invest in explaining to a larger audience what was going on. Poet Guillaume Apollinaire, in his own review, *Les Soirées de Paris*, but also in numerous other periodicals, newspapers and most notably in his book *Les Peintres cubistes, méditations esthétiques* (1913), soon revealed himself as a prodigious art journalist with a clear-cut mission: to clarify the value of the new types of art that were being exhibited in Paris during the 1900s and 1910s. Others, as we will see, followed Apollinaire's example of giving public lectures or embarked on veritable European tours to disseminate information about their work first hand.

Yet it would be equally mistaken to state that avant-gardists, even when they were taken by surprise, did not appreciate the occasional public outrage. There were two reasons for this. First, perhaps better than more conventional artists, avant-gardists were aware of the norms and criteria most art-lovers, avid readers, music, dance or theatre buffs liked their art to stick to, simply because avant-gardists consciously sidestepped many of these rules and tastes. As a result, the contempt of petty bourgeois art-lovers or *philistines*, as they were frequently called by the avant-gardes, was often taken for a token of the right kind of appreciation. But there was a second reason why the at times heated response of the larger public did not upset the avant-gardes all that much. One of their overall aims, as shown in Chapter 1, was to turn art into a site of action rather than one of mere contemplation. To this aim they did not only search for new ways to represent the world and the art object, nor explored how to combine different artforms and senses into a Total Art that could fully enclose and immerse the audience. Turning art into a site of action

also meant: to make that audience an *active* participant to the work of art rather than a silent and contemplative bystander. And what better evidence of this active involvement was there than the occasionally brash and very negative response of the wider public, which regarded the avant-gardes as producers of non-art or even of anti-art?

Non-Art

Some avant-garde groups proved very skilful at devising methods to involve their audience. The so-called 'serate' of the Italian Futurists offer a nice illustration of this. The term *serata* – plural: *serate* – in Italian is similar to the French 'soirée', and so basically signals any kind of evening entertainment. While the term thus has no specific artistic or even theatrical meaning, the Futurists developed their *serate* into a distinct interartistic performance genre which by the outbreak of the Great War was recognised as such throughout Italy. Indeed, it was hard not to know about these mass events organised by the Futurists: the newspapers were filled with reports on them and as a rule they were attended by audiences ranging between 2,000 and 5,000 spectators. On 15 February 1910, for instance, the Futurists landed for a *serata* in Marinetti's hometown Milan – one of the many cities they would frequent up to the start of the First World War. An estimated 3,000 people from all social classes – tickets were always kept cheap (approximately one lira) so that workers could attend as well – crammed together in the Teatro Lirico. (Benito Mussolini was there as well.) When after a musical introduction the curtain was lifted, the Futurists appeared in neat evening attire on a stage without décor, with the exception of a table and a few chairs. They met with applause, whistling and laughter, all of which suggested that the audience was not going to take the Futurists all that seriously. The Futurists meant serious business, however, because the *serate* in general were first and foremost designed to introduce a larger audience to the new movement. This is why during almost every *serata* Marinetti opened with a speech on the overall aesthetic of the movement, others read poems, Umberto Boccioni recited manifestoes on Futurist visual art – for a *serata* in 1911 in Palermo there were plans to also bring paintings and sculptures on stage, but the show was cancelled due to an outbreak of cholera in the city – and orchestras performed Futurist symphonies by Francesco Balilla Pratella. Even Luigi Russolo's first *intonarumori* (see Fig. 27), a mechanical noise intoner that produced machine-like industrial buzzing, was first introduced at a *serata*. Thus, spectators of a *serata* always received a good introduction to the views and works of Futurism.

Marinetti and his fellows, however, also had a second goal with their *serate*: they wanted to present works as objects the audience could actively

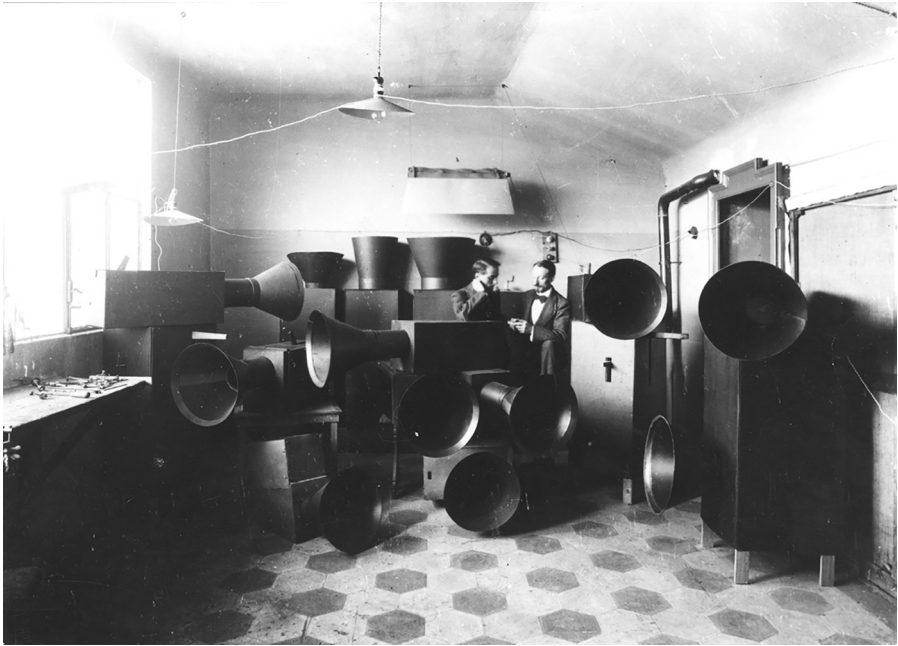


Figure 27 Photograph (ca. 1914–15) of Futurists Luigi Russolo and Ugo Piatti in their Milan studio with *intonarumori*. Following his manifesto 'L'Arte dei Rumori' (The Art of Noises, 1913), which sought to introduce noise in art (Bruitism), Russolo began to develop these new and brightly painted instruments, for which he subsequently composed pieces. The *intonarumori* produced a continuous acoustic mass whose pitch and intensity could be varied by the use of mechanical handles or electric switches.

react *against*. To this aim they let go of the finesse of Symbolist recitation while reading poems and fiction, for example; nor did they appear as actors representing characters in a Realist mode. Instead, they simply presented themselves and their ideas, in a clownesque fashion recalling the *commedia dell'arte* and also leaving ample room for improvisation and interaction with the audience. Thus they broke down the so-called 'fourth wall' separating performers and the audience. On the night of the 1910 Milan serata, for instance, Marinetti's opening speech on Futurism was constantly interrupted by people booing and shouting to the point where he could no longer be heard. Instead of toning the audience down, however, Marinetti and his fellows kept soliciting audience responses throughout the entire evening and at a certain moment veritable fights broke out among members of the audience; the havoc spread to the stage too when one spectator grabbed Marinetti by the throat. During other serate spectators threw fruit, vegetables and other projectiles they had brought along to the theatre hall.

The *serate* as a rule received a lot of attention in the press, partly because the Futurists prefigured present-day marketing strategies. They had announcements sent to almost all Italian newspapers before and after the events. They usually arrived a day in advance in the city where the *serata* would be held and in the run-up to the evening of the performance would create rows in bars and chic restaurants, give interviews, distribute thousands of flyers (often in different colours) in public places, sometimes using colourfully decorated automobiles and carnivalesque costumes. When in 1915 Italy entered the First World War, the *serate* had helped turn Marinetti and his movement into national icons of sorts, and many Futurist trips and shows abroad had also stirred the international *beau monde*. Yet few among a wider public took the Futurists seriously as artists, it seems. People came to *serate* and other Futurist events out of curiosity, perhaps looking for an experience they had never had before. But after the 1910 Milan *serata*, for example, even journalists willing to consider Futurism favourably portrayed the event as a joke or hoax. 'If this is Futurist art', one reporter claimed, 'I am Chinese.'¹ The ideas and works presented were likened to many things in accounts of other *serate* as well, but only rarely to art, let alone to serious art. (According to Communist leader Antonio Gramsci, labourers were some of the few to defend the Futurists from attacks by the bourgeois establishment.)

It is ironic, then, that, on the one hand, the Italian Futurists set up the *serate* to introduce their art to a wider public and proved very effective at making that public an active component of their art, while, on the other hand, that same audience did not experience the *serate* as art.

Anti-Art

The confused responses of the wider public gradually gave rise to the popular idea that the avant-gardes formed some sort of anti-art, an idea voiced particularly strongly in discussions of Dadaism. Wherever Dadaists took to the streets or to the auditoria to explain what their work was about, they too drew large crowds of up to 2,000 people, but at best drew only mildly bemused reactions from art critics – whether it be in the Netherlands, where in early 1923 Kurt Schwitters, Theo van Doesburg, his partner and musician Nelly van Moorsel, and the Hungarian Vilmos Huszár embarked on a Dada Tour during which they read sound poetry and presented mechanical Indonesian shadow puppet-like theatre; whether in Central Europe, where a six-week tour of Eastern Germany and Czechoslovakia at the beginning of 1920 was undertaken by German Dadaists Johannes Baader (the self-proclaimed chief Dada), Raoul Hausmann (the Dadasopher) and Richard Huelsenbeck (World-Dada); or in the numerous public shows Dadaists set up in Paris during the early 1920s. Such performances sometimes drew close to the model of the *serate*. On a



Figure 28 A report in the magazine *Portugal Futurista* on a Futurist ‘lecture’ held by José de Almada Negreiros in April 1917 at the Teatro República. The lecture was entitled ‘Ultimatum Futurista às gerações portuguesas do século XX’ (Futurist Ultimatum to the Portuguese Generations of the Twentieth Century). Almada Negreiros is shown wearing workers’ clothing, recalling Charlie Chaplin’s tramp character.

nearly empty stage a Dadaist would come and expound the ideas and feats of Dada. Different works then would be presented; the audience throughout would be provoked to interact and to forget about the disciplinary rules the-atre-goers normally had to respect.

Some pieces during the Central European Dadaist Tour, like Hausmann’s parody of popular dance, *Dada-Trot / Sixty One Step*, brought joy to the audience. Here, spectators clearly recognised what they all knew well: popular culture. Indeed, following the lead of preceding avant-gardists, not least the Futurists, quite a few Dadaists in their work championed (albeit often ambivalently) aspects of so-called ‘low’ or popular culture. Who, for instance, would not have recognised the reference to Charlie Chaplin’s baggy pants in *The Tramp* (1915) upon viewing the costume Portuguese José de Almada Negreiros wore in 1917 during a Futurist soirée in Lisbon (see Fig. 28)? Popular sports also were never far off: from football to boxing, they were made the topic of Dadaist and Futurist works. For the most part, however, the Central European Dada Tour incited negative reactions. As soon as the three German Dadaists began performing an improvised *simultaneous poem* – a distinctly Dadaist type of poetry, a tactic of combination designed as a musical score whose different lines or ‘bars’ were recited by several poets in polyphony, often in various languages (see Fig. 29) – spectators would get agitated, nervous, and start to boo or shout. During the first Dada show in Prague one spectator even threw a stink-pot on the stage. Interestingly, after the German Dadaists had left Czechoslovakia, the local inhabitants of Prague went on to organise their

L'amiral cherche une maison à louer

Poème simultan par R. Huelsenbeck, M. Janko, Tr. Tzara

[illegible][illegible][illegible]

En même temps Mr Apollinaire essayait un nouveau genre de poème visuel, qui est plus intéressant encore par son manque de système et par sa fantasia tourmentée. Les images, les figures, les symboles et les lettres se combinent à l'infini pour créer à peu près une poème des tous cloûs à la fois. Les poèmes de Joris Baran et Divorce sont purement formels. Je chercherai en vain d'y saisir ce qu'il peut signifier en faisant les mêmes associations que sur une cartière d'architecte.

Je voulais l'analyser un poème basé sur d'autres principes. Qui consistent dans la possibilité que je donne à chaque centaine de lettres les associations concevables. Il reflète les caractéristiques poétiques personnelles de l'auteur. Mais il n'est pas si simple tout-à-coup dans la direction que l'autour a choisi.

Le poème que j'ai essayé d'analyser est intitulé "L'ÉPIQUE". Il ne donne pas une description musicale, mais tente à individuer l'impression du poème simultanément auquel nous donnons par une nouvelle lecture.

La lecture parallèle que nous avons fait le 31 mars 1916. Huettenbeck, Janke et moi, était la première réalisation scénique de cette esthétique moderne.

Figure 29 The simultaneous poem ‘L’Amiral cherche une maison à louer’ (The Admiral Seeks a House for Rent, 1916) by Tristan Tzara, Richard Huelsenbeck and Marcel Janco. The poem was written as a performance piece for the Cabaret Voltaire. When performed, the three voices – each in a different language, and Janco singing – read the poem simultaneously like musicians treat a score, from left to right. The middle part consists exclusively of sound poetry. At the end of the poem, of course, the admiral still has not found a house. At the bottom Tristan Tzara’s ‘Note pour les bourgeois’ (Note to the Bourgeois) explains that the work, following earlier experiments by Cubists in the visual arts, was intended as a synesthetic experiment that fused language and music in literature.

own 'Dada' carnival on 30 April 1920: a boxing match between Pipsdada and Popsdada and many other supposedly 'Dadaist' activities were followed by a 'Dada-Trot' dance contest. This shows that by the 1920s Dadaism as well had become part and parcel of European popular culture. Ironically, perhaps, this also reinforced the idea that Dada in particular was a sort of anti-art out to ridicule (if not, to destroy) art rather than to change it.

Of course, not all avant-gardists drew such large crowds; nor were they all as loud nor did they all feel the need to explain their work in public. The infamous case of Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917, see Fig. 30) illustrates that even when artists said almost nothing about works whose original was never even seen, the idea of an anti-art loomed large. An overwhelming number of people today know about *Fountain*. Like *In Advance of a Broken Arm*, *Fountain* is a *readymade* – a common prefabricated object, which, isolated from its functional surrounding and without (or with only minor) alteration, is elevated to the status of an



Figure 30 Alfred Stieglitz's photograph of Marcel Duchamp's lost *Fountain* (1917), signed R. Mutt. Note the careful presentation of this aesthetic object, which leaves little doubt that Stieglitz, assisted by Duchamp, wanted the piece portrayed as a work of art.

artwork by a mere act of declaration. Duchamp also called it 'la sculpture toute-faite', sculpture already made. Much has been written about *Fountain*, which Duchamp signed with the pseudonym R. Mutt. (Duchamp, in typical fashion, later never said much about it, and what he said was contradictory.) *Fountain* was entered unnoticed into the first exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York. This event was open to all artists, professional or other, provided they pay a modest fee. All types of art, anything really, could thus be exhibited. By vote, however, the exhibition's board of directors, which included Duchamp, censored it because a majority found it to be a disgrace. Duchamp resigned from the board, the wider public never got to see it, the original got lost and to date it remains unclear how exactly – replicas were made only much later. How could this porcelain urinal create such a stir?

It stands beyond doubt that Duchamp to some extent desired to shock with *Fountain*, but it is certainly not a work of anti-art. Some of its features clearly invite us to approach it as an aesthetic object. Duchamp, at least on the famous photograph Alfred Stieglitz took of the work before it disappeared, manipulated the urinal, for example, so that its familiar outlook changed and its contours came to resemble those of a Madonna or a seated Buddha figure. The ready-made's title further referred to the many (sometimes dreadful) paintings of bucolic washbasins and sculptured garden fountains on display in the exhibition, which Duchamp as a board member would have seen before he entered the work. Many have argued, moreover, that *Fountain* also referred to art as a whole. Duchamp, it has been said, performed a radical gesture by taking a non-art object and simply pronouncing it art. In so doing his *Fountain* in essence drew attention to the contexts and official institutions in which art functioned. Questioning the boundaries between art and non-art as well as

the difference between skilfully or professionally produced art and amateur art, Duchamp, posing as R. Mutt, further invited the audience to consider the possibility that everyone is a potential artist. Rather than a piece of non- or anti-art, then, *Fountain* was perhaps above all an indifferent work of art: it did not say what art should or should not be, but simply asked its audience to decide for itself, to actively engage in the matter rather than to remain a docile bystander.

When held alongside other works of the European avant-gardes, however, another interpretation of *Fountain* is yet possible. For what happened with this readymade – an artist takes a non-art object and brings it into the realm of art – was perhaps not all that different from Russolo's *intonarumori* introducing a kind of factory or industrial noise into the auditorium, from Marinetti employing mass-marketing strategies to promote art, from José de Almada Negreiros dressing up like Chaplin, or, for that matter, from people bringing vegetables and stink-pots to theatre halls. All of this points to an *expanded notion of art*: the avant-gardes, it appears, were masters at introducing into art subjects, objects, materials, practices and people, even their audiences, which up to that point had had no place there. Clearly, then, the avant-gardes' Total Art was not restricted to a recalibration of the different arts; it also introduced into art recognisable non-art phenomena and thereby fundamentally changed the way art in general was thought about. This change did not come unannounced, however. When we take a somewhat 'longer' view and look at the history of art and aesthetics in the preceding century (part of it at least), it becomes clear that the rupture brought about by the avant-gardes had long been prepared.

The Ugly

Striking in reactions to the avant-gardes throughout Europe was the consistent stress on how ugly people found what they saw, read or experienced. It does not matter which artwork we single out, written records of the wider public's response time and again illustrate that ugly was the word that first came to people's minds. One illustration should suffice. Expressionist composer Arnold Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, yet another work harking back to the improvisational *commedia dell'arte*, premiered in Berlin in 1912. The premiere unleashed for the first time on a live audience *Pierrot lunaire*'s dissonant and chromatic harmonies as well as its use of the *Sprechstimme* (speech-voice) – a vocal technique that combines elements of song and speech; instead of singing the conventionally notated vocal part on the score, the singer rhythmically speaks the text in a way that approaches, but never fully blooms into, singing. While Schoenberg, who acted as conductor of the singer and the small ensemble of five musicians, could not claim the invention of the *Sprechstimme*, it is a

notoriously difficult technique to perform, which the concert audience in turn had difficulty digesting. As one critic reported afterwards in what seems to have been an attempt to inflate the word ugly altogether, the musical piece, along with the usual hissing and laughing in the concert hall, ‘in its hideousness and illogical, ear splitting ugliness’ defied description.²

By that time used to this kind of verbose reaction Schoenberg allegedly retorted that one day the milkman during his round would be whistling such ‘ugly’ music. Many avant-gardists indeed took pride in their work being called ugly, making this denomination their own. In the ‘Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature’ (1912), for example, Marinetti wrote: ‘Bravely, we bring the “ugly” into literature, and kill off its ritual pomp wherever we find it.’³ To leave the past behind, and to make an advance in literature, Marinetti suggested here, the Futurists introduced the ugly. Interestingly, he also put the word ugly between inverted commas, as if to suggest that he was not using it in a conventional way. Vorticist Wyndham Lewis, in his magazine *Blast*, did exactly the same when he considered the changes painting was going through. Walking through a modern city, he observed, allowed for a rich and exciting visual display of ‘cheap manufactured goods, woods, steel, glass, etc.’ If simply walking the streets could already give people such pleasure, Lewis asked, then what would remain of traditional painting? Why keep on painting beautifully? ‘Even if painting remains intact’, he asserted, ‘it will be much more supple and extended, containing all the[se] elements of discord and “ugliness”’.⁴ For Lewis too, then, ‘ugliness’ – here more clearly defined as modern commercial non-art objects – was to become part of art.

Lewis, Marinetti and many others who made similar observations were by no means the first to argue for the inclusion of the ugly in art. As their use of inverted commas suggests, they did not conceive of the ugly along the lines of common sense, or at least not entirely. We all recognise an ugly object or person when we see one. In such cases we would be inclined to say that this object or person is not beautiful, yet we all know as well that many ugly things can also be touched by beauty somehow. It was not this vernacular meaning of the ugly the avant-gardes had in mind, but a more objective and conceptual meaning that had come about much earlier in modern art. Indeed, some of the founding texts of modern aesthetics deal with the ugly in this conceptual sense. Take Friedrich Schlegel’s essay *Über das Studium der griechischen Poesie* (On the Study of Greek Poetry, 1795). The German Romantic Schlegel basically claimed that art is the realm of beauty, but he also implied that art only became truly modern with authors and artists like himself, who paid attention to the ugly. To Schlegel beauty was the norm in art, with neither the sublime nor the interesting marking its true counterpart, but the ugly, *that which simply was not treated or seen as art: non-art*. A modern artist, self-conscious of his of her practice, was therefore also to plunge head first into the ugly, to explore the

world outside of art, and to consider whether advances within art could be made by bringing aspects of non-art into the realm of beauty.

Oversimplifying – for the issues raised here form the topic of vexed discussions among philosophers and historians of art – it can be argued that from Schlegel onwards change in modern art always occurred as a result of an ongoing exploration and domestication of non-art. Indeed, the ugly in modern aesthetics from Romanticism onwards came to be broadly defined as those forms and topics which, *at a certain point in history and within a specific culture*, challenge what counts as art. (It is important to emphasise that what people experience or think of as non-art is not universal, but is always site-specific, that is, related to a particular time and place, a specific cultural and artistic context.) The ugly, the name given to non-art as it is introduced into art, thus came to be depicted as a category always broadening the domain of beauty. The most important consequence of this way of looking at the ugly was that it led to the assertion that true change in modern art always results from inserting into art ugly contents and forms. This is, for example, why the Symbolists' turn to the city and everyday metropolitan life in poetry was received as both distasteful and ground-breaking. This also explains why in painting Gustave Courbet's large realist canvas, *Un Enterrement à Ornans* (A Burial at Ornans, 1850), is often said to signal the date of origin of the modern 'cult of ugliness' – Courbet used a genre of history painting, so far reserved for the portrayal of nobility, to depict sombre middle-class citizens at a graveside. And this is also why Duchamp's readymades are still remembered by a wider audience as constitutive of modern art. According to this tradition, rupture in art, revolution even, always comes with the radically ugly.

In the course of the nineteenth century the ugly was approached time and again. What Schlegel's study of (pre)modern poetry did for German Romanticism, Victor Hugo's long introduction to his play *Cromwell* (1827) did for French Romanticism. Art portrays nature, Hugo argued, and because nature on occasion is ugly, its more seedy aspects too were to be the subject of art. Like Schlegel before him Hugo made beauty turn full circle: here too the ugly and the grotesque were in the end to add lustre to, or to expand, the domain of beauty. This tendency to subjugate the ugly to beauty was also characteristic of Karl Rozenkranz's famous *Ästhetik des Hässlichen* (Aesthetics of the Ugly, 1853). An expert on G. W. F. Hegel and an editor of Immanuel Kant's philosophical work, Rozenkranz was the first to systematically think about the ugly in all its forms. Distinguishing various such forms (in nature, in thought, and in art), he paid ample attention to the grotesque and to caricature. For Rozenkranz as well it was the beauty of the ugly in art, the way in which seemingly ugly phenomena could be made to bear on beauty, that really mattered.

An avid reader of Rozenkranz, Symbolist Charles Baudelaire, in turn looked to 'beautify' the ugly. The title of his most scandalous book of poetry – one of

its sections was banned from publication for almost a century – is obviously telling of his project: *Les Fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil, 1857). Thematically introducing in poetry aspects of everyday life that before had no place there – such as extreme poverty, carcasses or people dying – Baudelaire further praised Spanish Romantic Goya's portrayal of ugly, monstrous figures because of their imaginative power. Goya's monsters did not exist in reality, and Baudelaire thereby seconded Hugo's observation that the introduction of the ugly into the realm of beauty could also considerably expand that realm's imaginative horizon. Yet with Baudelaire the realm of the ugly was further enlarged to include not only all given aspects of life outside art, but also all potential products of the imagination artists and writers could come up with. Schlegel's contemporaries Novalis and Ludwig Tieck, with their glorification of the unconscious and the dreamlike, had ventured there before.

By the turn of the century, when Decadence celebrated the beauty of the ugly in unprecedented ways, some went as far as to bracket the distinction between the two categories altogether. Italian Benedetto Croce in 1902, for instance, broke with previous approaches to the ugly by stating that in the aesthetic process of expression or creation the ugliness-beauty opposition simply had to be cast aside. Whatever means an artist draws upon in the act of creation is (and remains) aesthetic, Croce claimed. Many Expressionists held a similar view when it came to the process of creation, arguing that for them the act of expression was the only thing that counted. The more intensely that expression was fleshed out in the work, the better it was. To this aim people like Kandinsky argued that the artist was to manipulate and explore his or her material to the maximum so as to make it his or her own. But what that material was to be was not really specified – no specific themes could be prescribed here (Kandinsky and his Blaue Reiter companion, Franz Marc, for instance, shared an idiosyncratic preference for horses and horsemen); nor in theory did it matter whether the artist in practice worked with oil, pen or paper, a voice, a brick or any other object. All tactics of combination thus lay open. The opposition ugliness-beauty, non-art and art, accordingly, also played no real importance here.

Once we move away from the mere act of creation, however, and broaden the scope so that it comes to include the avant-gardes' reflection on art in general, we notice that all avant-gardists in some way continued to work with the opposition. Many wondered how it was possible that so far so little attention had gone to the materiality of the arts. Painters, for instance, had been using oil, aquarelle, paper, wood or cloth for a long time – in a sense the material of painting had been part of art all along. Yet when certain avant-gardists pursuing the strategy of differentiation elevated that material to the contents of their work – that is, when they drew attention to the surface of the material itself rather than to anything it referred to beyond itself – the public's

confused reactions exemplified that the materiality of painting so far had not been widely considered from this perspective. In so doing, the avant-gardes in yet another way expanded the domain of art or beauty. When Surrealist André Breton ended his anti-novel *Nadja* (1928) with the statement that 'Beauty will be convulsive or not at all', he echoed Baudelaire who had declared that the beautiful is always 'strange'. For the Surrealists, beauty could only be 'convulsive', a beauty born of the non-art, formless object that was transformed through art. The manifold search for ugly or non-art objects, topics and forms that still could be introduced into art thus clearly continued in the avant-gardes, but in unprecedented ways the avant-gardes also radicalised that process to the extremes, as we will see presently.

In short, historical audience responses that depicted the work of the avant-gardes as 'ugly' or as 'non-art' were far from inexact. These terms were in fact closely tied, if not synonymous, as the avant-gardes' 'ugly' work, following a procedure that had become increasingly common in the preceding history of modern art, was non-art turned art. That not all audience members recognised the affinity between the 'ugly' and 'non-art' is by no means to pass judgement on the evaluation of the wider public at the time. Quite the opposite: it was perhaps only with the arrival of the European avant-gardes that this longer tradition became manifest beyond refute and that the pieces of the puzzle fell into place.

An Expanded Notion of Art

Until the emergence of the European avant-gardes the ugly had been mainly thought of as a body of ideas, topics or forms outside of art that could be roped in to develop new modes of aesthetic experience and contemplation. Modern artists so far had been concerned primarily either with isolating different types of *subject matter* that were generally considered to be inappropriate in art, or with introducing *forms* that were found strange in the context of a specific art-form or genre. Baudelaire's poetry did both: formally, it introduced prose and everyday language in the realm of the poetic, while thematically it incorporated shocking motifs. Similarly, Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (Luncheon on the Grass, 1863), which is often said to have marked the birth of Impressionism, combined unusual subject matter (a naked woman alongside modern men in neat attire within a bucolic setting) with a hitherto unseen, brutal contrast in paint between lighter and darker sections. The European avant-gardes extended this search, often also by bringing back elements from the past to this aim, as shown more elaborately in Chapter 7. One example can suffice here. Surrealist Breton wrote in a style that must have struck many as anachronistic, because it was closer to the eighteenth-century writing of Blaise Pascal than anything more recent. Yet the most distinct avant-garde contribution to this modern

tradition derived from avant-gardists' desire to make art a venue for action and to fundamentally change the experience of art. To this aim they expanded the domain of the ugly so that it came to include more than just phenomena people could passively experience or contemplate from a distance. They additionally turned their sights on non-art *actions* and *practices*, on all kinds of things people *did*, on everything that made them *act* in their daily business.

This accounts for the fact that many reshaped *objects* which people used in their everyday lives, and why in the process avant-gardists also fully cast aside the old distinction or hierarchy between the 'applied' and the 'fine' arts. In Zürich's Cabaret Voltaire, for example, Dadaists Sophie Täuber and Hans Arp mobilised techniques and media of the decorative arts. Recalling pre- and early modern art, they created abstract embroideries that were framed and hung on walls as if they were paintings. They produced three-dimensional abstract and symmetric wooden 'sculptures' resembling functional objects, and Täuber developed a series of colourful Dada heads, also from wood, which simultaneously drew close to the genre of the portrait bust and resembled decorated hat stands (see Plate 10). Like others elsewhere in Europe, Russian Constructivist Varvara Fedorovna Stepanova set out to reimagine the way people dressed, designing fabrics, suits and sportswear (see Fig. 31). Stepanova's colleague, Alexander Rodchenko, who published her designs in the magazine



Figure 31 One of Varvara Stepanova's many clothing designs, here for sportswear (1923). Stepanova produced utilitarian, functional uniforms and fabrics which could be mass-produced, and like Alexander Rodchenko preferred 'unisex' or genderless clothing (such as overalls) whenever possible.

LEF, even created paper wrappings for biscuits. Like still others, Expressionist Lionel Feininger and Dadaist Hannah Höch added children's toys and dolls to their list, while Futurists Romeo Bevilacqua and Tullio d'Albisola turned to ceramics during the early 1930s, producing magnificent vases, plates and jugs. During the First World War, Vorticist Edward Wadsworth supervised military 'dazzle-camouflage' painting, strange geometric and colourful patterns he had designed and which the military adopted as camouflage for warships and other vehicles. The numerous exploits of Constructivist interior design, from Gerrit Rietveld's *De Stijl* chaise longue to the functionalist Bauhaus lamps, tea sets, chairs, folding tables and cupboards, are just a few more examples of the diverse objects the avant-gardes turned to. Concentration upon the avant-garde object itself even led to the launch of the 'utilitarian' movement of Veshchism or Thingism by Russians El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg. In the manifesto of their journal *Veshch. Gegenstand. Objet*, they argued that 'for us, art is nothing other than the creation of new objects'.⁵ Any non-art object, in short, could be turned into an art object as well. There were historical precedents to this tendency too, such as William Morris' Arts and Crafts movement or the German Werkbund, and the commercially successful phenomenon of Art Deco from the 1920s onwards could be mentioned here as well. Above all, what the avant-gardes shared with such precedents and contemporaries was a desire to artistically redesign, to bring into art, functional objects not commonly seen as part of serious art.

The stress on common or non-art actions and practices also united the many, seemingly irreconcilable trends and movements in avant-garde architecture. In Prague, the Cubist *Skupina výtvarných umělců* (Fine Arts Group), founded in 1911 by painters Emil Filla, Antonín Procházka, Josef Čapek, the sculptor Otto Gutfreund, the writer Karel Čapek, and the architects Pavel Janák, Josef Gočár, Vlastislav Hofman and Josef Chochol, believed that the whole human environment had to be imbued with a unified aesthetic character. The house and its interior were to become a complex work of art, with Cubist furniture and lights, Cubist coffee and tea sets, vases, cases and ashtrays, Cubist paintings on the wallpaper and Cubist decorations. In a kindred spirit, avant-gardists throughout Europe produced plans for houses, cafés, music halls or cinemas. Like the allegorical Caliph or Iraqi King in Wyndham Lewis' book, *The Caliph's Design* (1919), who one day gets up and starts sketching plans for an entirely new street, some also dreamt of entire cities, countries even, being rebuilt along avant-garde lines. That the different factions and groups within the European avant-gardes – the Constructivists, the Cubists, the Purists and many more – disagreed on how such designs were to look, let alone practically realised, is less important than the fact that they shared the same ambition to bring into art all the objects and environments in which people lived.

This ambition is visible as well in the many non-art *practices* the avant-gardes turned to. If art was to become a form of action, then non-art types of action as well were to be redesigned. Surrealists, for instance, often claimed that they were not artists but scientists who took up the role of exploring and studying the human mind and imagination. If they thus implied that the practice of science as well was to be turned into art, they also transformed the practice of dreaming into art. During the first years of the movement in Paris, Surrealists convened for so-called dream séances, during which they dreamt out loud, or recounted to each other the dreams they had had. For a brief stint they even opened up a ‘research bureau’ in a house in Paris, where passers-by or anyone else could join them in collecting and documenting dreams. Others turned to cooking. *La Cucina futurista* (The Futurist Cookbook, 1932), for example, contained numerous recipes for experimental dishes. This book not only prescribed or invented new types of food, it also transformed the very practice of cooking and eating into an artistic one. The same Futurists, shortly after the First World War, were also the most extreme of all avant-gardes when they launched what is arguably the only political party in modern history to be founded by artists and to have stood in elections. (The *Partito Politico Futurista* failed abysmally during the 1919 elections, however.) Indeed, this had been one of the aspects of Futurism spectators as well during the *serate* before the war had always been upset by: Marinetti and his fellows kept bringing up political issues, which the audience had trouble placing within the context of serious art. This shows that some Italian Futurists, in what they called *arte-azione* (art-action), went as far as to treat political practices too as a type of non-art, making them in turn an object of artistic experimentation and aesthetic experience.

In summary, the European avant-gardes fundamentally altered the way in which art was conceived. Building on an older, distinctly modern tradition, they expanded the notion of art by enlarging the domain of non-art to the maximum until it came close to including everything. As such, they were perhaps also the first to see the true power and full range of modern art put into practice. In 1915 Italian Futurists Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero phrased it perhaps most tellingly, when they projected no less than a complete ‘reconstruction of the universe’ through a Total Art: ‘We Futurists’, they wrote in a manifesto, ‘want to [...] reconstruct the universe, cheer it up [...] We shall find abstract equivalents for all the forms and elements of the universe, then combine them [...] to create plastic complexes which we shall put in motion.’⁶ Not all avant-gardists voiced their aesthetic as grandiloquently as Balla and Depero, but their words may well hold true for all European avant-gardes. The philosophy of art that surfaces here is one that defines art as a site in which all ‘ugly’ facets of life, the entire universe, can be integrated and

made the subject of artistic experimentation, and, above all, aesthetic experience through action. This aesthetic cannot be reduced to the intentions of one specific avant-gardist. (In fact, huge debates were waged over this expanded notion of art.) Rather, it is a philosophy that becomes visible only when we look at the European avant-gardes as a whole and mend the many fragments they produced throughout the continent.

Art and Life

As the title of El Lissitzky's 1920s essay 'Preodolenie iskusstva' (Overcoming Art) suggests, an important consequence of the avant-gardes' philosophy of art is that it projected the end of art, or at least a moment in the future upon which the distinction between art and non-art, between art and life, would stop being relevant. If modern art is indeed defined and delimited by what surrounds it – that is, by non-art – then what would remain of both if the whole of non-art would have been drawn into the surging vortex of art? Had the European avant-gardes succeeded in realising their aesthetic, if their art had fully reshaped all non-art, then the two, art and life, would have become one. Most avant-gardists whose work added to this utopian projection did not place much hope in it. It does not take long to see why: art can never come to enclose the whole of life or non-art for the plain reason that life too always keeps changing and evolving. Hence, as the third part of this book demonstrates, it was perhaps not so much a distant utopian future that formed the main concern of the avant-gardes, but the present, the context that surrounded them. The avant-gardes did not seek closure of their utopian project. It was the process of getting there, the experiment, the ongoing search for ever new possibilities in a definitively and indefinitely unfinished project that made them tick.

Nonetheless, awareness of the impossibility of reaching the projected unison of art and life did not keep certain avant-gardists from trying to get as close as possible. They were by no means the first to do so. Many Romanticists as well already had dreamt of a way of life in which art came first, and throughout the nineteenth century so-called *artist colonies* – places, mostly rural villages, where creative practitioners lived and interacted in relative seclusion – had cropped up all over Europe in a grassroots attempt to realise that dream. The European avant-gardes too set up such colonies, making all objects and practices the product of an ongoing artistic experiment involving everyone. One such colony was located in the Croatian city of Rijeka – a century ago still called Fiume. In late 1919, Italian Post-Symbolist poet Gabriele d'Annunzio, along with an army of deserting soldiers, came to Fiume, occupied it, and had the army seal its borders – the city was part of a contested region which according

to some Italians belonged to Italy; d'Annunzio was eventually chased out and the city became part of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, the later Yugoslavia. However, for an entire year, within the city's walls, d'Annunzio, the soldiers, and many Futurist and other artists who joined them, went on to actualise the avant-gardes' utopian project. Pilot Guido Keller and writer Giovanni Comisso began their own magazine, *Yōga*, in which one anonymous piece read: 'perhaps one day people will write, think and act collectively [as we do in *Yōga*]. Entire societies, and even entire nations.'⁷ At night the inhabitants organised festivities, pageants and processions, designing their own clothes and costumes, decorating the façades of houses and even producing their own pottery. The whole of life here, in admittedly unusual circumstances, was turned into art – and it should perhaps be added that the artists involved not only worked in various arts but also held highly diverse political views. Unsurprisingly, historians to date are still puzzled by the coming about of this 'aesthetic state', which at the time even tried to get legal recognition by the international community of its independence as a state. When for a few years after the 1917 Russian Revolution Constructivists Vladimir Mayakovsky and Alexander Rodchenko, among others, were given the opportunity to help shape a new Bolshevik state, the entire moment was fused with utopian aspirations as well. This shows further that the utopian project of the avant-gardes often had political ramifications, as discussed in the second part of this book. Instances like Fiume and early Bolshevik Russia also form important exceptions to the rule, however: for the most part circumstances simply did not allow the avant-gardes to go as far.

There is another way still, however, to approach the European avant-gardes in light of all this: when we take them as a collective, spread throughout Europe in different spaces and places, the avant-gardes formed perhaps the largest internationally networked artist colony ever. It is indeed amazing to observe how well connected the avant-gardes were at a time when social media still belonged to a distant future, and how throughout Europe, and beyond, they made room for grassroots experimentation in dialogue with others elsewhere. This strong cohesion across cultural, national, regional and linguistic borders also explains why they went on to contemplate collectively the possibility of a New Man. For all these reasons, it is time to move beyond the confines of art, the avant-gardes' artistic strategies and tactics, and to turn our sights on the spaces and places in which the avant-gardes thrived.

Box 3: Futurisms

Futurism is a confusing term as few exponents of the movement were primarily concerned with the future. In fact, perhaps the only one really to deserve the label Futurist in this sense is Russian poet and critic Velimir Khlebnikov, who considered himself and his fellows as *budetlyane* (Russian for 'men of the future'). Far more central than the future in Futurism was the fascination with the dynamism, speed and restlessness of modern machines and urban life, which went hand in glove with a thorough dislike of all remnants of the cultured past and with a euphoric attempt to intuitively capture in art the vitalism of modern times. Futurisms experimented in every artform and medium, including ceramics, textiles and gastronomy.

The origins of the movement are usually traced back to F.T. Marinetti's inflammatory founding manifesto of 1909, yet almost at the exact same time Futurisms surfaced in Russia and by the mid-1910s Futurisms mushroomed throughout the whole of Europe. Futurism in Italy had outposts from Naples in the south to Milan in the north, where Marinetti held court. The Italian movement developed in waves with younger artists stepping in after the First World War; the movement in this way managed to evolve (both politically and artistically) and last into the 1930s. Besides Marinetti, important writers included Aldo Palazzeschi, Giovanni Papini, Luciano Folgore, Francesco Cangiullo and Fortunato Depero the painter. They concerned themselves not only with visual poetry and book art but also sought to destroy syntax, and they promoted the use of mathematical symbols and asyntactical *parole in libertà* (words in freedom) so as to put forth more synthetic modes of writing that could convey messages with the speed of electricity or the wireless. Also, in theatre and the performing arts Futurists explored the possibility of accelerated communication, as in the so-called *sintesi* of Emilio Settimelli and Bruno Corra. These were compressed plays which usually lasted no more than five minutes and portrayed several actions simultaneously with a minimal stage design. A concern with velocity and dynamism was equally pronounced in the visual arts. Painters Umberto Boccioni (see Figs 37 and 70), Carlo Carrà, Giacomo Balla and Gino Severini, among many others, sought to make Cubist multi-perspectivism dynamic and, in a variety of ways, expressed their fascination with movement, modern urbanism, technology and violence. One of their principle objectives was to intuitively abstract dynamic movement to a series of *force-lines* that emanated from (and enwrapped the spectator of) depicted scenes and subjects. The genre of *aeropittura*

(aeropainting) from the late 1920s was developed following the lead of certain literary and visual experiments of Futurists before the war, which adopted a perspective from an aeroplane. A form of (abstract) panorama painting in which an aerial perspective is maintained, *aeropittura* was officially launched in a manifesto of 1929, and in the course of the 1930s over 100 artists came to practise the genre, including Benedetta Cappa, Enrico Prampolini, Gerardo Dottori and Tullio Crali. Architect Antonio Sant'Elia already before the war gave shape to his ideas of modernity in his drawings for *La Città Nuova* (The New City, 1912–14, Fig. 40), while Tato (pseud. Guglielmo Sansoni), Anton Giulio Bragaglia and his brother experimented with photography (compare Fig. 33) and Luigi Russolo pioneered noise art or *Bruitism* as a new form of artistic creation.

In Russia, Futurism comprised a wide variety of factions which would eventually know even more diverse outgrowths. In the visual arts and poetry, the faction of the *Cubo-Futurists* (also known as the Hylaea group), formed in the early 1910s, is generally considered the most influential. Important poets here were Velimir Khlebnikov, Alexei Kruchenykh and Vladimir Mayakovsky, whose daring experiments made clear that all material aspects of language, such as sound, grammar, syntax and meaning, could be moulded and changed to flesh out new types of writing, new words or neologisms even, fit for modern times. In the visual arts Cubo-Futurists, like their Italian peers, adopted the simultaneous multi-perspectivism of Cubism but tried to couple it to the dynamism of modern life. The group included a remarkable number of female artists, such as Aleksandra Exter, Olga Rozanova, Natalia Goncharova (Fig. 32), and Liubov Popova (see Plate 7). It further counted Vasily Kamensky, Mikhail Larionov, Ivan Puni, Vladimir Burliuk and Kasimir Malevich within its ranks. Larionov and Goncharova already



Figure 32 Natalia Goncharova's painting *Velosipedist* (The Cyclist, 1913). A classical work of Russian Futurism, this painting depicts a cyclist as seen through a shop window against a static background of billboards, cafés and shops. While fragments of words and images seem to float by the cyclist and the schematic rendering of the figure and his bicycle suggest repetitive human/mechanical movement, the painting celebrates speed and technology. The hand urging the cyclist to go back perhaps evokes the forces resisting the Futurist programme.

in 1913 pioneered *Rayonism*, which took to capturing the reflection of rays of light from subjects, and resulted in increasingly abstract, brisk works. A move towards complete non-objective abstraction was made around the same time by Malevich, when he launched Suprematism. Through basic (multi- and monochrome) geometric shapes such as circles, squares and lines, Suprematism tried to put forth the design of pure artistic feeling, as for instance in Malevich's famous *Chernyi suprematicheskii kvadrat* (Black Suprematist Square, 1915) – El Lissitzky, with his so-called Prouns, played a vital role in spreading these new views in Western Europe.

The Russian faction of *Ego-Futurists* took a different approach and opposed the Cubo-Futurists' trend towards objectivity. Instead, this group of poets (also known as the Mezzanine of Poetry), with Igor Severyanin, Vadim Shershenevich, Graal Arelsky and Lev Zak, among others, argued that a new art had to be subjective, use neologisms and promote blatant selfishness. Their short-lived variant of Futurism led to *Imaginism* in the 1920s, a movement whose poetic drew near to the English-language movement of Imagism. Using (often long) chains of unusual metaphors in at times verbless poems (similar to Pound's famous 'In a station of the metro' of 1913), the Imaginists desired to evoke the individual experience of modernity as intensely and as directly as possible. A concern with density and precision, finally, could also be encountered in the poetic work of *Acmeism* of Anna Akhmatova, Nicolay Gumilev and Ossip Mandelstam. Working in the fringes of Russian Futurism, their poetry already in the early 1910s strove towards compactness and non-redundancy, yet it also primarily looked towards forgotten classical themes which were thought fit for a new and modern art.

Futurisms, as mentioned, cropped up throughout the whole of Europe in the course of the 1910s, and often disappeared as brashly as they had emerged. A case of note is Portuguese Futurism. From little magazines like *Orpheu* (1915), where Fernando Pessoa (aka Álvaro de Campos) and Mário de Sá-Carneiro began their careers as poetic innovators echoing many aspects of Futurism, to the single issue of *Portugal Futurista* published in Lisbon in 1917, Futurism here led to a brief eruption of creativity that was halted primarily by the early deaths of Sá-Carneiro and painters Santa Rita Pintor and Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso around 1917. Portuguese Futurists turned to literature, painting and the performing arts. The writer embodying the spirit of Futurism perhaps with the most vitriolic verve was José de Almada Negreiros. His short stories, poems and incendiary manifestos and performances strongly added to the lasting fame of the brief Futurist moment in Portugal.

In Greece, similarly, Futurism came and went like a flash of lightning, yet its proportions were of a remarkably modest size. Long before Giorgos Theotokas here published his provocative *Eleuthero pneuma* (Free Spirit, 1929) – which officially inaugurated the so-called Generation of the 1930s: a heterogeneous movement of artists who sought to modernise Greek art and culture in part through alignment with avant-garde currents elsewhere – Photos Giophyllis (pseud. Spyros Mousouris) published poems such as *Hē hēdone tēs mēchanēs* (The Pleasure of the Machine, 1910) and ‘S.A.P.’ (1916, inspired by the raging war), which were meant to introduce a Greek Futurism. Yet this is as far as Futurism went in the country. Alkviades Giannopoulos (better known as Alk Gian), who did not reside in Greece but in Italy, did contribute to various Italian Futurist magazines. Like Jules Schmalzigaug, who in Belgium was the only Futurist painter, these individuals did not operate alone, however, as they also corresponded with Marinetti and others and formed part of a pan-European Futurist network that considerably influenced modern art in almost every region of the continent.

Part II

Spaces and Places

Chapter 4

Cafés, Cities and Centres

The European avant-gardes did not develop their new art in a vacuum. This occurred within specific spaces and places. As such, an exploration of the geographical, cultural and political context in which the avant-gardes flourished is essential. A good place to start that exploration is the city. For in whatever climate or culture avant-gardists found themselves on the map of Europe – or beyond, as shown in Chapter 6 – the windows of their residences most often looked out on an urban environment. Cities were important to the avant-gardes for two reasons. First, they were a natural home to most avant-gardists, in part because cities, ever since the nineteenth century the centres of capital, housed the main art markets. Cities, moreover, were cheap to live and work in. Obviously while not all large towns in Europe were of the same size – around 1905 London was twice the size of Paris, five times as large as Berlin and over twenty times the size of Bucharest – the overall population living in cities between 1880 and 1910 saw a six-fold growth. As a result of this massive population increase, cities expanded dramatically as well and all over Europe had peripheral, often ramshackle, quarters with inexpensive rooms for rent that could also be transformed into work spaces. The relatively low cost of living in cities made it easy for avant-gardists to congregate, exchange ideas, and work collectively. By the turn of the century, finally, a network of railways was also in place that connected capitals and larger cities on the continent. This too of course made cities the ideal laboratories for the remarkably mobile avant-gardists to develop and test their new art in. Yet cities were indispensable to the avant-gardes for a second reason: they provided artists with a wealth of inspiration, so much so in fact that there probably would have been no avant-gardes without the cities in which they thrived.

The New City

As energetic and lively places in which the most advanced forms of transport, technology and leisure were matched in complexity only by the many languages and subjectivities of their inhabitants, cities triggered the imagination of avant-gardists in a panoply of ways. The number of photographs taken by avant-gardists of urban environments is indicative of their fascination with cities. Photographers Alexander Rodchenko, Germaine Krull, André Kertész and

Brassaï, Sasha Stone, Herbert Bayer, Man Ray and Otto Umbehr (Umbo), to name but a few, all shot images of urban scenes, often from spectacular angles and incorporated into photomontages. There were photographs of cars, trams, aeroplanes and metros, construction work, city industry and collective sports activities, of social outcasts, empty and overcrowded streets, squares and municipal chairs, of caf  s and cabarets, popular performers, of modern electricity pylons feeding cities with the energy to keep them going, of skylines, fashion and shop windows. This impressive archive of city photographs makes us aware of at least four important aspects of the relationship between avant-garde art and the city.

First, avant-garde photography instantly reveals that artists valued urban modernity in different manners, but hardly ever in an outright negative fashion. It is interesting to observe, indeed, that almost all avant-gardists turned to depicting the city in their art, and that only a handful of them thoroughly disliked the city (including Expressionist painter Emil Nolde, who only produced presentations of interiors and caf  s and never of street life, for example). Many viewed the metropolis in highly positive terms, as a site of the absolutely new, the hypermodern, and the centre of technological advancement (see, for instance, Fig. 33). No icon played such a central role in promoting this view as the Eiffel Tower. An emblem of modernity, not just because of its intricate



Figure 33 Mario Bellusi's *Traffico moderno nell'antica Roma* (Modern Traffic in Ancient Rome, 1930). Inspired by Futurist photographer Tato (pseud. Guglielmo Sansoni), Bellusi exposed and superimposed numerous negatives here to create the effect of chaotic urban traffic, of buildings being intersected by trams, and of exorbitant human figures roaming the streets.

design but also because it was used as a transmitting tower for telegraphy and radio, the Eiffel Tower was looked at by avant-gardists all over Europe as a magical construction that came with the promise of a new and modern world. László Moholy-Nagy's *Eiffel Tower* (1925, Fig. 35), for example, captured the famous tower from an unusual, upward-looking perspective that exploited to an aesthetic effect its multidirectional straight and curved metals and shades. Suggesting that the tower was larger than life and required a new way of seeing it, Moholy-Nagy implicitly celebrated all that Eiffel's design stood for: the thrill of progress, technical ingenuity, global communication and tourist attraction. In a similar way Vladimir Mayakovsky's poem 'Parizh. Razgovorchiki s Eifelevoi bashney' (Paris. Chatting with the Eiffel Tower, 1923) praised Eiffel's masterpiece. The poem's voice urges the tower to lift itself, move to Russia and put its shiny steel at the service of the USSR.

Mayakovsky's witty poem reminds us that not all cities in Europe modernised at the same pace – in Moscow, for example, only a minority of boroughs in the 1930s had running water. Yet his poem further illustrates that avant-gardists in less modernised and less industrialised cities often were the ones to lionise the modernity of the city and technology most. Artists living in the south of Europe were a case in point. Reading, for instance, the long Futurist 'Ode Triunfal' (Triumphal Ode, 1914) by Portuguese globetrotter Álvaro de Campos (pseud. Fernando Pessoa), first published in the rabble-rousing, Lisbon-based magazine *Orpheu* in 1915, we get an exhilarated, almost hysterical, experience of the modern city. In this ode, supposedly written in London, a lyrical persona frequents modern factories, travels across Europe, applauds, among other things, wireless telegraphy for being able to connect people all over the world, and concludes by portraying the whole continent as a gigantic moving metropolitan machine in which everything and everyone coincides, forever under construction, growing, a 'cosmopolitan factory-tree!'¹

Not all avant-gardists were as emotional about the big city and the technological as well as industrial progress associated with it. Some tended to approach urban modernity in an indifferent fashion. Many avant-garde photographers, for instance, resembled Baudelairean *flâneurs*, city wanderers who without a fixed direction allowed their environment to take them by surprise, as for instance in the coincidental encounter of the old and the new in the photography of Eugène Atget, whose documentary photography was greatly admired by Parisian Surrealists (see Fig. 34). The city to emerge from Atget's photographs is a place where remnants of times gone like ill weeds grow apace. Modern automobiles and motorbikes, along with aeroplanes, figure centrally in the work of many avant-garde champions of the modern city and technology, where they were often inserted as symbols of the velocity and staggering pace of modern metropolitan life. In Atget's work, however, this pace is halted and in a dreamlike manner made to coincide with signs of seediness and decay. Atget's city is a place of strange magic, of dark passageways,



Figure 34 Eugène Atget, *Cour, 7 rue de Valence* (Court in 7 Valence Street, 1922), made with a heavy, tripod-supported, wooden camera and glass negative. Atget, in his mid-sixties when this photograph was taken, was probably one of the oldest living artists to figure among avant-gardists. He was discovered and cherished by the Parisian Surrealists, who also published his photographic work in their magazines.

improvised, maze-like house extensions, a disquietingly unpopulated city at times too. Admittedly, this makes his city rather different from that of Álvaro de Campos, but by the same token Atget isolated another mesmerising facet of the modern metropolis.

Some works border on expressions of latent fear of modernisation and urbanisation. Jakob van Hoddis' poem 'Weltende' (End of the World, 1911), for example, often termed the first Expressionist poem and a classic instance of Expressionist *Grossstadtslyrik* (great city poetry), on the surface leaves little to be desired from living in a big city. Launching the so-called *Reihungsstil* or sequence style – which in an almost aphasic string of associations allowed the writer to juxtapose (real or imagined) images and perceptions of the city and to bundle them in often macabrely breathless visions – the poem's first stanza evokes a cityscape about to witness the end of days: 'From the Buhrger's pointy head the hat flies, / in all quarters resounds hullabaloo / roof tilers plummet and break in two / along the coasts – one reads – the flooding rises.'² Here, a constantly changing point of view on disparate elements foregrounds the fragility and ultimate breaking point of a city in constant change. Ludwig Meidner's Expressionist painting *Apokalyptische Landschaft* (Apocalyptic Landscape, 1913, Plate 2) is at first sight similarly



Figure 35 A photograph by László Moholy-Nagy of the Eiffel Tower (1925), made with a Leica, a lightweight, portable camera that had just come on the market.



Figure 36 Alexander Rodchenko, *Shorka dlya dyemonstratsii* (Assembling for a Demonstration, 1928). Photograph taken with a Leica from a balcony. Like Moholy-Nagy, Rodchenko thought that viewing the modern city required unusual angles. Much of his work as a photographer went into demonstrating that compositional skill and experimental shot-angles not only made photography a modern artform in its own right but also allowed people to see the world differently.

ambivalent in its presentation of urban modernity; its title, moreover, suggesting that metropolitan life had become a second nature to modern man. The horizontal and diagonal destructive lines of firework-like comets (or comet-like fireworks) and the colourful spectacle of distortion add up to what seems to be

a vision of the end of the world. Meidner's 1913 painting is often said to have prefigured the ruin of the First World War, but its grotesque rendering of the modern metropolis, like that by van Hoddiss, is not plainly negative. It shows a city ablaze with its own vital energy, burning by its own electrifying expansion. This nuance is important, because it reveals that even the least positive renderings of the big city in the avant-gardes were always accompanied by excitement about urban modernity. Even to Meidner, whose projection of the modern metropolis might come across as frightening, the city, possibly after its eradication, was the place where the new would take root.

Perhaps most disconcerting in Meidner's painting is how it pictures an anonymous panicking crowd about to meet its end. When it comes to crowds, to the rising number of inhabitants in modern cities, the avant-gardes tended to be more ambiguous. In photographs by Russian Constructivists during the 1920s we often meet uniformed groups of sportsmen and women moving orderly and synchronically on city squares to suggest the emancipating power of the collective (see, for example, Fig. 36). In Wyndham Lewis' famous painting *The Crowd* (1914–15, also exhibited as *Revolution*, Plate 8), by contrast, stick-like, mechanised figures diagonally and disorderly move in a vertical, flat and sterile cityscape. Lewis' imagined city is one that has outgrown its population, leaving a nameless yet powerful mass to an unclear fate.

Many avant-garde works explicitly thematise the relationship between the one and the many, the subject and the crowd. Futurist Umberto Boccioni's *La strada entra nella casa* (The Street Enters the House, 1911, Fig. 37), for example, depicts an older woman (reputedly his mother) leaning over a balcony while observing a large group of workers laying the foundation of a building in an urban landscape. The ongoing work and racket quite literally enwrap the woman. The far-off buildings and houses surrounding the construction site fracture in

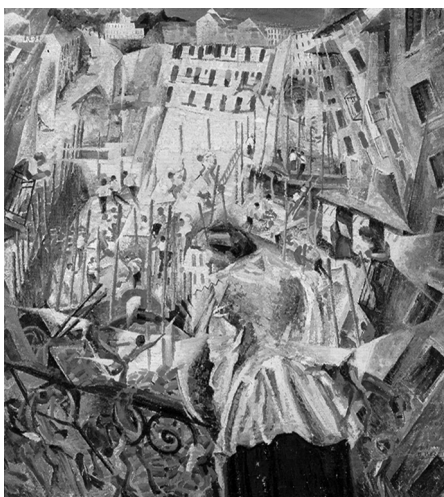


Figure 37 Umberto Boccioni, *La strada entra nella casa* (The Street Enters the House, 1911), painted shortly after his more famous and monumental, *La città che sale* (The City Rises, 1910), which marked his turn to Futurism, a movement he became one of the principal theorists of. Boccioni, like several other Italian Futurists, perished during the First World War.

geometric planes all leaning towards the central square which rises as the centre of gravity. On the square itself, the sway of the construction work suggests a whirlwind-like set of events unfolding; workers and their horses as well as staircases and other constructed materials find themselves not in front but move behind the observing woman's back, over whose shoulders we too come to see the action. As a result, we too find ourselves placed right in the middle of the vortex, becoming part of the same labouring mass and their materials. Boccioni's painting ultimately leaves us in limbo, though: is the loss of self it induces meant as a sign of hope in the coming of a new community, or as a token of fear for the anonymous crowd? We do not see the face of the seemingly calm woman, which makes it hard to decide which is which. What we can say for certain is that *La strada entra nella casa* is fundamentally about the act of perceiving and experiencing the city, about capturing its fierce tempo, its simultaneity of events, and its hyperstimulation of the senses.

This brings us to a second important aspect of the avant-gardes' relation with the city, that is, the avant-gardes' search, in all the arts, for a language that could somehow match the city's multi-sensorial experience, exasperating rhythm and simultaneity. It would be wrong to state that the avant-gardes' aesthetic project, as discussed in Part I, was a mere response to urban modernity. This project, however, was to a large extent incited by avant-gardists' experience of the modern metropolis. We need but recall the many theories of simultaneity put forth by Expressionists, Futurists and Cubists, or the fact that Robert and Sonia Delaunay coined the term *Simultaneism* to mark their own variant of Orphic Cubism – the Delaunays drew on the nineteenth-century theories of colour advanced by Michel Eugène Chevreul, who had argued that when two dissonant colours are contrasted alongside one another (say, a white fence along a bright green lawn), our retina perceives the colours mixing, and a vibration or movement is suggested as a result of their simultaneous perception; in Robert Delaunay's painting *Une fenêtre* (A Window, 1912, Plate 6), for instance, we recognise the Eiffel Tower and Paris' famous Roue or Wheel as seen through a window, but what the work primarily manifests is the visual effect of colours interfering with one another, moving, almost. All this focus on simultaneity is not simply to be reduced to the mundane experience of strolling the city street, with its perennially lit quarters, constant bustle, traffic to and fro, and the countless stimuli it unleashed on sensitive artists. Yet that this experience should be factored in stands beyond doubt.

Many avant-gardists explicitly stated as much. In the Romanian manifesto-poem 'Aviogram' (1924), for example, a typographically experimental text published in the magazine *75HP* (1924; the journal's title was a reference to the 75 horsepower engine of an automobile), Ilarie Voronca claimed that the task of the modern artist was to 'INVENT INVENT' a new art that could equal the modern city in surprise and estrangement. Judging from the amount of references in this manifesto to modern modes of transport, communication,



Figure 38 Victor Brauner's and Ilarie Voronca's colour linocut, *Pictopoezia* n° 5721, in the only issue of the journal *75HP* (1924). Both the geometrical shapes and the text, which resists traditional reading protocols, are of equal value in this work.

jazz and other forms of popular music as well as film – and from its capitalised call ‘READER, DE-LOUSE YOUR BRAIN’ – Voronca was rather optimistic about the products of modernity on display in the modern city. This optimism led him to join forces with Victor Brauner and to compose, in the same issue of *75HP*, what they called a *pictopoezie* (picturepoem), a type of visual poetry that combined poetic language and visual art (see Fig. 38). Just like the city, in a sort of cognitive overload, bombarded several senses at once, so could a new art, Voronca and Brauner asserted.

In their *pictopoezie* Voronca and Brauner gave the word ‘KODAK’ a central place. This mention of the American manufacturer of cameras was no accident. In the 1920s avant-garde photographers had long turned to the modernity of the city as their subject. They had done so in part to break with the nineteenth-century tradition of pictorialism – a trend that tried to emancipate the artform of photography by making photographs look like Impressionist paintings, often of nature or rural scenes, with blurry effects attained through platinum printing, photoetching, and scratching on negatives. Studying the city as the site of the new par excellence, avant-garde photographers claimed that a new way of seeing was called for – when in 1929, for instance, Franz Roh and Jan Tschichold compiled their influential photobook with cutting-edge photography of the time, they tellingly entitled it *Foto-Auge: 76 Fotos der Zeit* (Photo-Eye: 76 Photos of the Time). The city in photography too thus left its imprint by moving the artform away from nineteenth-century painting and towards actual camera work.

By the time Roh's and Tschichold's *Foto-Auge* came out in the late 1920s, however, a third important aspect of the avant-garde's relation to the city had made itself manifest. A tension had emerged between two extreme positions.

On the one hand, artists adhering to the movement of the New Objectivity or *Neue Sachlichkeit* increasingly turned to documenting urban modernity, using the battery of formal techniques avant-gardists had previously developed. On the other hand, there were those who resisted the emphasis on art's documentary function, claiming that the new art of the avant-gardes was to *add* experiences to those of urban modernity instead of merely *documenting* them.

The artform of film in the 1920s, and especially the genre of the *city symphony*, made this tension all too evident, as it hovered between these two extreme positions. Films often mentioned in discussions of the city symphony include René Clair's 1923 *Paris qui dort* (Paris Sleeping), Alberto Cavalcanti's *Rien que les heures* (Nothing but Time, 1926), Joris Ivens' *De Brug* (The Bridge, 1928) and *Regen* (Rain, 1929), and especially Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphonie einer Grossstadt* (Berlin, Symphony of a Great City, 1927) and Dziga Vertov's *Chelovek s kinoapparatom* (Man With a Movie Camera, 1929). All these films, to varying degrees, tried to flesh out an aesthetic specific to film, but in an experimental documentary fashion also zoomed in on everyday life (often from dawn to dusk) in one or several European cities. Language and literature (intertitles, a plot) as well as theatrical modes of acting were abandoned and made room for rhythmic and associative montages of (staged) real-life scenes and events. The city symphony genre, as its name suggests, took recourse to music in order to assert itself as art and to arrive at the visual equivalent of metropolitan experience. As in a musical composition, for instance, Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphonie einer Grossstadt* carefully calculated the duration of shots to capture a train entering Berlin. Recurring alternating shots of (objective) and from (subjective) the convoy evoke the rhythm as well as the sound of the train. In Vertov's classic *Chelovek s kinoapparatom*, images of birth, death, marriage and divorce are juxtaposed and intercut with shots of the cameraman at work. The first series of images compresses the lifecycle of city inhabitants and hints at their simultaneity; the shots of the cameraman foreground the key role of film editing in this operation. In all these lyrical documentaries we get a sense of witnessing everyday life a century ago in European cities and almost like anthropologists we find ourselves studying a social group. If today many of the big-city images produced by these films are iconic (evocating, as these films do, the appearance of efficient industry, travel, poverty, leisure time, etc.), we should not forget that they figured in complexly constructed and formally advanced works of art that did not plainly mirror historical reality.

Surrealism in the 1920s and 1930s, like the city symphony, displayed an anthropological and documentary interest in metropolitan everyday life as well, but translated this interest rather differently. For the Surrealists the city's attraction resided in the fact that its chaos allowed for chance encounters with people and objects. In André Breton's book *Nadja* (1928), for example, a narrator hardly distinguishable from the author charts, in a near-documentary fashion, his adventures with fellow Surrealists until one day he meets the character of

Nadja. The narrator is attracted to this seemingly confused woman, as she moves through the city of Paris regarding it as a wonderful forest of signs. Others fail to take notice of these signs, but when Nadja and the narrator contemplate them from up close, they soon reveal a network of cryptic messages that leads to revelation. Breton, conspicuously, called his book an ‘anti-novel’, because he wished to make clear that the magic Nadja allowed him to experience was not fiction but real. Similarly, in Louis Aragon’s novel *Le Paysan de Paris* (Paris Peasant, first serialised in 1924–5), the narrator carefully maps out the places he frequents in Paris, in search of a ‘modern mythology’. Aragon’s city comes to us as a place where dreams can be lived and dreaming with our eyes open is possible. Indifferent to what comes his way, the novel’s narrator among others takes us through the then down-and-out nineteenth-century shopping arcade of the Passage de l’Opéra. Linger past the dilapidated shop windows, a mannequin in one

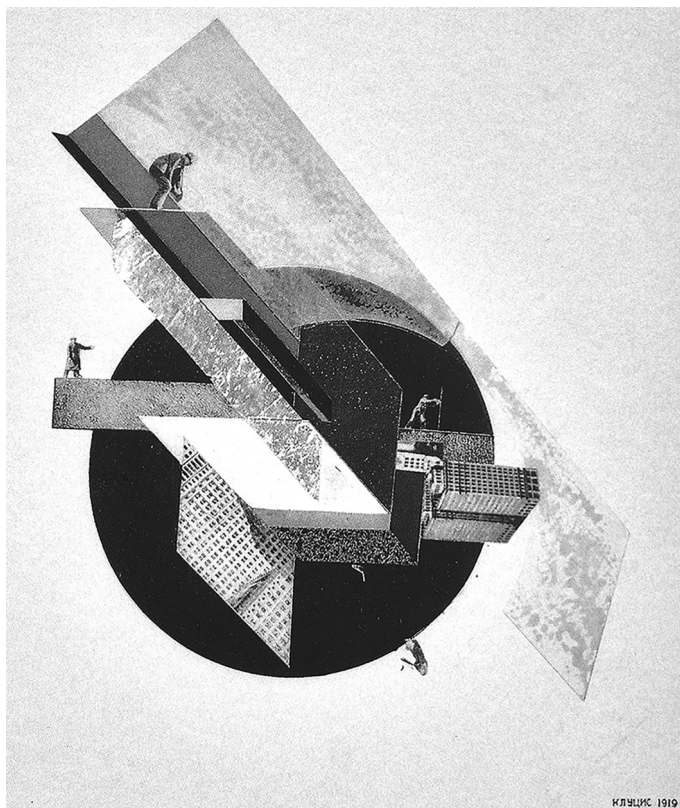


Figure 39 Gustav Klutsis, *Dinamicheskii Gorod* (Dynamic City, 1919). This photomontage with cut-and-pasted photographs, paper, aluminium foil, gouache and pencil argues for the application of abstract art in city design and planning. Klutsis called works like these *kartiny-veshchi* (images-objects) to emphasise his utilitarian approach and so as to urge his viewers to imagine them as real, three-dimensional objects.

window suddenly transforms into a mermaid, and the whole arcade turns into a human aquarium. In Surrealism, then, chance encounters with people as well as objects stumbled upon in flea markets and such, sparked marvellous, dreamlike images, which like those of the city symphony hovered between documentary and art, between decoding the familiar and making it strange.

Some avant-gardists upheld that the main task of art was not to decode the city in novel ways, but to put forth ideas for entirely new cities. In Latvian Gustav Klutsis' photomontage *Dinamicheskii Gorod* (Dynamic City, 1919, Fig. 39), for instance, we are quite clearly dealing with a possible rather than any real city. Of course, whatever artform we turn to, all avant-garde portrayals of cities, even those of the New Objectivity, were to some extent 'montages', that is carefully selected facets of urban modernity assembled into imaginary cities rather than actual representations. Works like Klutsis' push this to the extreme, however. In so doing, *Dinamicheskii Gorod* can also be read as a challenge to architecture, a complex artform in which many avant-garde practitioners are renowned, because they devised plans that were never realised. Italian Futurist Antonio Sant'Elia, for instance (see Fig. 40), produced a large number of sketches for

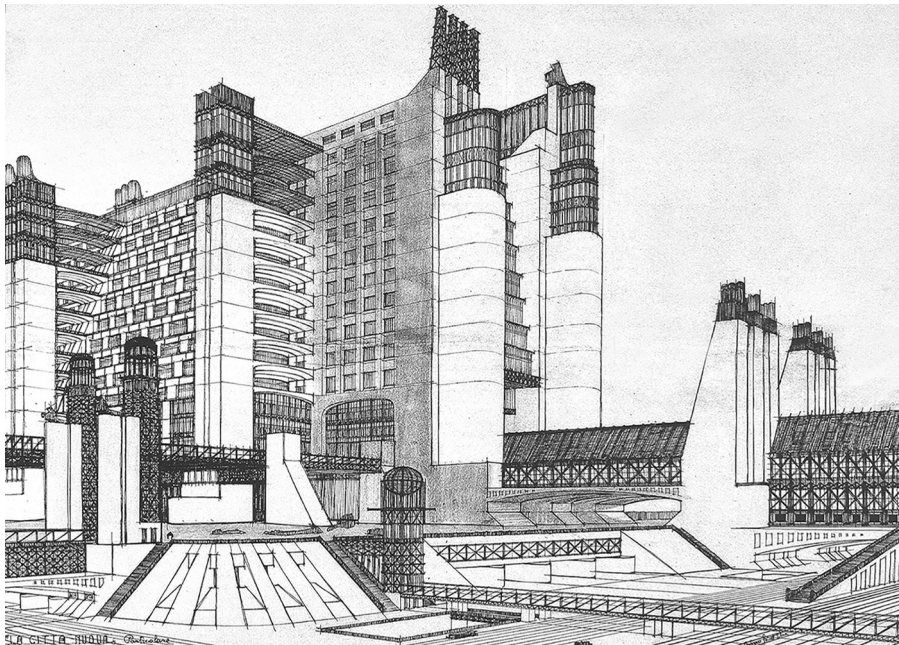


Figure 40 An ink drawing from Antonio Sant'Elia's *La Città nuova* (The New City, 1914), a series of unrealised designs for a city. Sant'Elia's sketch projects a modern metropolis that works like a gigantic, dynamic machine and allows for constant circulation. Presented here is a large residential block with external lifts, a gallery and an indoor passage, with three traffic lanes running underneath (a motorway, a tramway/railroad and a walking lane), topped with a lighthouse and a radio tower.

future cities which at that point were technically impossible to build. Expressionist architects Wenzel Hablik and Hermann Finsterlin, likewise, projected designs for cities that were never meant to be built, but which were intended to challenge the artform of architecture to think differently and to question its key role in city planning and design. Hablik's *Grosse bunte utopische Bauten* (Big Colourful Utopian Constructions, 1922, Plate 3), to take one instance, with its crystal, floral edifices and colourful skyscrapers, clearly amounts to impossible architecture – but what a wonderful one at that. By evoking the impossible (rather than the possible, which could be captured in intricate documentary ways), Hablik also powerfully asserted the role of art in the face of urban modernity. This happened in other artforms as well. Russian poet Velimir Khlebnikov, for example, in his elaborate manifesto 'My i doma' (Ourselves and Our Buildings, 1920–1), called for cities where every person would live in 'a container of moulded glass, a mobile dwelling-module supplied with a door, with attachment couplings, mounted on wheels, with its inhabitants inside it. It is set on a train [...] or on a steamship, and inside, without ever leaving it, its inhabitant would travel to his destination.'³ Appealing or not, Khlebnikov's mobile glass cities in turn questioned the basic principles of contemporary architecture and city design.

Fourth and finally, the three aspects of the avant-gardes' relation to the city discussed so far – that is, the diverse yet predominantly positive response to urban modernity, the varied attempts to match the experience of the big city in art through formal and thematic innovation, and the tension between documenting that experience and adding to it in art – show that the city in the avant-gardes was as much a contested mental space and an object of aesthetic experiment as it was a concrete topographical or historical place. The idea of the city, rather than the real or given city, made it possible for avant-gardists to converse with one another and to toss around projections of cities across national and cultural borders. It further made it possible for avant-gardists to imagine, say, Paris, without ever having been to the city. Take Belgian Expressionist writer Paul van Ostaïjen. Residing in Berlin in the early 1920s, van Ostaïjen, together with visual artist Oscar Jespers, produced the typographically experimental poetry volume *Bezette Stad* (Occupied City, 1921). Never having been to Paris van Ostaïjen began his book with a section in which he announced the total destruction of convention and the imminence of the new. The section mentions Paris' Place Blanche, a famous square close to the Moulin Rouge in Montmartre. In van Ostaïjen's book, however, the square literally comes to mean what its name suggests: a white plaza, a place to start afresh, a blank sheet of paper. A voice then dangles a blank map of Europe in front of the reader and invites him or her to redraw its internal borders as he or she desires. All cities

of Europe merge in this operation: 'BRUSSELS, Amsterdam, Bucharest, London, PARIS',⁴ all coalesce in a new generic European metropolis where a novel type of community could take root.

The imagined metropolis van Ostaijen launched from the Parisian Place Blanche is boundless – is it still a city? – and eminently transnational. The city to show itself in the work of artists who resided in Paris is often remarkably small. Many collages produced in Paris by Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and other Cubists, for example, lay out a semi-public interior animated by popular music, banter, debate and drinking. Their collages reference everyday objects that could be found in any café or music hall in Europe: table tops, bottles, newspapers, musical instruments and scores. What crops up is a static space of shelter, and, perhaps, camaraderie. We can read such works as interventions in an ongoing avant-garde debate on how to project a generic, modern (or possibly future) city. Yet the semi-public space of these collages also proves to be not quite immune to threats from the outside; Picasso in various collages used newspaper clippings to allude to historical events such as declarations of war. These of course remind us of the real or topographical city in which works were made. How, then, did avant-gardists themselves actually live in cities? What marked their lifestyle? And where would we most likely have found them?

Paris, Berlin

Paris and Berlin were without a doubt the most important cities in the history of the avant-gardes, and a brief look at how avant-gardists lived and operated there also teaches us a lot about how they went about their business in other cities. Paris was Europe's cultural capital when the avant-gardes stormed the stage of art around 1905, and most avant-gardists who had the means made an effort to travel to the city and spend time there. From all over Europe, and beyond, they came. In La Ruche (the beehive), for example, a large, ramshackle building which its art-loving owner had opened up to near-penniless artists for lodging and working, many now canonised avant-garde sculptors, painters and poets resided. There were Cubists Fernand Léger and Blaise Cendrars, the Eastern Europeans Chaim Soutine, Jacques Lipchitz, Marc Chagall and Alexander Archipenko, Italians such as Ardengo Soffici, Scandinavians and adventurous artists from the Balkans. Situated on the outskirts of the Montparnasse section of Paris, La Ruche was a squalid place. The rooms were damp, lacked running water and were infested with lice.

Such living conditions make it all too apparent that there could be a huge rift between the city projected in avant-garde works and the actual city in which artists lived. Some of these young creative talents spent years

in poverty and set up an alternative economic system whereby food or drinks were exchanged for small artworks. Others had money, and generosity towards fellow avant-gardists in such cases was an understood thing. Unsurprisingly, most avant-gardists flocked to the cheapest quarters in the city. To Montmartre, for example, in the Bateau-Lavoir (laundry boat), a building complex that thanked its poetic nickname to being large, dark and dirty. In the 1900s the building was ruled over by Picasso and populated by other painters and writers such as Juan Gris and Max Jacob. In this momentary free-space Cubism took off – it was in the Bateau-Lavoir that Picasso painted his proto-Cubist *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907, Plate 4). Yet Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, who would bring Picasso and Cubism to world fame, had a gallery located in a tiny room (4 × 4 metres) in the Rue Vignon close to the Madeleine, a much more wealthy area of Paris. This illustrates that avant-gardists worked out carefully where and how to package their work, and whom to ally themselves to for this. In the much smaller town of Zürich too, for instance, Dadaist Hugo Ball ran the Cabaret Voltaire for six months in 1916 in the run-down quarter of Niederdorf. In less than a year, however, Ball opened the Galerie Dada on the other side of the River Limmat in an impressive premise on the upmarket Münsterhof square. While the Cabaret mainly catered to students and people looking for a good time, the Galerie saw a change of audience and gradually welcomed more wealthy guests. In order to make ends meet avant-gardists throughout Europe made similar decisions, either moving quarters within cities or, if need be, relocating to other cities.

To accentuate their professionalism, and as frequently to distance themselves from more bohemian artists who in quarters like Montmartre were known for their scruffy looks, avant-gardists more often than not appeared in neat attire wearing suits. This post-bohemian marker of distinction adopted, regardless of their income, by avant-gardists all over Europe is visible in many period photographs and added to the image of the professional (rather than the free-spirited, tatty) artist the avant-gardes cut out. It was this same sense of professionalism, ultimately, that attracted so many avant-gardists to Paris. Naturally, Paris was appealing for many reasons, not least for its renowned nightlife. But it was above all the city's large modern art market, its concentration of art schools and its reputation of tolerance for artistic innovation, that had allure. Artists coming to Paris, like the Swedes Rolf de Maré and Jean Börlin, who in the 1920s created the Ballets Suédois at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, expected to benefit from Paris' freedom of expression and vibrant art scene. Yet they also waited to meet fellow countrymen in the city. With its many 'académies libres' (private academies where precursors of the avant-gardes like Fauvists Henri Matisse and Kees van Dongen, or later Cubist

Jean Metzinger taught students) and with its astonishing variety of exhibition and promotion venues, cinemas, bookshops and artist societies, Paris housed veritable colonies of artists from countries and regions all over Europe. At any point between 1905 and 1935, as a result, Swedes like de Maré and Börlin, if they wanted to, could meet up with dozens of other compatriots in Paris. In fact, more than 2,000 painters and sculptors from Nordic countries alone exhibited work in Paris between 1900 and 1930. With such a critical mass of international artists – not all avant-gardists of course – and an art market that attracted collectors worldwide, Paris was incontrovertible for the young revolutionaries of the avant-gardes. If there was one place to redirect the course of modern art, it was Paris.

After the First World War, more than a decade on in the international history of the avant-gardes, the city of Berlin also gained a lot of appeal. As the war had caused the market to collapse, leaving many artists penniless, Berlin proved much cheaper to live in than Paris. A hotbed of countercultural trends and far more central on the map of Europe than Paris, Berlin, along with the French capital, became the most important nodal point in the network of the European avant-gardes. Well-equipped with its own art schools and market, adorned with its own iconic sites, such as the Potsdamer Platz (read: endless construction work, traffic, commerce and consumption, leisure activities, and prostitution), Berlin after the war also came to house hundreds of avant-gardists from abroad.

Where would we have met them? In cafés, most likely. Warm – spending time in cafés also meant saving money on heating – noisy, anonymous, in principle open to everyone and always bustling with life, the café in many ways was the natural habitat of avant-gardists, and this not just after the First World War. Countless reports testify to the fact that avant-gardists throughout the period between 1905 and 1935 frequented cafés often several times a day, considering them an extension of their homes as well as their work places. Indeed, for a formation like the European avant-gardes, which sought to impact and transform life from within art, it appeared only natural that they also took their business to the streets. In Berlin, for example, many artists had a *Stammtisch* or regular table in places like Café Monopol (where Max Reinhardt developed his first plans for an Expressionist theatre), Café Josty and the Café des Westens, where they joined eccentric locals, extravagant immigrants, and women with unusual dress codes. All these cafés were places of social variety; bohemians and avant-gardists, crackpots and intellectuals, locals and strangers, high and low artists were all mixed inside.

Herwarth Walden, promoter of the avant-gardes, held court in the Café des Westens with his first wife, poet Else Lasker-Schüler. Other avant-gardists

throughout the day flocked in and out of this not particularly elegant establishment, table hopping, mingling. The café subscribed to many international newspapers and magazines and even had its own newspaper waiter. Dubbed Café Megalomania, the Café des Westens was a place of debate and a replacement editorial office; many issues of avant-garde magazines, including *Die Aktion* and *Der Sturm*, were compiled on its tables. Expressionists Franz Werfel, Kurt Tucholsky, Ludwig Meidner, but also Bertolt Brecht, the famous critic Walter Benjamin and countless others frequented it. Situated in the respectable middle-class West Side of Berlin, the Café des Westens was always portrayed in the popular press as a den of subversion. In 1915 it closed, supposedly for remodelling. The regulars were banished as the owners sought to attract a more ‘decent’ clientele. So avant-gardists simply moved shop, and after the First World War claimed a patch of the public space elsewhere in Berlin, like in the Romanisches Café or in one of the many other establishments adorning the city.

Selecting cafés in which to meet up was not done lightly. In Paris, the Surrealists went for the Cyrano and Café Certà, among others, because they were rather ordinary establishments with regulars coming and going, blushing couples and subdued card players. The cafés picked by Surrealists were located in neighbourhoods with places that had a particular attraction to them, like the Passage de l’Opéra. Surrealists in the early years of the movement convened at noon and again at night to show allegiance to their movement, to plot performances and public scandals, recite texts, recount their dreams, or draw a *cadavre exquis* (exquisite corpse) – a type of collective drawing whereby each collaborator in turn adds a portion without seeing what others drew, because they fold the sheet, covering their own contribution, when they pass the paper on. Other avant-gardists could be found in Le Dôme, La Closerie des Lilas, La Rotonde or Le Coupole. Some of the most famous avant-garde magazines were born in the cafés of Paris. Guillaume Apollinaire’s suitably titled *Les Soirées de Paris*, for instance, emerged from a back room of Café de Flore. Apollinaire was a regular there and held most meetings at his own, ever reserved, table. Every night, cineastes, sculptors, dancers, painters, poets and art dealers could be spotted at other tables.

Nights could be animated. Alcohol and drug use were not uncommon – some avant-gardists struggled with addiction. As they frequently disagreed during discussions or simply had too much to drink, rows often occurred. The list of bar fights among avant-gardists is impressively long. As members of different movements often held differing opinions on how to take art further, settling arguments (and attracting attention to their movements) through violence was common practice. When Marinetti visited Paris in 1910 on the occasion of a large Futurist exhibition, Alexander Archipenko approached Marinetti’s table after a talk the Italian had given and asked

whether he thought Futurism was the only worthwhile thing. Marinetti got up and simply punched Archipenko in the face. Police came. Arrests were made, and as usual the event led to reports on Marinetti in the press, adding to the notoriety of Futurism.

As might be clear, the avant-gardes' public life in cafés, with its less refined types of humour, varying degrees of sexual promiscuity and unrestricted freedom of expression, was a predominantly male undertaking. Women, for whom it was uncommon to enter cafés without male guidance in most European countries, had a much harder time to find a spot in this often virile and at times misogynist environment, as shown in Chapter 5. Yet they too added to the counterculture of creative exuberance which the avant-gardes launched in the public space. Indeed, avant-gardists might have been professionals, but in their everyday lives these free-spirited youngsters also extended the anti-establishment attitude at work in their art. Their lifestyle thereby culminated in one of Europe's first counter- and subcultural youth movements. For differences between various isms set aside, avant-gardists were also united by a sense of generational solidarity. As José Ortega y Gasset put it so succinctly: 'All modern art begins to appear comprehensible and in a way great when it is interpreted as an attempt to instil youthfulness into an ancient world.'⁵

The semi-public space of the cinema too was a spot favoured by many avant-gardists. Surrealists made it a game to hop from one screening room to the next, and instead of consuming a single commercial narrative film always ended up making their own film-mélange. The music hall and cabaret (introduced in Germany only around the turn of the century) had equal appeal. Many liked music halls such as the famous Bobino in Paris' Montparnasse. It was here, for instance, that Les Six, the group of composers, was formed. All these public and semi-public venues, from cafés and cinemas to music halls and cabarets, illustrate how the avant-gardes in their work not only projected the city as the place of the new. In their everyday lives as well, work and leisure, art and life, mingled in the project of a Total Art as they claimed a portion of the city's public space for their work and practices.

Avant-garde designs for music halls, among others, remind us that these artists ultimately aimed at the transformation of all non-art into art. Fortunato Depero's short-lived Cabaret del Diavolo in Rome, the decorations by Vorticists Wyndham Lewis and Jacob Epstein in Frida Strindberg's lush but equally short-lived Cabaret Theatre Club in London, and the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, among others, all show the extent of this ingenious project. So too does the collaboration, from 1926 to 1928, between Sophie Täuber, Hans Arp and De Stijl representative Theo van Doesburg on the design of a veritable amusement complex in the Aubette building on Place Kléber in the French

city of Strasbourg. Each of them took charge of the design of several rooms in the large building complex: a café-brasserie, a restaurant, a bar, a ‘cave’ for dancing in the cellar, a billiard hall, a ciné-dancing (literally, a cinema in which to dance), a large party hall, a foyer-bar, etc. Only the large staircase hall was designed collectively. For a decade, people in Strasbourg could enjoy their leisure time in this avant-garde complex, experiencing each unique, individual room. (In 1938, the owners regrettably thought it was time to redecorate.) As these examples manifest, avant-gardists of course could be found in various other European cities as well. Paris and Berlin housed the largest concentrations of avant-gardists, but this did not prevent other cities in Europe from counting their fair portion of itinerant avant-garde artists.

A Network of Centres

London, the largest and most modernised city in Europe, and around 1900 the capital of the world’s biggest empire, of course had its own force of Vorticists and Imagists. Everything considered, however, London’s critical mass of avant-gardists, in numbers at least, did not quite match that of Paris or Berlin. The proximity of Paris, the relatively high cost of travelling to and from London, the much older tradition of café and music hall culture and the fact that urbanisation and modernisation in general set in much earlier in London, are just a few reasons why between 1905 and 1935 the city never quite became as significant a centre as Paris or Berlin. London played a key role in the period, though, as a European centre of the avant-gardes in economic terms. From the 1910s onwards major exhibitions of Fauvist, Cubist, Futurist and Russian and German modern art were held in the city, and for the occasion Kandinsky and Marinetti, among others, also visited London briefly. Book-ended by Roland Penrose’s and Herbert Read’s 1936 exhibition of Surrealism in the New Burlington Galleries, a whole series of shows in London massively expanded the market for the avant-gardes.

In much smaller European cities as well avant-garde groups could be found. In fact, they could be encountered in nearly all European capitals and sometimes even in larger provincial towns, provided those towns gave access to the avant-gardes’ networked art market and were equipped with their own art schools. Other factors also fostered the attraction of certain cities to avant-gardists. Consider Copenhagen. Before the First World War, the city had already housed a series of exhibitions of foreign avant-garde art – in 1912, Herwarth Walden, for example, had exhibited twenty-four Italian Futurist paintings in Copenhagen; the same exhibition had previously stopped at Paris, London, Berlin, Brussels and Hamburg; a year later Walden returned to Copenhagen with an exhibition of Cubists and Expressionists. Danish artists themselves

before the First World War had also begun to experiment. Gudmund Henze, for instance, had participated in a show of *Die Brücke* in Dresden. The First World War changed the scene drastically, however, as the capital of neutral Denmark, like Zürich in Switzerland, became a magnet for avant-gardists who wished to escape the violence of war elsewhere. As entrepreneurs in Denmark further began to amass capital by trading and shipping food and other stock to warring countries, a new wealthy class of collectors in Copenhagen also emerged. A myriad of exhibitions in the city during the war followed, showing artists like the eccentric Norwegian painter Per Krohg, Swede Isaac Grünewald and Icelander Júlíana Sveinsdóttir, among others, from Nordic countries, but also an impressive number of artists from Germany, Russia and elsewhere. In 1917, Copenhagen saw the launch of the avant-garde magazine *Klingen* (The Blade, 1917–20), whose editor, Axel Salto, claimed in the first issue that like ‘a mighty phalanx “new art” advances: Frenchmen, Russians, Germans, Scandinavians, Poles, Spaniards – artists from all countries are on the march. Art is on the threshold of the new, rich land.’⁶ Salto’s words were prescient. The significant exposure of Copenhagen during the war to international avant-gardists left clear traces on the local art scene after 1918, when many local Expressionist, Dadaist and other avant-garde activities steadily grew in the city – one of the more memorable events occurring when Dada-inspired Emil Bønnelycke publicly read one of his poems and fired a gun in the auditorium.

The effect of radical geopolitical changes like war, revolutions and mass famine can also be seen at work in other centres of avant-garde activity. In the early years after the 1917 Russian Revolution, for instance, a considerable amount of Eastern European and especially Russian avant-gardists moved to the city of Tiflis (now Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia). Independent from 1917 to 1921, Georgia’s already lively scene of artists and poets in Tiflis expanded to unique proportions. In *The Fantastic Tavern*, an artists’ café, and the *Cabaret Chimaera*, local artists like Ilya and Kirill Zdanevich, Lado Gudiashvili, the resident Armenian Futurist Akop Kara-Dervish, and Muscovite Futurist Alexei Kruchenykh, among others, created a vibrant multilingual and international atmosphere that in the course of the 1920s yielded numerous local avant-garde initiatives, magazines, exhibitions and performances. These magazines and events in turn were picked up elsewhere in Europe, in other centres, and so Tiflis also became one of the many indispensable locales of the avant-gardes.

From Brussels, over Vienna, to Moscow, from Kristiania (Oslo) to Naples, avant-gardists were there, and despite at times enormous cultural differences they always shared the same attitude of rebellion and experimentalism, as a rule exhibiting that rebellion in the public space while posing as professional artists. In the 1910s Acmeist poets Ossip Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova convened and read from their work in the seedy *Stray Dog Café*, located in

a basement in the centre of St Petersburg. Here, they were joined by other luminaries of the Russian avant-garde, such as Mayakovsky, who made his debut as a public performer in the café, and by composer Arthur Lourié. Avant-gardists were also remarkably resourceful at securing their own café space. In 1917, Vasily Kamensky, along with Mayakovsky and David Burliuk, managed to persuade a rich restaurant owner in Moscow to subsidise a small café for artists located in an old laundry in the city centre. Soon known as the Poets' Café, this place was frequented by artists and intellectuals reciting from their work to all those interested.

In Prague, Budapest, Weimar, Dessau, Zagreb, Belgrade, Ljubljana, Poznań, Cracow, Warsaw, Łódź, in short, throughout the centre of Europe as well, considerable contingents of avant-gardists resided, both before and after the First World War. In Bucharest, for instance, the *Simbolul* group in the early 1910s, with Tristan Tzara, Marcel and Jules Janco and Ion Vinea, among others, ran their own magazine *Simbolul* (Symbol, 1912–13). Still in secondary school, these adolescents' pranks and poetry, though timidly, prefigured the explosion of Dada in Zürich to which Tzara and Marcel Janco would later travel. In the café Enache Dinu near the big market of Bucharest, moreover, avant-garde activities after the First World War continued. Here Saşa Pană, Stephan Roll, Geo Bogza and others met up, the place eventually becoming the launching spot of Romania's contribution to Surrealism in the 1920s.

In the south of Europe as well the avant-gardes blossomed. They had outposts all along the Mediterranean. In Milan, for instance, the headquarters of Futurism were located in the Caffè Savini, where Marinetti as a rule went before and after a Futurist *serata*. This café had a considerable artistic history, having long been a meeting place for famous Italian writers and artists. Yet there were also the Caffè del Centro, meeting place of Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà and Marinetti, and the Caffè Zucca, founded by Gaspere Campari. Similarly, in 1918 in Madrid, Guillermo de Torre, Juan Larrea, Gerardo Diego and the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges, then living in the city, formed Ultraism in the so-called *tertulia* (literary club) of Café Colonial. Several years before, in 1915, avant-garde writer Ramón Gómez de la Serna had established his own famous *tertulia* on Saturdays in the Madrilène Café Pombo. These evenings were attended by locals as well as by avant-gardists from other countries passing through Madrid. (Gómez de la Serna kept careful records of visitors.) Known as the 'Sacred Crypt' presided over by the Pontiff Gómez de la Serna, Café Pombo was where the *pombianos*, as regulars called themselves, ate, drank, read, drew cadavres exquis, and, when debates got too heated, entered into duels. The café's Spanish-Argentinian host, Gómez de la Serna, kept a female dummy as a companion, lectured from a trapeze and called on all those present to experiment in the arts. Today still he is especially known for his *Greguerías* – a short form of poetry that roughly corresponds to the one-liner in comedy.

Not all avant-gardists, of course, always lived in cities. Many often retreated to quieter rural residences or to artist colonies to work in a more natural environment, freed from the pressure and stir of the city, yet surrounded by fellow artists. Dancers Rudolf von Laban and Mary Wigman, for example, withdrew to Monte Verità (the Mountain of Truth) in Ascona, Switzerland, close to Lago Maggiore. This mountain had been bought by rich radicals around 1900 who wished to start a completely new way of life. Creative self-expression, nudism, veganism, feminism, psychoanalysis, anarchism and mysticism all came together in their anarchic community. Over the years, Monte Verità attracted several Dadaists, Expressionists and even representatives of the Bauhaus, and it was here too that Laban lay the foundations for his Expressionist dance as he set up his own dance school on the mountain. However, as artist colonies like the one on Monte Verità were designed precisely to retreat from city life, they cannot deny the centrality of the city in the history of the avant-gardes.

Indeed, this far from comprehensive survey of European municipal centres of avant-gardists makes clear that the avant-gardes would not have been the same without all their various city centres of activity on the continent. Undeniably, Paris and Berlin were major centres. However, they became so important in the history of the avant-gardes mainly by grace of the coming and going of artists from so many other cities and centres of avant-garde activity in Europe. To look at Paris and Berlin in isolation, in short, amounts to missing the rather singular transnational network that marked the avant-gardes. This network, when mapped out, amounts to a flat or horizontal (and not so much a hierarchical or vertical) web of European cities and centres, a rhizomatic structure, perhaps, where the mobility of ideas, works and personnel proved no less important than the concentration of capital and art dealers, modernisation and city expansion. On whatever individual centre or city we zoom in, we almost always meet artists from various isms, socialising, arguing, or, as in the case of Vienna, living in perfect isolation from one another – due to political upheaval in their home country, a large contingent of Hungarian avant-gardists around Lajos Kassák in the 1920s exiled itself to Vienna without ever entering into meaningful contact with local Expressionists or the Viennese *Kinetists* around Franz Cizek, Erika Giovanna Klien, Marianne (My) Ullmann and Elisabeth Karlinsky, whose abstract visual art emphasised movement and rhythm. When we zoom out and look at the connections between one city or centre and others, we always notice an intricate grid of relations. The Hungarians around Kassák, for example, might appear to have been isolated within Vienna, but they were simultaneously in contact with kindred spirits in at least a dozen other cities within different countries.

In 1921, Theo van Doesburg captured this transnational *va-et-vient* across national borders quite well, when he remarked that the ‘*avant-garde* always

already implies an International of the Spirit. This International [...] forms a disorderly troop, scattered over all nations.’⁷ A sort of *Europia*, in sum, emerges when we canvass all the cities in which the avant-gardes held court, an imaginary space, which like the city projected in the avant-gardes’ work itself is perhaps best seen as a ‘third space’ located between reality and desire, the possible and the impossible. Among the factors that in part made this transnational space impossible, as shown in Chapter 5, were the realities of state borders and international politics.

Box 4: Vorticism

Vorticism was the most successful attempt in the period 1905–35 to form a distinctly English avant-garde movement. It was spearheaded by painter, prose-writer, dramatist and polemicist Wyndham Lewis, and further involved, to various degrees of commitment, writers Ezra Pound, Richard Aldington, Ford Madox Hueffer (the later Ford Madox Ford) and T. S. Eliot, photographers ('Vortographers') Alvin Langdon Coburn and Malcolm Arbuthnot, architect Frederick Etchells, sculptors Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and Jacob Epstein, visual artists Cuthbert Hamilton, Edward Wadsworth, Lawrence Atkinson, David Bomberg, Jessie Dismorr, Helen Saunders and Dorothy Shakespear, along with the only self-named English Futurist, Christopher Nevinson.

Vorticism's interartistic adventure officially began with the publication in 1914 of the first (of two) issue(s) of *Blast: A Review of the Great English Vortex*. Its founding manifesto made no secret of its provenance. Based in London, the largest and arguably most modernised city in Europe at this point, Vorticism 'blasted' and 'cursed' Paris for its alleged parochialism, and 'blessed' English humour as well as the great industrial and technological advances the English had brought about. Machinery, steamships, trains, they were all English inventions, Vorticists asserted, yet England's art remained remarkably provincial. To change this situation, Vorticism did what many avant-garde movements from the 1910s onwards did: it looked to prior isms, selected elements from them and then combined these elements in a new mix of its own. While many Cubists and Expressionists like Kandinsky were formally progressive, Vorticism averred, their favourite subject matter (domestic still lifes or nature scenes) did not mesh with life in the modern metropolis or mechanised warfare. Italian Futurists, Vorticists admitted, did turn to modern subjects and championed aggression, violence and machines, yet they did not attain the formal intricacy of Cubism or a Kandinsky. Thus, fusing Cubism's multi-perspectivism and Expressionism's formal intensity with Futurism's fascination for mechanical dynamism, Vorticism carved out a new direction for modern art. As *Blast's* manifesto stipulated, Vorticists desired to 'produce a New Living Abstraction'. From within art, in sum, the movement set out to transform the world in order to make its look and culture truly modern.

Pound is generally credited with having coined the term Vorticism. In 'Vortex' (1914), an essay also published in *Blast's* first issue, Pound defined the notion of the vortex as 'the point of maximum energy' and suggested that one of the main goals of Vorticist art was not so much to apprehend

the dynamism of the mechanical age, as it was to capture the stillness at its core. Inside a machine, Pound argued, there is always a point of stillness, a point of powerful intensity too, from which the dynamic movement of the machine itself can be witnessed. It is this unusual perspective *from within* the mechanised entity (be it a machine or a modern city) that indeed marks many works produced by Vorticist artists. From within a newly imagined city or social machine, these works allow us a glimpse of the other world Vorticists had in mind.

For Pound this project inevitably entailed differentiation: each artform had to strive towards the same goal, but with the means specific to it. Thus, in 'Vortex' he argued that whereas other arts might work with different materials, 'the primary pigment of poetry is the IMAGE'.¹ With this statement Pound infused Vorticism with Imagism (a movement also discussed elsewhere in this book). Launched a year earlier, Imagism had argued for a poetry of pure images without ornamentation and had defined an image as a point of convergence of intellectual and emotional energies. Building on this, the Vorticist Pound now argued that the image was a vortex, a nodal point around which a whole set of ideas and affects whirl in attraction. In his poem 'Dogmatic Statement on the Game and Play of Chess', published in the second issue of *Blast* (the so-called 'War Number' of 1915), Pound illustrated what he meant by this. The poem describes an endless game of chess in an unusual way. In quasi-abstract descriptions of lines, colours and patterns, the poem evokes the hands of chessmen moving pawns on a board and perpetually restarting after each game so that the board becomes the site of a whirlwind-like, hard and monochrome vortex. This short image-poem thus verbally performs abstraction (without thereby becoming fully non-objective) and opens up a still centre on the chess board for the reader to occupy and from which to experience the intellectual and emotional energies invested in the game.

What Pound realised in the poem 'Dogmatic Statement', Vorticists in other artforms and with different means made happen on a larger scale. From the experiments with the camera by photographer Langdon Coburn to the many abstract paintings foregrounding structural masses, thick lines and geometric shapes by Wadsworth, Bomberg, Saunders and others, from Lewis' long conceptual play, *Enemy of the Stars* (1914) to Epstein's famous *Rock Drill* (1913, Fig. 41) – consisting of a 'readymade' drill mounted by a plaster, tendon- and nerve-like human figure whose stillness contrasted with the energy and warlike industrial construction work suggested – attempts were made to abstract modernity and to articulate new visions of it. Although the work of Vorticists proved formally heterogeneous, during Vorticism's most intense phase of activity from 1914 to 1915 it did display

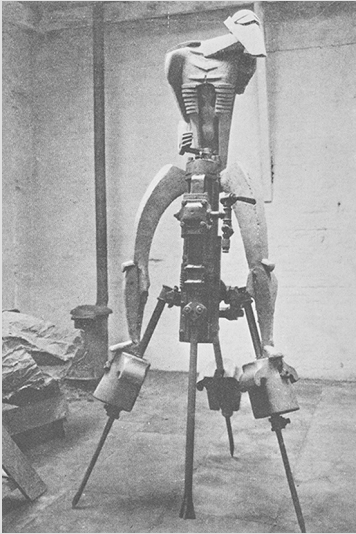


Figure 41 Jacob Epstein's *Rock Drill* (ca. 1913), a plaster figure mounted on an actual rock drill, as displayed at Brighton City Art Gallery from December 1913 to January 1914. The work was later destroyed by Epstein. This powerful still figure, packed with energy, invites us to imagine its noisy context, a huge construction site or a mine perhaps, whirling with muscular, mechanical vitality.

remarkable stylistic and thematic convergence. The collective body of work set forth by Vorticists adds up to a complex design for a new city, a modern world for the masses, which as in Lewis' painting *The Crowd* (1914–15, Plate 8) at times looks frighteningly virulent and violent. Indeed, we can enjoy Vorticism today for its formal intricacy and the astounding skill it displays. But when we imagine ourselves inhabitants of the new city projected, we also soon realise that Vorticists did not only celebrate technology and industry; they further used their art to come to terms with profound fears engendered by modernity.

These fears proved founded; the movement ended in 1915 as many members got roped into the First World War. While some Vorticists, like the autodidact sculptor Gaudier-Brzeska, died on the front, others subsequently went their own way in artistic terms. Begun in the London Rebel Arts Centre in 1914, which had been open for only a few months in 1914 and which had been financed by painter Kate Lechmere as a meeting place and studio for experimental artists, the mechanised 'Great War' crushed Vorticism after it had managed to organise only one group exhibition. After the war Lewis made an attempt to revive the movement with the launch of artist Group X and his magazine *The Tyro* (1920–1), yet both initiatives proved short-lived. After the war Lewis nonetheless remained ambitious. As he put it in his long essay, *The Caliph's Design: Architects! Where is Your Vortex?* (1919), he wanted to move art out of the studio into life, and he argued that Vorticists were to construct the world anew.

Not much came of this plan – the Group X organised just one exhibition. Yet when we turn to the reception of Vorticism in the rest of Europe, it becomes rather apparent that the movement lived on in avant-garde discussions well into the 1920s. A reproduction of one of Lewis' visual works, along with an interview with Pound on Vorticism, appeared in the St Petersburg anthology *Strelets* (The Archer) as early as 1915. After the war, in 1921, the Polish Futurist magazine *Nowa Sztuka* (New Art) brought a discussion of *The Tyro* and presented Vorticism, alongside Expressionism, as an alternative to Cubism and Futurism. In 1922, *The Tyro* was further discussed in *Semafor u Maibutnie* (Semaphore into the Future), the Kyiv-based journal ran by Panfuturist Mikhail Semenko. Thus, reaching avant-gardists as far as Russia, Vorticism remained an active force among the European avant-gardes long after its actual disbandment in Britain.

Chapter 5

New Men in Old Europe

An undisputed fault line in the history of the classic avant-gardes, the First World War was by no means the only war witnessed by the avant-gardes. The list of rupturing geopolitical events between 1905 and 1935 in Europe is upsettingly long, and includes the Russian Revolution of 1905, the 1907 Romanian Peasants' Revolt, the 5 October 1910 Revolution in Portugal, the Italo-Turkish War of 1911–12, the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the subsequent civil war and rise of the Eurasian Soviet Union in 1922, the German Revolution of 1918–19, the Finnish civil war of January 1918, the installation in 1919 of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic of Councils led by Béla Kun, the Polish–Soviet War of 1919–22, the Irish War of Independence and the Irish Civil War, the blood-soaked years leading to the March on Rome in 1922 by the National Fascist Party led by Benito Mussolini, the ominous rise to power in 1933 by the Nazi Party and the dawn of the Spanish Civil War. These events demonstrate that the transnational and horizontal network of centres and cities of the European avant-gardes developed against a backdrop of uninterrupted violence, hunger and mass migration, very often directly caused by nationalist forces (see Fig. 42). Such geopolitical upheaval often forced the avant-gardes to mobility, to move and take their portable works and projects with them. Yet how did avant-gardists view this tremendously unstable and perennially precarious context? What political convictions did they adhere to? And what, if any, alternatives did they present to a European culture which proved unable to avert such devastation?

Politics

Avant-gardists adhered to a variety of views on the political palette, ranging from the far left to the extreme right. To the left, for instance, we find the Russian devil-do-all Alexander Rodchenko. In 1920 he accepted the appointment by the Bolshevik Government as Director of the Museum Bureau and Purchasing Fund. This made him responsible for the reorganisation of art schools and museums. Rodchenko later took on several other posts as a Soviet official. In the process he abandoned studio painting, which he considered a useless, typically bourgeois artform unfit for Soviet proletarian culture. With his 1921 triptych – a



Figure 42 Otto Dix's drawing, *Dirne und Kriegsverletzter* (Prostitute and War Wounded, 1923). A work typical of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity), Dix's drawing documents the effects of the First World War on ordinary civilians. She has a syphilitic scar that resembles a bullet hole, his wound resembles female genitalia. Dix later renamed this work *Zwei Opfer des Kapitalismus* (Two Victims of Capitalism).

genre traditionally used in Western art for the representation of religious scenes – of three monochrome paintings in red, yellow and blue, Rodchenko believed to have made clear once and for all that painting was over and done with. For this was as pure as painting got. And what more was painting than a mixture of three basic colours on a flat canvas? What really was the social use of that? A new Soviet art, Rodchenko believed, was to draw on modern technology, new media and other recent advances so as to actually improve the living conditions of Russians. So Rodchenko began to devote his time as an artist, among other things, to photography, which by use of a machine, the camera, was also mechanically reproducible and therefore more democratic as an artform than painting. He also lent his talents to advertising and propaganda for the Soviet cause, designing posters and even paper wrappings for so-called Red October Sweets. The increasingly repressive cultural politics of the Soviet regime put Rodchenko's talents to the service of propaganda only. It is unclear how exactly Rodchenko related to the rather bloody and totalitarian regime he worked under, but that same regime certainly made explicit what it thought about many avant-gardists when it eventually muzzled, imprisoned or eliminated them.

To the far right we find avant-gardists as well. German-Danish painter and print-maker Emil Nolde, for instance, was not only one of the first Expressionists and a member of *Die Brücke*. Like Joseph Goebbels, he also considered Expressionism to be distinctly Germanic and in the 1920s he became a supporter of the Nazi Party. Nolde's allegiance to this party signalled his belief in the distinct qualities, if not superiority, of the German 'race' – Nolde was also an anti-Semite. Hitler, however, did not think much

of Nolde. He found Nolde's work 'degenerate' and eventually forbade him to paint; over a thousand works of Nolde were also removed from German museums. The cases of Rodchenko and Nolde show that practical or official politics and the avant-gardes mixed like oil and water. They further illustrate that it is impossible to pinpoint a single practical political programme at work in the European avant-gardes. The majority of avant-gardists in fact never said much about their practical political inclination, and those who did make their convictions explicit most often tended to hover somewhere left of centre of the political palette, commonly to a form of socialism or anarchism.

The somewhat diffuse relationship between art and practical politics can in hindsight be explained by three in part conflicting presuppositions at work in the avant-gardes' project of an expanded Total Art. First, avant-gardists throughout Europe tended to be against the political establishment because they were convinced that it kept their project of a Total Art from thriving. This made sense considering that the political establishment also extended its power into the realm of art through all kinds of official artistic institutions as shown in Chapter 1. In light of this, it is also logical that many flocked towards at times radical anti-establishment political views in the hope that these could bring about change. Harder to swallow, perhaps, yet also related to the avant-gardes' rebellion against the establishment, was that many welcomed war with open arms. Many artists approached war, and the First World War in particular, as a cleansing, iconoclast operation, and anticipated that once peace would have returned the powers-that-be would also end up being dethroned. This does not mean that all avant-gardists were warmongers, of course, but it does tell us something about the naïve conviction many shared, especially at the outbreak of the First World War: the foreseeable destruction was regarded as the precondition for a new, modern and perhaps even avant-garde culture to emerge. Naturally, this sentiment, which often came with a dose of nationalism as well, soon made room for regret, if not genuine fear, a few months in the war: the death toll among avant-gardists was considerable; many came back with shell-shock, while others, like Cubist poet Blaise Cendrars, lost limbs. As these young creative minds soon found out, moreover, making art in times of war, when even food is in short supply, proved to be no picnic.

Second, avant-gardists attached great value to coterie and group experience. Uniting themselves in isms and other loose forms of collaboration, and developing their own youth subculture, the avant-gardes in a way formed a large, pan-European countercultural network. The social dimension of their countercultural undertaking, in sum, can hardly be overestimated. This led various of these young creative minds to sympathise with all kinds of social

groups that struggled to assert themselves, ranging from students, workers and colonised peoples to those belonging to suppressed European nations or, as in the case of Surrealism, the mentally ill. This social or collective aspect of the avant-gardes further explains why many adhered to a form of socialism. As artists who in their own time were often relegated to the margins, many felt a bond with other groups that in the fringes of society also played only a minor role in practical political decision-making. In various ways, we could say that the avant-gardes' identification with less fortunate social groups awakened a desire to act as these groups' mouthpiece.

The avant-gardes' emphasis on the collective stood in stark contrast with a final presupposition, however: the unconditional stress on the artist's freedom. Indeed, third, avant-gardists held subjective freedom in high regard, because they wanted to be as unrestrained as possible in devising their art and aesthetic ways of life. As Mayakovsky put it: 'In all our demonstrations, this is what came first on our banner: "Every creative work is free!"'¹ Surrealist André Breton similarly claimed throughout his career that there could be only one 'formula: *complete freedom for art*'.² This emphasis on the anarchic independence of the artist unearths a liaison with various anarchist currents in political thought, and might also explain why avant-gardists were most often suspicious of views on collective ways forward proposed by official political parties. The stress on freedom or autonomy in any case hints at the main reason why, ultimately, the avant-gardes and practical politics never quite managed to bundle forces enduringly. For whereas those in practical politics are supposed to represent the *collective* and the common good – a task which, admittedly, many politicians would betray during the interwar period – avant-gardists, often forced to do so, always emphasised their *subjective* freedom as artists in order to be able to carry on their work.

Thus, while there was a tension in the avant-gardes' aesthetic project between the one and the many, the subjective and the collective, when the time came avant-gardists as a rule chose their own, subjective freedom over the concerns of the collective. Even Mayakovsky, who in the 1920s explicitly put his artistic talents at the service of the people, reserved the right to decide on this move *himself*. In 1930, with Stalin firmly at the helm of the Soviet Empire, he made the final choice of committing suicide – some say under suspicious circumstances. His funeral was attended by 150,000 people – only Lenin and Stalin had more mourners – a reminder of the fact that the avant-gardes in many countries developed to become a major cultural force, and as we will see at the close of this chapter this probably also explains why political forces in many parts of Europe during the 1930s decided to smother them.

Already shortly after the First World War, however, the structural incompatibility between practical politics and the avant-gardes became rather visible.

Faced with the destruction of various cities and regions in Europe, avant-gardists asserted that they were ideally placed to guide, if not lead, the reconstruction of Europe. Their new art, after all, was the best guarantee for the old not to repeat itself. In Germany alone hundreds of artists united in various semi-official political-artistic organs, such as the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* (Workers' Council for the Arts) and the *Novembergruppe* (November Group), with the aim of devising architectural plans for new types of cohabitation and paving the way for a novel society. In 1919 the *Novembergruppe* published a pamphlet entitled *An alle Künstler!* (To all artists), the cover of which showed a lithograph by *Brücke* member Max Pechstein; it depicted a man holding his heart from which flames spread to adjacent factories; from this would arise a new social constellation.

Participating in the reconstruction of society via their art thus became a primal concern for many avant-gardists in the post-war period and, as could be expected, this inevitably entailed a dialogue with practical politics. For an artist, obviously, cannot simply start reconstructing, say, a destroyed city block without the consent or financial support of its future inhabitants whom those in practical politics are meant to represent. It is here, at the point upon which avant-gardists sought an alliance with practical political factions which they thought to be most favourable towards their artistic plans, that we also come to see most clearly that the avant-gardes were unwilling to compromise their independence as artists.

A few examples. In 1919 in Hungary, Lajos Kassák tried to persuade Béla Kun, leader of the short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic of Councils, of the need to give artists absolute freedom in coming up with plans that might be of value to the new Republic. Kun's regime had other priorities and when the Republic was overthrown and repression set in, Kassák fled to Vienna. In 1919 in Germany, Expressionist Kurt Hiller became the leader of the *Rat Geistiger Arbeiter* (Council of Spiritual Labourers), a quickly disbanded artists' and intellectuals' association founded in Germany after the war. The *Rat* tried to convince political officials of the benefits of better representing social minorities – Hiller himself was homosexual – and of giving avant-garde artists more social responsibility. Yet Hiller was simply ignored and was only mildly enthusiastic about the arrival that same year of the Weimar Republic, Germany's first parliamentary democracy – like many, he sensed that the introduction of democracy would not bring fundamental changes; old ideas would just parade as new ones. In France in the 1920s, the Surrealists struggled to forge alliances with the Communist Party, convinced as they were that Surrealism could help further a new culture among the people, whereas the Party could strive towards bettering the everyday living conditions for all. The Surrealists' attempts led nowhere, however, except

to an internal fracturing of the movement: some members, such as Pierre Naville, and, later, Louis Aragon, believed that compliance with the Communist Party's dogmas was more pressing than safeguarding the autonomy of art. All these cases – and there are many more – show that the avant-gardes' multifarious encounters with practical politics are a capital aspect of their history. Yet they also highlight that avant-gardists saw themselves first and foremost as free-spirited artists, whose primal business was not so much in the domain of practical politics as it was in the realm of culture. For here was where the real political battle had to be fought, and where a New Man, a completely different type of subjectivity and European culture, could well arise.

The New Artist

The old Europe, so all avant-gardists agreed, had to make room for the new. Home to seemingly universal value-systems such as Christianity and the Enlightenment, the self-acclaimed cradle of humanity, beauty, tolerance and philosophy, a cultural and political entity rooted in Athens and Rome and shaped by St Augustine, Dante, Cervantes, Shakespeare and Goethe, Europe was not looked upon favourably by its avant-gardes. Slovenian Avgust Černigoj summed it up well in his '1½ štev tanka' (Tank Manifesto, 1927) for the fleeting and eclectic Constructivist magazine *Tank* (1927):

europe must fall due to overbearing egoism
 = = = = subconscious individualism
 = = = = free terrorism.
 our striving begins where european decadence stops forever.³

A majority of avant-gardists upheld that the most powerful social class, the bourgeoisie, was to blame for most, if not all, problems in Europe from the turn of the century onwards. While not all regions in Europe knew a bourgeoisie as dominant in economic, political and cultural terms as in the West of Europe, it was common for avant-gardists all over Europe to oppose the bourgeoisie. 'Europe' in fact was most often used as shorthand in avant-garde writings for the 'West of Europe', the 'occident'. Given that the bourgeois here dominated the old Europe, opposition to that old Europe also entailed aversion to the values of the bourgeoisie. Similarly, a search for a new or alternative Europe inevitably implied the construction of other forms of subjectivity to oppose bourgeois identity. As Czech Jindřich Štyrský put it in the magazine *Disk* (1923–5), '[t]he project of a new world can be worked out only by a NEW MAN'.⁴

The avant-gardes' exploration of a New Man, that is of forms of subjectivity that parted ways with the identity of the bourgeois, was perhaps their most significant contribution to European culture at large. This exploration began logically with avant-gardists themselves: they modelled or fashioned themselves into different emblems of the New Man. Oversimplifying, it can be said that avant-garde artists came in three types: 'provocateurs', 'apostles' and 'engineers'. Each in their own way these types embodied a certain ethos of artisticity, yet they all tended to present the artist as a model whom others, also outside of art, could follow. (In yet another way, the irresolvable tension between the one and the many shows itself here.) In their public interventions 'provocateurs' like the Dadaists, for instance, took it upon themselves to shock and provoke their bourgeois audience, ridiculing dominant views and political or cultural trends. 'Provocateurs' thus seized their freedom as artists to deliberately go and stand *outside* of society, distanced from common-sense views that circulated in culture and endowing themselves with a detached, reflective role as creative minds. As Tristan Tzara put it in a 1919 'Note on Poetry': '*Freedom, freedom*: not being a vegetarian I'm not giving any recipes.'⁵ Refusing to prescribe how others were to live in freedom, Tzara, the 'provocateur', simply suggested that people had to find out for themselves how to reach the freedom he, as an avant-gardist, had carved out for himself already.

Rather different was the role avant-garde 'apostles' reserved for themselves. Expressionists, for instance, not infrequently presented themselves as messianic figures who had come to liberate mankind. Bruno Taut, for example, once referred to himself as 'Christ',⁶ as the figure whose work meant to redeem everyone, whereas fellow Expressionist writers whose poetry was collected in Kurt Pinthus' famous anthology *Menschheitsdämmerung* (The Dawn of Humanity, 1919) in a variety of ways presented lyrical personae who called upon their readers to follow in their Promethean wake so as to unite in a new humane collective, governed by love and brotherhood. Unlike the 'provocateur', the avant-garde 'apostle' often lacked a sense of irony and with a heavy dose of pathos located him- or herself literally *above* everyone else, as a shining and radiating example who could lead others to the Paradise on Earth.

Finally, avant-garde 'engineers' saw themselves as the designers of plans and models that could be executed by fellow non-artist labourers. Constructivists such as the already mentioned Rodchenko, for instance, depicted themselves as functionalist or utilitarian artists who stood *among* the people. Calling 'art' (at least as it had been understood traditionally) dead, Rodchenko, along with Alexei Gan and several others after the Russian Revolution of 1917 set out to construct objects and artefacts that would be useful to proletarians and which ideally could also be mass produced in modern factories. Importantly, while being perhaps the most 'worldly' of avant-gardists, even the 'engineer' was not

simply a worker – he or she was the designer of plans others eventually would have to execute.

These three types of course had predecessors in art history – to take one case here, avant-garde ‘apostles’ clearly drew on Romanticism. Of course, artists also often took on various of these postures throughout their careers, or made their own *mélanges*. Nonetheless, all three types show that avant-gardists, be it in shifting degrees, saw themselves as embodying a New Man in opposition to the bourgeois and the old Europe. Further, the fact that these types are rather different implies that avant-gardists never really agreed on the precise nature of the New Man. It was the quest for another subjectivity, rather than its fixation in a stable identity, that defined their cultural endeavour. Central to that quest was the shared conviction that European culture needed, in the words of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Der Antichrist* (1895), a ‘transvaluation of all values’. The bourgeois understanding of reason, gender and the nation ranked perhaps the highest on the avant-gardes’ list of values in need of fundamental reform, and so it makes sense to chart the many variants of the New Man along these lines in what follows.

The Alter-Rationalist

As Hans Arp observed after the First World War, ‘Reason, that ugly wart, has fallen off man.’⁷ Arp was by no means the only avant-garde artist to take issue with ‘reason’. The avant-gardes’ quest for a New Man always in some way hinged upon the problems of reason and rationality, as most avant-gardists defied the narrow way in which the bourgeoisie especially dealt with reason. For did not all bourgeois patterns of behaviour and morality, even the act of going to war, come under the guise of being ‘reasonable’? And was not reason, then, the primal instrument used by the bourgeoisie to perpetuate its power and mode of life? Many avant-gardists mocked the bourgeois penchant for reason at all costs. Consider the strangely monumental assemblage *Der wildgewordene Spiesser Heartfield* (The Middle-Class Philistine Heartfield Gone Wild, 1920, Fig. 43) by George Grosz and John Heartfield. This assemblage signalled, importantly, that avant-gardists, many of them coming from an (upper) middle-class background, of course also struggled with the bourgeois or philistine within themselves – the mannequin, after all, is named after Heartfield. The objects that adorn this ‘Spiesser’ or bigoted bourgeois, furthermore, accentuate the conflict between reason and the irrational in the bourgeois: the doorbell evokes the protective domestic space, the number 27 suggests that all bourgeois are at heart identical and interchangeable, the pistol and the medal allude to the Spiesser’s recent acts of war and violence. Finally, the dentures in place of genitals



Figure 43 George Grosz and John Heartfield during the 1920 Dada 'Messe' or fair in Berlin, in front of their *Der wildgewordene Spiesser Heartfield. Elektro-mechanische Tatlin-Plastik* (The Middle-Class Philistine Heartfield Gone Wild. Electro-mechanical Tatlin Sculpture, 1920). This assemblage of approx. 130 cm (51 3/16 in) height stands on a wooden plinth, and consists of a tailor's dummy, a light bulb, plaster dentures, an Iron Cross, embroidered insignia for the Black Eagle Order on a horse blanket, a revolver, doorbell, knife and fork, the letter C and a number 27 sign. Grosz and Heartfield hold a placard ironically stating 'Art is dead. Long live the new machine art of Tatlin.'

testify to a repression of sexual drives. Bourgeois reason thus overrules sexual desire, but not the drive to kill. Heartfield and Grosz did not mean to endorse violence with this assemblage. Their suggestion, rather, was that by not covering up these inconsistencies and recognising conflicting, potentially destructive drives, a New Man could perhaps also transform these drives in creative ways. Because of this conviction, many avant-gardists also frequently referred to Freudian psychoanalyses, as they found Freud's views of human nature congenial with their own project.

Yet Freud's psychoanalytical views were not the only source avant-gardists drew on to voice their discontent with the bourgeois' reduction of humans to a purely reason-driven species. With his theatre Bertolt Brecht, for example, thought he could make an audience reflect on social injustices mainly by calling on real rational thought. Modern philosophy in the West since René Descartes had tended to define man as a self-enclosed, thinking individual. Bourgeois identity and morality had made this idea of the individual their own, at the cost of the collective. For Brecht, therefore, it was time to get rid of this questionable bourgeois notion of the individual and to show an audience the rational flaws of its injustice. In his play *Mann ist Mann* (Man Equals Man, 1926), for instance, the first dramaturgical elements of his later mature *epic theatre* became visible, such as the character-narrator interrupting the action to address the audience, or songs inserted in the middle of dramatic scenes. Such devices added to what Brecht called the *Verfremdungseffekt* or *V-Effekt*

(estrangement effect), an operation meant to make the public aware of the fact that it was witnessing a representation of reality, and not reality as such. The plot of *Mann ist Mann* added to the estrangement: nearly all characters change identity (and even sex) in the course of the play to suggest that profit and not reason drives the world of the bourgeoisie. In this world all people are at heart interchangeable; just as long as people do their jobs and mind their own business, the system does not care. Individuality in Brecht thus proved an illusion, for rationally speaking, *Mann ist Mann* argued, we are all in it together.

Brecht illustrates that the avant-gardes were never really *anti*-rationalist but always *alter*-rationalist, that is, they drew on a variety of sources in order to push alternatives to the narrow definition of reason in the 'old', bourgeois Europe, and to show that the full potential of man included much more than just the ability to reason. Several avant-garde writers, for example, tended to closely associate reason and language. The principal instrument the bourgeois used to express its views, after all, was language. Hence, by transforming language, and by promoting new types of writing such as *zaum* poetry, authors also believed to be giving shape to a new or different form of thinking and experiencing the world through language, one that also gave room to affects and emotions, for example, and perhaps even to a pinch of magic in the case of *zaum*. To reduce language to pure sound, as in *zaum*, moreover, implied a search for some sort of origin or starting point on which a truly New Man could be built. Indeed, to find out what else defined man, some argued that it was necessary to return to a state *before* modern culture, to an original, if not naked, state of authenticity (put into nudist practice, among others, by Expressionist Ernst Ludwig Kirchner in his studio, see Fig. 44). Others decided to study so-called 'primitive' peoples – an issue discussed at length in Chapter 6. Still others seized on dance as the ideal artistic means to arrive at a form of the rhythmic and dynamic expression beyond the conventions



Figure 44 A 1915 photograph of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (naked), Werner Gothein, Hugo Biallowons and Erna Schilling in Kirchner's studio in the Berlin Friedenau quarter. Like many, Kirchner advocated a return to nature, away from the 'second nature' of the modern metropolis.

of verbal, rational language. In all these attempts the human sensorium and sensory experience of the world was explored, because it was felt that reason had downgraded many human senses (all but sight, in fact), or that reason had managed to numb the senses by prescribing and limiting how a proper person was to experience the world. The 'reasonable' bourgeois looked at him- or herself as a self-enclosed, rational being. Yet real reason, that is, science, was on the avant-gardes' side here to prove this idea of the autonomous subject an illusion. References to Ernst Mach's *Analyse der Empfindungen und das Verhältnis des Physischen zum Psychischen* (Analysis of the Senses and the Relation of the Physical to the Psychological, 1886) can be frequently encountered in avant-garde reflections. Mach, who was also to deeply influence Albert Einstein, had argued that the human senses from touch to hearing and seeing showed how the idea of a self-enclosed individual was little more than a *meta*-physical construction, as human bodies are always tied to and determined by environmental and sensory factors – our skin absorbs liquids, sounds go through our bodies, scents enter our noses, etc.

Many avant-gardists turned to other than scientific forms of thought to expose the narrowness of what the bourgeois called reason. Expressionists Franz Marc and Kandinsky were drawn to more esoteric forms of thought. In his landmark essay, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (On the Spiritual in Art, 1911), Kandinsky argued that an artwork had to represent an 'inner necessity'. This ambivalent notion implied, first, that an artist was to follow the internal dynamic of the artwork's material, which in the process of producing art dictates its own internal, possibly universal, laws. Second, it also implied that artists were to express their deeper, potentially intersubjective, experience of the world. Kandinsky and Marc believed that by making art in this way, their work could also come to touch others. Their conviction was in part informed by the esoteric philosophy of theosophy, which around the turn of the century counted thousands of adherents worldwide and which asserted that each human being carried the divine within him- or herself. Believing to express the inner divine element in their work, Marc along with Kandinsky speculated that their creative output accordingly had the potential of triggering the divine in their audience as well. Marc even went as far as to speak of the avant-gardes' 'European civil war', a *Geisteskampf* or spiritual war against the culture that had dominated Europe for so long.⁸

Quite a few other avant-gardists as well took recourse to esoteric or occult theories that were commonly regarded as irrational in bourgeois culture. Take Czech painter František Kupka, whose work was at the forefront first of Cubism and later of the Abstraction-Création group. Kupka worked at séances as a so-called 'medium' allegedly being able to contact those in a parallel universe, beyond life. Building on a variety of pseudo-scientific theories which

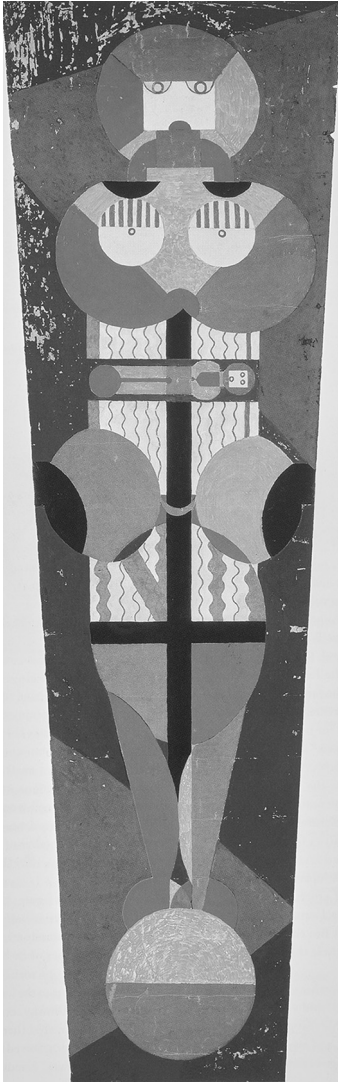


Figure 45 Lothar Schreyer, *Entwurf für das Totenhaus der Frau* (Draft Version of a Woman's Death House, ca. 1922). In an attempt to create a site in which body and soul could be reunited after death, Bauhaus teacher Schreyer designed this sarcophagus-like coffin for his wife; a similar one was made for himself. Schreyer eventually buried his parents in them. This drawing bears witness to this endeavour and to Schreyer's productive interest in esotericism.

stated that a vitalist energy ran through all human bodies and inanimate objects (sometimes across the ages), an energy that thus tied the whole universe together, others reflected on how to give shape to what could be called a Cosmic New Man, one who would eventually possess knowledge of the universe's most profound aspects. Bauhaus teacher Lothar Schreyer, for instance, called on seventeenth-century mystic Jakob Böhme in his draft for a *Totenhaus der Frau* (Woman's Death House, 1922, see Fig. 45). Schreyer thus suggested that even the divide between life and death was a bourgeois cultural convention that hid a deeper unity.

Attempts to flesh out a New Man that fell back on more established forms of religion abound also in the European avant-gardes. For were (bourgeois) reason and religion not conflicting modes of human thought and experience too? Many Dadaists certainly believed they were, and by (often superficially) referencing Taoism and Buddhism, they sought to find a way to detach themselves from this contradiction. In turn, many Expressionist avant-garde 'apostles' relied heavily on the Christian tradition and produced works rife with Biblical images. Their references to the Christian stock was of course motivated by the fact that this stock had been part and parcel of European art history all along. And through their unusual, at times blasphemous, employment of Christian imagery the avant-gardes drove a wedge between that artistic tradition and themselves. For against dominant religious conventions of the bourgeoisie, the avant-gardes drew on the Christian stock in order to unleash human drives and forms of community that were suppressed by the identity they opposed.

Of course, at the heart of European religion we also find the Jewish tradition. Most interesting in this context are the distinctly Jewish avant-garde groups. An influential number of avant-gardists were of Jewish descent, and spread throughout Europe, from the cities of Berlin and Paris, Minsk in Russia, Riga in Latvia to the Polish towns of Warsaw and Łódź, we also find avant-garde groups that explicitly foregrounded elements from Judaic religion and tradition to further their own variant of the New Man. The collective around the ephemeral magazine *Yung-Yidish* (Young Yiddish), which ran only in 1919 and appeared in Łódź, forms a nice example. Poets and artists Moyshe Broderzon, Yankel Adler, Marek Szwarc, Yitzhak Brauner, Pola Lindenfeld and Dina Matus, among others, launched this journal with the aim of promoting a new, recognisably Jewish, avant-garde. Claiming to have lost the affinity with God, which their fathers still knew, these youngsters sought to find their way back to God, eternity and Logos, in order to infuse European culture with new vitality. To represent the markedly Jewish spirit in their art, they built on the idiom of Expressionism but also incorporated elements from holy scriptures, Hebrew calligraphy, synagogue decoration and Jewish grave ornamentation. The result of this in part Zionist endeavour – for some of these youngsters also strove towards a Jewish state, an alternative to that in Europe – is a precious little magazine and a small rack of (literary) works produced outside the columns of *Yung-Yidish*, which portray yet another variant of the avant-gardes' multifaceted New Man (see Fig. 46), one that did not so much stress the universal as it foregrounded the particular and singular case of the New Jew.



Figure 46 Marek Szwarc's woodcut on paper, *Crucifixion* (1919), reproduced in the Polish magazine *Yung-Yidish* (nos 2–3, 1919). Szwarc, who began his career in Paris and also helped launch the first Jewish art journal there, was one of many to affirm an ancient faith in a distinctly avant-garde fashion. He later converted to Catholicism and eventually returned to Paris, where his work became an integral part of the so-called École de Paris (School of Paris), that is, the many foreign-born (Cubist and Surrealist) artists, often of Jewish descent, who in Paris during the interwar period added to the splendour of 'French' avant-garde art.

Many Constructivists held up at the opposite side of the spectrum and accentuated the universal. A new, universal or at least classless type of man had to be developed, they thought, by making rational use of technology and modern advances to the benefit of all and not just the few. Constructivists as well, in short, did not oppose reason, but the limited way in which the bourgeois ‘individual’ made use of it. Presentations of human figures in Constructivist artworks – and it does not quite matter where we turn here, whether it is to those in Russia, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands or elsewhere – as a rule underscore the universal and collective dimension over the specific and individual. Striking in Hungarian Sándor Bortnyik’s *Az új Ádám* (The New Adam, 1924, Plate 16), for instance, is the glossy, almost metallic surface of the New Man’s body. Bortnyik’s painting, in the upper-left quadrant, reproduced one of El Lissitzky’s so-called Prouns, *Proun 1C* (1919). When we turn to El Lissitzky’s own *Neuer* (New Man, 1923, Fig. 75), we find perhaps one of the purest manifestations of the Constructivist type of subjectivity: a generic, abstract-geometrically shaped being whose body resembles an agile, mechanical automaton more than anything else. This pure and universal, perhaps even *post*-human, type, Constructivists upheld, would come about when modern technological advances would be used rationally to overcome the hardship of labour. Man would then have the time to develop further spiritually and physically. Kasimir Malevich, for example, asserted that,

the efficiently mechanized world could truly serve a purpose if only it would see that we (every one of us) gained the greatest possible amount of ‘free time’ to enable us to meet the only obligation to nature which mankind has taken upon itself – namely to create art.⁹

Here, we come full circle, for like those drawing on allegedly irrational theories and religious traditions, Malevich in his Suprematist phase was convinced that mankind could not simply be defined as a rational species. It would not take long for people to find this out for themselves, provided they would be given time to explore their sensibilities through art.

The New Woman

All this talk about the New *Man* might give the impression that the avant-gardes were an exclusively male undertaking that plainly repeated traditional, bourgeois views of gender. Undeniably, the majority of avant-gardists were male, and, admittedly, misogyny was not uncommon. F. T. Marinetti’s 1909 ‘Foundation et manifeste du futurisme’, for instance, championed ‘scorn for

women'.¹⁰ Convinced, it appears, that Italian 'mamas' in their servitude to men were not up for the tough job of avant-gardists, Marinetti was heavily criticised by poet and performer Valentine de Saint-Point in her *Manifeste de la femme futuriste* (Manifesto of Futurist Women, 1912). Women could be just as virile as men, she upheld. To Saint-Point it made no sense to divide humanity into males and females. All great human beings were great precisely because they were both masculine and feminine. Not biological sex, in short, but gender – that is, the way in which the bourgeoisie codified sex in culture, separating men as masculine and women as feminine, and allocating both different, purportedly 'natural' social roles – was the real issue avant-gardists had to tackle in their search for a New Man. Saint-Point was by no means the only one to argue so. A great variety of women and some men in the avant-gardes' ranks also strove for the equality of men and women – as also did feminists and suffragettes at this point all over Europe. Poet and performer Mina Loy, for example, briefly joined the Italian Futurists and she too got tired of the macho atmosphere; her 1914 'Feminist Manifesto', tellingly, only appeared after her death. In Germaine Dulac's film *La Souriante Madame Beudet* (The Smiling Madame Beudet, 1922), often considered the first feminist film, a woman protagonist gets fed up with the hysterical pestering of her husband. Deploying such devices as superimposed images, distortions and slow motion, the film powerfully communicated the constrictive role of male dominance.

Not all women avant-gardists were of course actively engaged in gender politics. Making a career for themselves often proved hard enough – it was not uncommon, for example, for women avant-gardists, especially in the performative arts, to prostitute themselves so as to make ends meet. Belgian abstract painter Marthe Donas escaped that fate and had her first solo exhibition in 1921 in Herwarth Walden's Der Sturm gallery; in Germany, Walden was one of few gallery owners to also actively promote women artists – Marinetti, paradoxically, did so as well in Italy. Donas' solo exhibition at Walden's gallery was no small feat – American collector and avant-garde Maecenas Katherine Dreier called her the first woman abstract painter. Nonetheless, Donas struggled hard for recognition. It is also telling that, like Florence Henri, Olga Rozanova, Jacoba van Heemskerck or Hilla Rebay, Donas made a career mainly by focusing on (non-objective) abstract art, leaving the representation of gender problems largely to others. We see something similar happening in the landscape and portrait art of Expressionists Marianne von Werefkin, Maria Uhden and Gabriele Münter, whose work tended to shun gender issues. In addition, many women avant-gardists were known mainly as 'partners of': prolific writer Emmy Hennings was Hugo Ball's, talented visual artist Sophie Täuber was Hans Arp's, etc. In many artforms, moreover, such as orchestral music composition, drama writing or

architectural design, most women managed to play an ancillary role at best. In sum, for women avant-gardists gender equality was serious business in the dominantly male bastion of the avant-gardes, and raising this problem was not always without peril.

Around the turn of the century, the necessary emancipation of women was debated widely in culture. All over Europe, discussions were waged about the need to give women equality in law (the right to vote), schools (the right to higher education), and the economy (the right to work). For most male avant-gardists gender inequality did not appear that important an issue, though. Destroying the social nucleus of bourgeois culture tied to gender – that is, the family – proved their main concern. As a young generation who also tried to destroy the bourgeois *within themselves*, most avant-gardists struggled with the father-figure and the traditional family structure. Otto Gross, for instance, an early student of Sigmund Freud and a sort of guru-figure for many German Expressionists, claimed in Expressionist periodicals like *Die Aktion* that the main goal of his generation was to liberate the sexes so that both men and women could experience their sexuality freely. To this aim they had to get rid of the patriarchal male whose oppressive power perpetuated the status quo. Tellingly, in 1913, at the request of his father, Gross was incarcerated in a mental asylum for publicly venting his views. Gross was not alone to revolt against the dominant father-figure. This revolt was also a common theme, for example, in the work of many German Expressionist playwrights like Reinhard Sorge, Walter Hasenclever, Paul Kornfeld, Ernst Toller and Fritz von Unruh. Hasenclever's play *Der Sohn* (The Son), performed in 1919 and actually based on the story of Gross' incarceration, put the anguished, tormented and alienated emotions of the son (Gross) at the centre and gave shape to his frustrating struggle to escape from the domineering father. Hasenclever endowed the actor playing the son with the task of transmitting emotions as intensely as possible. This was done by manipulation of the body – through voice, gesture and movement – and culminated in a highly artificial, exaggerated acting style that was further emphasised by dramatic make-up, costumes and stage designs whose distorted scenery and sharp claire-obscure lighting also externalised the feelings of the protagonist (see Fig. 47).

If *Der Sohn* was a call to escape from the clutches of the father-figure, others went a step further by suggesting concrete alternatives to the bourgeois family. For Dadaist Raoul Hausmann, for example, who worked with Otto Gross, Franz Jung and others on the Dada journal *Die freie Strasse* (The Free Street, 1915–18), the possibility of a matriarchal family structure was to be explored. If the authoritative father-figure suppressed the creative and sexual desires of artists and youths, then putting on top the mother was perhaps the



Figure 47 Stage set design for the living room scene in Walter Hasenclever's *Der Sohn* (The Son, 1914) by Otto Reigbert for a performance directed by Gerhard Ausleger at the Stadttheater Kiel in 1919. Everything in this design is meant to accentuate the already over-accentuated feelings of anxiety and estrangement of the protagonist taking centre stage.

solution. Equating matriarchy with a lack of domination and with sexual promiscuity, Hausmann suggested that matriarchy held the promise of a less restrained choice of sexual partners, a world 'free of possessiveness, purified of greed, the beginning of community'.¹¹ Not all artists regarded the prospect of a matriarchy as advantageous, however. In part informed by Otto Weininger's *Geslecht und Charakter* (Sex and Character, 1903), some argued that the mother-figure, as symbol of procreation and domesticity, had to be replaced by a New Woman modelled after the allegedly sterile yet creative prostitute, a woman who could act as a muse for the man-artist as he tried to free his repressed sexual desires and to put these to creative use. A staggering number of prostitutes indeed was depicted by avant-garde artists, as were brothel scenes. While such works admittedly entailed the emancipation of women's sexuality, they nonetheless furthered a dominantly male gender politics: the woman here was still portrayed as a sexual object or muse meant to inspire the male artist. That women could be more than muses apparently did not enter the discussion. The so-called mechanomorphic portraits by Francis Picabia and other Dadaists (see Fig. 48), while partly ironic and also applied to men, only added to this dominantly male perspective: like machines, women were depicted here as mindless constructions both designed and operated by men.

In response to all this some avant-gardists put forth alternative models of masculinity, which in hindsight proved far more radical than the alternatives to the bourgeois family or the roles of woman isolated so far. In 1921 Marcel

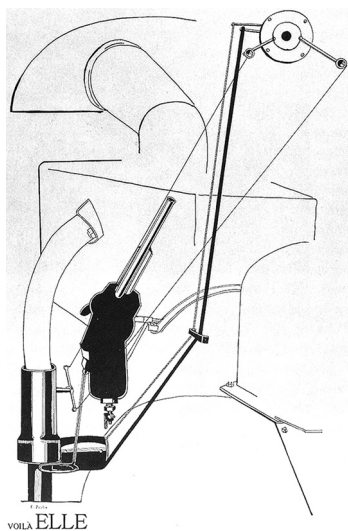


Figure 48 Francis Picabia's mechano-morphic *Voilà ELLE* (There SHE Is, 1915), reproduced in Alfred Stieglitz's magazine *291* (no. 9, 1915), in which more such designs by Picabia appeared. The drawing presents a 'female', eroticised machine awaiting a source of power to activate it. Iconic rather than functional, the image's penetrating tubes uncover Picabia's more general interest in sexuality and machine metaphors.

Duchamp, for instance, in a series of photographs taken by Man Ray, took to cross-dressing and adopted the androgynous persona of Rose Sélavy (which when pronounced in French sounds like 'Eros, that's life'). By posing as a woman and also signing some of his works with the name of this persona, Duchamp, like Saint-Point, appears to have suggested that biological sex and cultural gender were separate matters. Just as the dominant rules of representation in art rested on convention, so did the bourgeois views of sex and gender. Rose Sélavy in a way made manifest that gender was not so much tied to the biological body as it was part of a cultural ritual or performance. Bourgeois men and women just played a role, it seemed, which they had copied from their parents and then gave on to their children. To upset this status quo, then, men could adopt a feminine gender; female artists, in turn, could act as men.

Women avant-gardists too discovered this transgressive tactic. It was put into practice, among others, by Expressionist poet Else Lasker-Schüler, by Czech Devětsil member Toyen (Marie Čermínová) and by Russian Cubo-Futurist painter Natalia Goncharova. All are reported often to have worn men's clothing in public. Goncharova, moreover, who from 1914 onwards devoted most of her time to décor-design for the Ballets Russes, is known to have appeared topless with hieroglyphic symbols painted on her torso. As such instances show, women avant-gardists also turned to their body as creative material, expanding the Total Art of the avant-gardes in their own way with taboo-breaking body art and performances. German émigré Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, in her performances for the Dada movement in New York, for example, is said to have behaved so deviantly from the bourgeois

norm that she unsettled even her fellow avant-gardists, both men and women. If, as even fellow men avant-gardists upheld, women were mere bodies, then experimenting with the body to highlight women's creative powers proved a particularly strong instrument. Making the (female) body anew became one of the primary objectives of Hannah Höch, for instance, whose Dada collages are also discussed in the first part of this book. Literally cutting up photographs of women's body parts and reassembling them, Höch among others criticised the commercialisation and sexualisation of women in bourgeois culture. Snippets from newspapers and magazines of women's bodies in her work combine in often humorous critiques of bourgeois views on gender, which from the 1920s onwards appeared to endorse a new, freer dress code for women. For Höch this new dress code did not bring an emancipation of women. It simply pleased the male gaze, the dominance of which went unquestioned.

Few avant-gardists proved as radical in gender terms as Claude Cahun. Cahun never officially adhered to any movement, pushing the idea of artistic freedom to the extreme, but her work closely monitored that of the Surrealists in France. Cahun's photographs (see Fig. 49), collages and writings are witness to a lifelong performance in which she adopted various (androgynous)

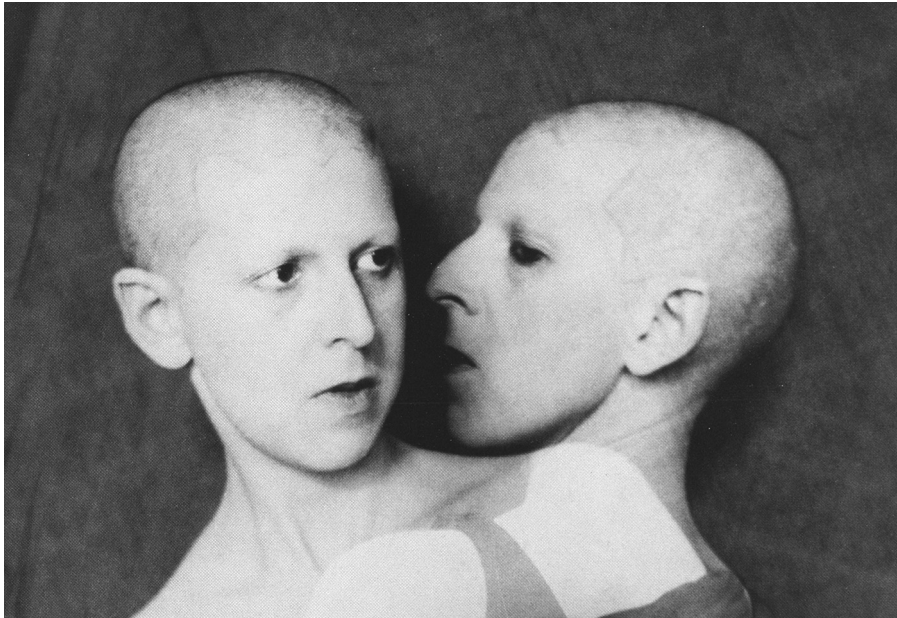


Figure 49 Claude Cahun, *Que me veux tu?* (What Do You Want From Me?, 1928). A concerned feminine and a menacing masculine gaze are captured here, as if to suggest that Cahun is conversing with herself in this photograph produced using superimposition of negatives.

pseudonyms and different looks in an ongoing attempt to escape identity. Cahun's work promoted a transgender, queer form of subjectivity in constant flux – it presented her as a woman, a man, a lesbian, a heterosexual, a Jew, a Catholic, an artist, a non-artist, etc. She thus made an artwork not only of her own body, but also of her very life as she actually went through life as the various personae she adopted. Today, her proposal for an 'agendered' and 'nomadic' New Man rightfully ranks alongside those versions of the New Man advanced by more canonised male avant-gardists. For few artists make as clear that the avant-gardes' New Man did not only come in different genres but in diverse genders as well.

The (Inter)Nationalist

All avant-gardists, wherever they found themselves, were transnational to the extent that they were all involved in an artistic exchange that surpassed national borders. This does not mean, however, that the avant-gardes' New Man was by definition nationless. Many avant-gardists, especially before the First World War, were plain nationalists to our present-day standards. Nationalism, however, came in all kinds of forms. Often, as cultural agents who sympathised with marginal groups, avant-gardists identified with 'minor' nations that strove for recognition or independence from certain states. This was the case, for instance, with certain Catalans in Spain, Scots in the United Kingdom, or Dutch-speaking Flemings in the predominantly francophone country of Belgium. Avant-garde poets from these regions, such as Joan Salvat Papaseit, Hugh MacDiarmid or Paul van Ostaïen, explicitly coupled their literary experimentation to the emancipation of their peoples, stating that they unjustly suffered economic, linguistic, educational and other forms of discrimination in their countries. Nationalism and internationalism often went hand in glove in these poets' political views, as they one day hoped to witness the arrival of a united Europe of (minor) nations or peoples, one in which the geopolitical power concentrated in larger states would end up being decentred. The idea for such a decentred Europe was not irreconcilable with the transnational, horizontal network of cities and centres the avant-gardes had created for themselves in art. Yet it was up against more dominant forces in international high politics, which constantly tried to expand state borders so that these came to include even more peoples or nations, and if that proved impossible, to redraw other states' borders out of self-interest.

When the Treaty of Versailles was signed after the First World War, for example, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Finland, Poland, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania rather suddenly surfaced as independent states and many avant-gardists from one day to the next awoke in a new country. This made it inevitable for avant-gardists to reflect on the 'national' character

of their new countries. In Latvia and Estonia, for instance, both of which had gone through years of bloodshed before reaching a degree of independence in the interwar period, many avant-gardists associated themselves to the Riga Artists' Group, founded in 1920 in Latvia, and the Group of Estonian Artists respectively. These associations were set up with the deliberate aim of providing the new countries with a distinctly modern cultural consciousness, and for avant-gardists at this point offered the best working conditions available. Several of the artists involved had studied in St Petersburg and Berlin and had been exposed to Futurisms and Expressionisms there. Yet as Russia and Germany in recent times had bulldozed Latvia and Estonia, it was felt that turning to French Cubism was a wiser option. So, in Latvia, painters Erasts Šveics and Jānis Liepiņš, and sculptors Teodors Zaļkars, Emīls Melderis and Kārlis Zālīte-Zāle, among others, began to espouse a singular type of Cubism that also incorporated indigenous cultural elements. For example, Uga Skulme, brother of theatre reformer Oto Skulme, inserted distinct traditional Latvian patterning in his Cubist *Kompozīcija ar skaitli un vijole* (Composition with Figure and Violin, ca. 1923, Fig. 50). The New Man promoted here was modern and international, but also local and national. The work of the Group of Estonian Artists, founded in 1923 in Tartu, was idiomatically more diffuse than that of the Latvians. It roped in elements from Futurism, Expressionism and Constructivism. Ado Abbe, Eduard Ole, Arnold Akberg, Hernik Olvi and others even entered into a debate on whether figuration or abstraction was better equipped to capture the modern, national spirit of Estonia.

All over Europe, in diverse cultural constellations, we see a similar dynamic at work whereby avant-gardists claimed that their new art could also instill a



Figure 50 Uga Skulme's oil painting *Kompozīcija ar skaitli un vijole* (Composition with Figure and Violin, ca. 1923). Like many avant-gardists little known outside his country, Skulme was an important advocate of the avant-gardes in Latvia. His later work mainly sought to connect with the movement of *Neue Sachlichkeit*.

new and dynamic (as opposed to a stale or stable) national consciousness. When Poland regained its independence after the First World War, for instance, the short-lived Polish Futurists stepped up to infuse the new state with modern pride. In the early months of independence, poets like Anatol Stern, Bruno Jasieński and Aleksandr Wat took to the streets of the capital Warsaw and read from their work. They called for the immediate ‘futurization of life’ in Poland, which many portrayed as the safe-keeper of Western European traditions against forces from the East (read: Russia). ‘If you do not wish to be the last nation in Europe, but on the contrary, the first’, Jasieński wrote in a manifesto that also introduced a novel, logical spelling, ‘stop feeding on the scraps from the kitchen of the West (we can offer our own menu)’.¹² As Jasieński’s advice to the Polish to stop looking westward reminds us, it was most often the ‘old’, bourgeois Europe, the ‘West’, which the avant-gardes opposed. Looking eastward here was one option, but many avant-gardists claimed that it sufficed simply to look around, to one’s own region and culture, to see that there were plenty of alternatives available to Europe’s West-centric, bourgeois culture. All throughout the centre and east of Europe, for example, it was quite common for avant-gardists to turn to certain aspects of Slavic, Magyar or other local traditions.

Perhaps the most radical proposal to do away with the ‘old’ Europe came from one of the continent’s most unstable and precarious regions, the Balkans. Progenitor of the avant-gardes in Croatia and Serbia, Ljubomir Micić, in his magazine *Zenit* (published in Zagreb and then in Belgrade, 1921–6), launched the movement of *Zenithism*. While the aesthetic and political orientation of this movement – joined, among others, by Mihailo Petrov and Jo Klek – tended to fluctuate, Micić’s general goal could not have been stated more clearly. Zenithism was meant as a rejuvenating, redemptive force of the Balkanic-Slavic *barbarogenije* (barbarogenius) over and against the decadence of Western Europe. A new Superman would emerge from going back to a state before nations, and from looking to the East, Micić upheld: ‘ZENITHISM = THE ORIENT OF AIRPLANE / SPIRITS [. . .] / ZENITHISM = ∞ = TOTALITY.’¹³ Ivan Goll, a key mediator in the West between the French and German avant-gardes, but also the translator of many Russian avant-gardists into French and German, joined Micić in *Zenit*, calling for the destruction of Western civilisation and for artists to sing to all nations, ‘for PEOPLE / again and always the *first words of the worlds*’.¹⁴

In sum, the New Man of the avant-gardes was also (inter)nationalist and framed within so many differing views of Europe that we can safely state that a single ‘Eurocentric’ avant-garde never existed. Perhaps because of this intricate mixture of views, politicians in Europe as a rule did not look favourably upon the avant-gardes, even when the latter claimed that their new art could

be a powerful nationalist force. The transnational avant-gardes in the whole of Europe, from their very inception, met with nationalist criticism in particular. For, more often than not, critics opposing the avant-gardes claimed that these remarkably transnational artists, with their 'ugly' output, could never represent their nation's 'indigenous' culture. In Iceland, for example, an island whose first visual art exhibition was held only in 1900 and whose avant-gardists could be counted on the fingers of one hand (all of them, like Jón Stefánsson and Finnur Jónsson, notably working abroad), the press for decades reported on the threat of foreign avant-garde art invading the nation. Iceland might not seem representative but in a way it was: even in France and Germany, leading conservative critics consistently denounced the transnational avant-gardes as being incongruous with the national spirit. This widespread sentiment also had a flip side: during the First World War Herwarth Walden, for instance, was secretly sponsored by German officials to set up exhibitions of German Expressionism abroad in order to make the Germans look tolerant and internationally oriented, instead of driven by purely nationalist concerns. This type of German propaganda did not outlast the First World War, however, although Nazi propaganda during the 1930s on occasion did appropriate techniques like those of photomontage and collage when these were thought to be useful.

One of the most tragic events in the history of the avant-gardes was the 1937 *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) Nazi exhibition in Munich (see Fig. 51). This exhibition, which portrayed avant-garde art as made by sick and filthy minds, was attended by a million people during its first six weeks, and led to many German avant-gardists' desperation and flight from the country. The *Entartete Kunst*

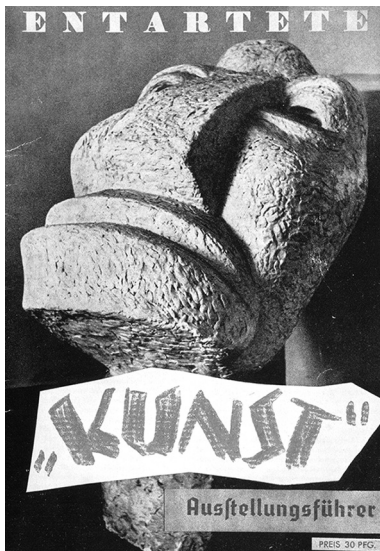


Figure 51 Cover of the brochure for the 1937 *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition showing Otto Freundlich's sculpture *Der neue Mensch* (The New Man, 1912). Freundlich's work recalls 'primitive' Easter Island sculpture and evokes the pre-First World War hope among Expressionists for a spiritual awakening. The work was most likely destroyed and Freundlich eventually died in a concentration camp.

exhibition was a symptom of a far-flung current in 1930s Europe that sought to smother the avant-gardes as a cultural force which had perhaps become too dominant. Indeed, the USSR meanwhile had decided on its official, Socialist Realist portrayal of its New Soviet Men and Women and had made sure to domesticate, censor or ban avant-gardists as well. The last classic or historical avant-garde group to emerge in Russia was called *OBERIU* – the name in Russian was short for Union of Real Art. Launched in 1928 by writers and performers Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedensky and largely unknown to the world at this time its absurd writings (poetry, prose, plays) and performances foreshadowed the later so-called Theatre of the Absurd of Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett. Performing in prisons as well as in conventional theatre venues, and gradually joined by film-makers, actors and musicians, after 1931 *OBERIU* disappeared from the public space under the pressure of Stalin's whimsical cultural policy of Socialist Realism. Like many other avant-gardists in the Russian empire, *OBERIU* members were arrested, imprisoned or made to disappear.

It would be wrong to say that the European avant-gardes after 1935 vanished completely – to that extent, the periodisation of this book's subtitle is somewhat aleatory. Among others, the so-called *École de Paris* (School of Paris) – that is, the many non-French Cubists and Surrealists who added to the fame of France as the country of the avant-gardes in the interwar period – continued on after the Second World War as well. Moreover, many who fled the continent simply carried on their business in other parts of the world. Nonetheless, despite the clear continuation of avant-garde activity in certain parts of Europe (and in other parts of the world), totalitarian political forces in the 1930s seized and annihilated ever more centres of avant-garde activity in Europe. As a result, the network of the avant-gardes shrunk so dramatically that it is difficult to still speak of the 'European' avant-gardes from this point onwards. The avant-gardes had witnessed their fair share of radical changes on the continent, yet by the mid-1930s Europe had changed so much that there was far less room left in the public space for the avant-gardes to flower. In the period in which they did flourish, they looked at 'man' as a cultural construction, a body overwritten by countless discourses and perceived through 'rational', ossified (sensorial) conventions – 'MAN, an invention', opened the editorial of the first issue of the Romanian magazine *Integral* (1925–8).¹⁵ As avant-gardists tried to create a New Man, it became clear early on how many directions could be taken, how many issues had to be factored in, and how full of tensions and contradictions their project really was. Precisely because of its richness, its thick crust of conflicting views and affects, the sustained, collective project for a New Man remains one of the avant-gardes' most impressive contributions to modern European cultural history.

Box 5: Dadaisms

The origins of the word Dada are notoriously confusing, because various members of the movement claimed to have discovered it in diverse circumstances. ‘Dada’: a more open-ended word (a noun? a verb? an adjective?) that sounds equally well in all languages can hardly be found. Recalling everything and nothing, being an affirmation as well as a negation, Dada in many ways marked the zero hour of all avant-garde isms.

When in 1916 Hugo Ball – along with fellow-German cabaret performer Emmy Hennings, Alsatian Hans/Jean Arp, Swiss-born dancer and textile designer Sophie Täuber, and Romanians Tristan Tzara and Marcel Janco – adopted the label Dada for their creative work in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, the word gained a ring it would never quite lose again. Soon joined by German writers Richard Huelsenbeck and Walter Serner, and by experimental film-makers Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling, the Zürich-based Dadaists, in their collective performances and other work, amalgamated elements from Expressionism (abstraction, detachment from conventions, etc.), Futurism (Bruitism or noise art as practised by Russolo, asyntacticalism, etc.), and Cubism (collage, assemblage, etc.) to forward a new art of their own. Stationed in rural Switzerland while the ‘Great War’ raged beyond its borders, the eminently international Dadaist group set out to rupture with the dominant cultural and artistic past. In part equating the carnage of the First World War with the conviction that art before the war had been a feeble and decadent enterprise, they turned to ‘ugly’ materials for producing art. If poetry before had been mainly regarded as a refined linguistic sensibility, Ball, Tzara and Huelsenbeck, among others, turned to gibberish, pseudo-shamanistic incantation and sound poetry experiments. Oil paint and bronze-cast sculpture in turn were spurned in favour of collages and assemblages of scraps of paper and other found objects.

A related attitude was adopted by European expatriates Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia, who in 1915 arrived in New York. Strictly speaking, proto-Dada activities – the label Dada was scarcely used before the 1920s in the USA – Duchamp’s and Picabia’s work, as well as that of their followers in the USA during the war, displayed remarkable overlaps with that of the Zürich Dadaists. Duchamp notoriously disliked the stress on craftsmanship and manual skill in art, opting for the readymade instead. He further abhorred the reduction of visual art to the eye and, claiming an ‘anti-retinal’ stance, sought to transform visual art into a more purely intellectual form of labour. In addition, regarding the humanist belief in technological advancement as a delusion unmasked by the war, Picabia

and Duchamp began to develop portraits of human/machine hybrids or *mechanomorphic* figures, of which Duchamp's painting on glass, *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even; left as unfinished in 1923, Plate 12), is perhaps the most famous.

After the war Dada travelled to Germany and France as well. In the final war year Huelsenbeck brought the portable word 'Dada' to Berlin. Here, in 1918, the 'Club Dada' was formed, comprising, on the one hand, a Communist-leaning group with Georg Grosz, Walter Mehring, Wieland and Helmut Herzfelde (the latter also known as John Heartfield), and, on the other hand, an anarchist-inflected group with Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch and Johannes Baader. Fiercer and more politicised than their Dada peers elsewhere, the Berlin Dadaists embarked on a multifarious revolt against those claiming that art was a lofty spiritual affair setting out standards for the cultivated. 'Culture', and art with it, in their view proved to be little more than a layer of varnish painted over acts of murder, cruel economic self-interest and exploitation. In Hannover, Kurt Schwitters' Merz (see Plate 11) also turned to making art of urban detritus (discarded tickets and paper, found wood blocks, etc.), while an offshoot in Cologne, with key figures Johannes Baargeld, Max Ernst, Franz Seiwert and Heinrich and Angelika Hoerle, coalesced in the 'Cologne Dada Fair' of 1920.

In 1919, after having travelled to Zürich, Picabia moved to Paris, to where Marcel Duchamp as well had temporarily returned. Duchamp and Picabia gained the admiration of a small group of Parisian poets around the journal *Littérature*, most notably Louis Aragon, Théodore Fraenkel, Paul Eluard, Philippe Soupault and their 'leader', André Breton. These poets in turn began to extend the Dada revolt against the dominant, and in their view, outworn, rhetoric about 'high' art. In due course they were joined by Tzara, Ernst and others, and for a few years set up various performances in which a dark and negativistic, cerebral yet humorous, attack on bourgeois views of art and culture unravelled.

The aesthetic theories of Dadaist luminaries were diverse and individual Dadaists often changed their views over time. In literature, for example, German-speaking Dadas mostly tended to question language's ability to properly evoke the world, and set out to explore the 'alchemy of the word', as Ball put it, searching for a new, primal and mystical language that could give meaning to a seemingly meaningless world. Ball's sound poem 'Karawane' (1916) and Schwitters' *Ursonate* of the early 1920s are examples of this. By contrast, French Dadaists tended to stick more to

semantic and syntactical conventions and were committed to a more lyrical poetic which foreshadowed the later Surrealist *écriture automatique*. Yet despite these and other differences, a number of general characteristics marked the work of most Dadas. Above all, they shared a sense of living in a world of debris and in a civilisation in shreds. Salvaging and transforming art so as to make it suitable for such a destroyed and destructive world was a serious endeavour for all Dadas. Their work not only meant to do away with the old; it also explored how to go on, albeit often indifferently, that is simply by accepting human nature's limitations and conflicting drives. This is why most Dadas were also united in their predilection for laughter, as a liberating and affirming force, and in their embrace of popular culture, which laid no claim on the elevating powers of 'high' art. Apart from a love of paradox, a disdain for hierarchy, and the boldness to confront and indict a world gone mad, most Dadas also shared an interest in chance operations. As they tried to get away from models of authorial control and to equip artistic production with new procedures, aleatory protocols in art, as exhibited in Arp's collages (see Fig. 52), proved rather liberating.

Championing photomontage (as opposed to painting), being anarchic and contagious, Dada went viral in the late 1910s and 1920s also in Belgium (with visual artist Paul Joostens, and poet-artist Clément Pansaers, among others), the Netherlands (Paul Citroën, Erwin Blumenfeld, I. K. Bonset [pseud. Theo van Doesburg], Vilmos Huszár), Italy (with painter

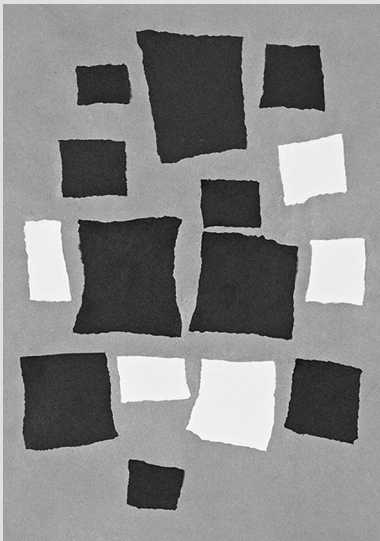


Figure 52 Hans (Jean) Arp's 1917 untitled work known as *Collage Arranged According to the Laws of Chance* (1917) with squares arranged according to the laws of chance. Torn snippets of coloured paper have been randomly pasted on paper here, the sole artistic constraint, apparently, being that the snippets could not overlap.

and philosopher Julius Evola and composer Vittorio Rieti, among others), Croatia (where Dadaist exploits included Dragan Aleksić's magazine *Dada-Tank*, 1922), and various other European cities and regions discussed elsewhere in this book. In one of their many affronting actions, Dadaists in Berlin set up a Dada Central Council for World Revolution, suggesting that Dada would eventually go global to redeem the world. In 1919, Baader, Hausmann, Tzara, Grosz, Janco, Arp and others, as representatives of the Dada Central Council, signed a satirical flysheet entitled *Dadaisten gegen Weimar* (Dadaists Against Weimar). Weimar was the German town of Goethe and Schiller, the perceived cornerstone of German civilisation, but also the location of the National Assembly of the newly erected Weimar Republic. Baader, reputedly, distributed the flysheet himself on Weimar's streets. The text claimed that Weimar would be blown up, and that Baader, the self-proclaimed 'Oberdada' or chief Dada, would be elected president of the earth. Baader of course did not become the world's president, but with outgrowths in the Americas and Asia (among others with the work of Japanese poet Shinkichi Takahashi and the journal *Dadaizumu* [Dadaism], 1922), Dada, indeed, did go global.

Chapter 6

A Global Avant-Garde

The avant-gardes did not halt at Europe's borders. They travelled to other continents too and displayed a wide interest in extra-European cultures. Hence, it is only logical that we also ask how the European avant-gardes related to the cultural production of spaces and places outside of Europe, and, in turn, how artists from extra-European cultures responded to them. Were there avant-gardes outside of Europe as well? These are big issues to take on in a single chapter, and they will take us on a planetary tour here. Yet they need to be addressed. After all, the 'old' Europe which so many avant-gardists opposed was also a colonial empire. If Spain and Portugal around the turn of the century had already lost most of their colonies in the Americas, the empires of many other European countries combined still covered enormous amounts of land animated by a variety of cultural traditions marginalised and repressed. Several avant-gardists turned to these traditions in the conviction that they could foster innovation in European art, assuming that the extra-European cultures from which they arose escaped the conventions and restrictions imposed by European bourgeois culture. Yet, interestingly, artists and writers outside of Europe at the same time also saw potential in the avant-gardes' project to help change their own local cultural production. It is to this complex dynamic that the present chapter turns.

Primitivism

The European avant-gardes are often associated with 'primitivism', a term derived from the Latin *primitivus*, the first of its kind. Primitivism, in short, denotes a desire to go back to an original state, to the beginning of what is, and as such it makes perfect sense that a formation like the avant-gardes, which looked for ways to start afresh in art and culture, was 'primitivist' as well. The avant-gardes' 'primitivism', as we will presently see, entailed a strong fascination with the cultural production of extra-European peoples. Yet it is important to emphasise that the term 'primitive' for avant-gardists referred to much more. Leafing through the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter* makes this instantly

clear. For Kandinsky and his cohorts, the ‘primitive’ could also be found in European folk culture, in prehistorical artefacts, in Gothic art, in the work of children as well as in so-called ‘outsider art’ produced by isolated autodidacts or psychiatric patients. The *Palais idéal*, for example, built over thirty years, starting around 1880, by the uneducated French postman Ferdinand Cheval near Lyon after a dream, was championed by Pablo Picasso and André Breton as an artistic masterpiece, while the so-called Prinzhorn collection, a compilation of thousands of artworks by psychiatric patients from all over Europe studied by Hans Prinzhorn in his book *Bildneri der Geisteskranken* (Artistry of the Mentally Ill, 1922), mesmerised, among others, Max Ernst, Paul Klee and Jean Dubuffet. (Dubuffet would later coin the phrase *art brut*, ‘raw art’, to denote such outsider art.) In turn, the Russian movement of *Neo-Primitivism*, launched in 1913 with Alexandr Shevchenko’s manifesto of the same name, proposed an avant-garde that also drew on Russian folk art conventions and motifs, such as the religious icon and the *lubok* (plural, *lubki*, a form of print that had been popular in Russia for centuries and that uses graphics and narratives, resembling an early version of the comic strip, see Fig. 53). Shevchenko’s suggestion was taken up by many, including Malevich, Marc Chagall, Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov and Igor Stravinsky. Taken together, all these instances of ‘primitivism’ clearly delineate what the avant-gardes were after, for these were all forms of cultural production which bourgeois culture deemed underdeveloped, inferior or at best ‘exotic’.

Around the turn of the century the Fauvists, driven by an interest in the ‘primitive’, were the first avant-gardists to study sacral and ritual objects from indigenous peoples in Africa, Oceania and the Americas. They were arguably not the first to look at extra-European cultures as a source of inspiration. Artists in Europe had long been familiar with, for instance, Islamic, Indian, Chinese or Japanese cultures. The avant-gardes extended this interest, but they



Figure 53 Kasimir Malevich and Vladimir Mayakovsky (text), *U Soyuznikov Frantsuzov ...* (French Allies ..., 1914). This colour lithograph poster was issued by the Muscovite publishing house Lubok Today in support of the Russian war effort. The text by Mayakovsky reads: ‘Our French Allies have filled the truck with captured Germans and our British brothers have a barrel full.’

in addition turned to the cultural production of peoples who had apparently 'no history', that is of which Europeans still knew very little, such as Central African, Oceanic or (Northern) American Indian cultures. Their interest in these other peoples of course ran parallel to the increasing number of European ethnographers, archaeologists and anthropologists who, aided by colonial infrastructures, studied these lesser-known cultures as well. Contrary to these scholars, however, avant-gardists between 1905 and 1935 were less concerned with the actual study of these peoples' everyday lives or cultural histories. Their main concern was with enquiring how the formal properties of these peoples' work could inform different ways of making art, new ways of experiencing and expressing that were perhaps more direct and pure.

From Fauvism onwards 'primitive' tribal objects and cultures came to influence all avant-gardists' work to some degree. The best-known instance is that of Cubism, the perceptual revolution of which was closely tied to Picasso's and others' exposure to African art in galleries and ethnographic museums. In Picasso's so-called 'African' period during the late 1900s, which roughly began with his portrait of American poet Gertrude Stein, the painter's fascination with African idols and tribal objects is all too apparent. In *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1907, Plate 4), for instance, we clearly recognise that Picasso had scrutinised attentively African masks and statuettes, using their example to create the illusion of a three-dimensional space crowded with seemingly deformed beings on the two-dimensional plane of the canvas. Yet Picasso was attracted to African tribal objects not only for their formal-aesthetic properties. At least as appealing to him was the function these 'primitive' objects purportedly had in their original context. For they were not, as Western artworks, meant as household decorations. These were magical items intended to master the at times dangerous and incomprehensible spirits controlling earthly life. Always putting art above everything else, Picasso turned to African art also to extend some of that supposedly monumental and magical power in his own work.

Some avant-gardists early on promoted themselves to experts of African art. The most notable of these were Latvian painter and critic Voldemārs Matvejs and German writer Carl Einstein. Matvejs, principal spokesman of the St Petersburg Union of Youth and known for his boldly comparatist, cosmogonist approach to art, travelled throughout Europe to photograph ritual objects in ethnographic museums. In his *Iskusstvo Negrov* (Negro Art, 1919), finished in 1914 yet published only after his premature death under the pseudonym of Vladimir Markov, Matvejs humbly asserted that his work was meant for a wider audience and that it by no means intended to be comprehensive. If Matvejs' study was comprehensive, it was in summing up all the ingrained prejudices Europeans had about Western and Central African

cultures. The latter allegedly lacked artistic refinement, knew no monumental (stone) sculpture, were historically barren, and at present amounted to little more than idol-producing, impoverished and tastelessly crude fetishists. Matvejs went out of his way to unmask these myths, carefully showing how in Sudan and the Congo a culture had been developed that was once at least as rich and diverse as that on other continents, noting along the way that much of Central and Western Africa had been destroyed and pillaged by Islamic and Christian culture over the past millennium. While drawing heavily on the work of ethnographers and paying close attention to the indigenous provenance of artefacts shown in his study – the publication had 123 plates – Matvejs' interest lay mainly with the aesthetic features of the works discussed. For he believed that the cultural production of Africans displayed the most refined aesthetic sensibility, one which Europeans could learn from too. Unsurprisingly, when his book was published in Russia it had an impact on many avant-gardists, including Vladimir Tatlin, Kasimir Malevich and Alexander Rodchenko.

Carl Einstein's *Negerplastik* (Negro Sculpture, 1915) in a similar way tried to take sub-Saharan African art seriously. Yet unlike Matvejs' study, Einstein's paid little heed to the original context of the approximately 100 sculptures it reproduced photographically. Abstracting works to pure sculptural forms, Einstein appears to have been less concerned with the cultural diversity and rich history of African sculpture than with what the artefacts he had collected photographs of could mean to European avant-gardists like himself. Known as a writer mainly when *Negerplastik* appeared, Einstein would afterwards not only join Dada but would also spend much of his later life studying African art and fine-tuning his views, among others in contributions to *Documents* (1929–31), a journal for 'Archéologies, Beaux-Arts, Ethnographie, Variétés' led by Georges Bataille. In his approach to African art, Einstein built on Nietzsche and argued that the modern European way of viewing the world was an anomaly in the history of human seeing. Europeans favoured a subjective viewpoint, detaching themselves from what is seen and turning *seeing* into a comfortably rational and analytic affair of *observing*. According to Einstein, this led (Western) Europeans to increased abstraction and generalisation as well as to the construction of all sorts of metaphorical, religious and scientific, *worldviews* which eventually made them incapable of actually experiencing the world as it really is: a sensorial zone of energies and materials in which people and their environments were inextricably connected. How could this primary form of seeing the world be uncovered again? The avant-gardes, Einstein reckoned, posed this question as well and made a powerful attempt to free or open up this immediate and primary mode of seeing, by foregrounding the material surface of artworks and fracturing perspective. Yet

to arrive at this zero zone of apperception, in which distinctions such as that between the world and the subject made room for the experience of pure energies in circulation, 'primitive' cultural artefacts were highly relevant as well. For, according to Einstein at least, a tribal or ritual object, whether it be an Ekoi dance mask, a Wangata phallus pole or a skull cup of the Ethiopian Bakuba, was not treated in the original context as some representation of a god, but as that god itself. Seeing such an object implied that the individual body was let go of, and that it entered into a collective ritual – tattooed, dancing and merging into a new communal body of ecstasy. By being organised in rituals and along the lines of (oral) myths, Africans drew on abstractions and metaphors too of course. In this sense they were not that different from European culture. Yet, the sustained and successful attempts by African peoples to experience this primary mode of seeing found very few cognates in European cultures, the avant-gardes being one of these few. The 'negro's' 'primitive' and collective perspective, in other words, was of great significance to Einstein too.

It is a matter of debate whether Einstein or any other avant-gardist ever truly saw African aesthetic productions in the same way as the African peoples did. The *idea* of Africa appears to have been mostly what it was all about, for the *idea* of the 'negro' which they projected, when taken literally, implied that they were looking at something comparable to the 'Indo-European'. Yet this was a vexed matter also among those who had lived in the West or its colonies for many generations through an ancestry of slavery and now set out to give shape to a modern and self-consciously Black subjectivity, be it in the so-called New Negro Movement and the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s in the USA or the *négritude* movement that in the 1930s stretched from the Caribbean to Senegal. Here too several proponents argued for a view of the new or modern 'negro' – the 'negro' as such. As artists and writers from these movements also began to draw on aesthetic features of their 'own' cultural heritage, they were no less burdened by their Westernised perspective on the tribal art of ancestors. Yet perhaps because of these shared issues, several representatives of the Harlem Renaissance and the *négritude* movement also felt affinity with the European avant-gardes, for the latter were at least on their side in trying to take Black African art seriously. A long poem by one of the key representatives of *négritude*, Aimé Césaire, entitled *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (Notebook of a Return to the Native Land, 1939), was later prefaced by André Breton, and in the Spanish translation illustrated by Cuban Surrealist Wifredo Lam. Césaire was rather pleased with these collaborations, as he believed Surrealism had helped set in motion a wider process of cultural emancipation – and in this he was not alone, as we will presently see.

First, however, it is crucial to point out that avant-gardists to various degrees often dubbed official colonialist views. Several Italian Futurists and Vorticists, for instance, plainly called for the expansion of, respectively, Italy's and Britain's colonial empires. In turn, when poet Michel Leiris, taking a vacation from Surrealism in the early 1930s, joined an ethnographic expedition from Dakar in Senegal to Djibouti in the horn of Africa, he came back not only with first-hand knowledge of the complexity of Northern African culture; he also returned a semi-professional plunderer of tribes. In 1933, the Surrealist magazine *Minotaure* (1933–9) devoted a whole issue to the expedition, paying tribute among others to the rituals of the Dogon peoples whom Leiris had studied from up close – yet no mention was made of how precisely the discussed ritual objects had been obtained. Others often ended up being highly ambivalent, as they frequently (yet perhaps also inadvertently) endorsed racist or at least stereotypical views of extra-Europeans as mythic 'primitives' or 'savages'. In 1916 the Zürich Dadaists Hugo Ball, Richard Huelsenbeck and Tristan Tzara, for instance, performed 'negro dances' or recited 'negro poems', whose nonsensical words sounded like what they thought were African languages. By doing so, they desired to unlock some original moment in language and to locate its intuitive sound qualities. They further drew on the *idea* of the 'negro' in order to shock their audience and to show it how bold and wild they were. In part informed by Freud's *Totem und Tabu* (1913), they thus hoped to unleash repressed desires in spectators. Associating 'negro' culture with transgressive sexual behaviour and deviant aggression, but also with child-like rebellion, lack of Western convention, spontaneity, intensity, clarity of expression and pure artistic activity, Dada *art nègre* at once fell prey to racist stereotype and tried to creatively imagine a 'primitive' counter-model to Western bourgeois culture.

Yet more seemed to be going on in the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich. The occasionally farcical manner in which Dadaists here performed their 'negro art' – posing as 'negro-drummers' and outrageous shamans – also hinted at the fact that by the outbreak of the First World War, 'primitivism', as far as African culture went, had very much become a fashion, a fad which Dadaist performances in part sought to mock. Indeed, if representations of non-Whites in European popular culture had always been stereotypical, the art scene, especially from the 1920s onwards, was captivated by veritable 'negrophilia'. Sacral and ritual art, mainly from Central Africa, had become a major commodity on the art market. Dealers in Brussels (who had direct access to Central Africa through the Belgian Congo), and to a lesser extent in Paris, 'gathered' masks and other artefacts from tribes all over Africa, which locals often had used for centuries in performances and other rites. From Brussels and Paris, a network of trade and distribution had come to cater to collectors worldwide, and by the 1920s it was in fact common practice in galleries to have sacral objects on

display alongside modern artworks. In light of this, the Dadaists' 'negro art', as well as the 'negro poems' of French poet Blaise Cendrars and others, can also be read as a parody of certain avant-gardists' infatuation with African art. The Dadaists' staging of completely made-up African 'languages' and 'dances' in addition can be considered a critique of the tendency to generalise the 'primitive' and to ignore the cultural complexity and diversity that lay behind it.

This critique became more vocal in the late 1920s and the 1930s. While avant-gardists continued to be drawn to lesser-known 'primitive' cultures from still other regions of the world, they also progressively became aware of their own ambivalent and limited perspective. French Surrealists in the 1920s, for instance, established the importance of Oceanic and North American Indian art – mainly Inuit, Northwest Coast and Southwest. Some Surrealists, like Max Ernst, boasted impressive collections of totems and other tribal objects of their own, while writers like Pierre Mabille became obsessed with (Haitian) *voodoo*. This wide interest in extra-European cultural production eventually convinced the Surrealists that in contrast to other parts of the world, Europe ran short of imaginative power. In 1929, in an anonymous drawing of a world map for the Belgian magazine *Variétés*, for instance, they made rather clear which parts of the world they thought to be most important (see Fig. 54). The map reduced Western and Central Europe to a piddling land mass, with Paris as the capital of Germany. Other, most often colonised

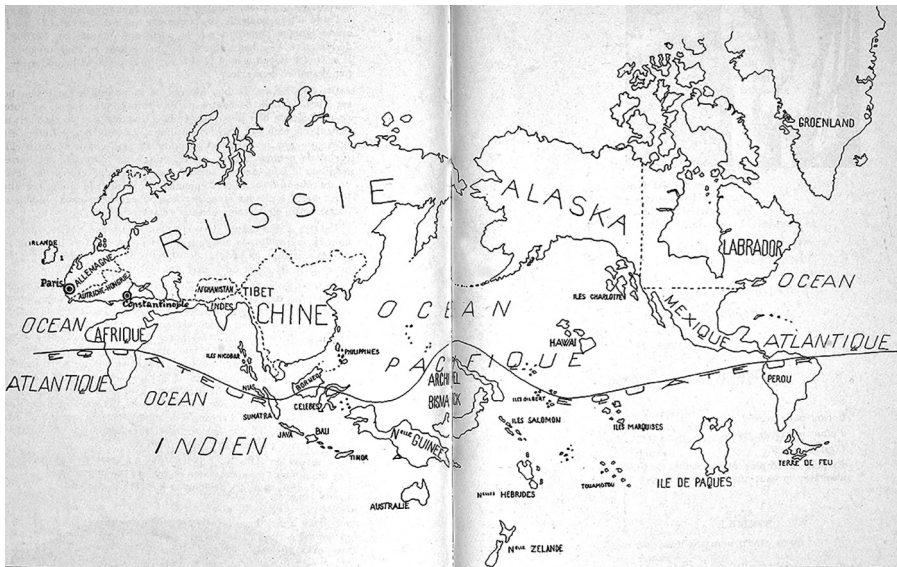


Figure 54 *Le monde au temps des surréalistes* (The World at the Time of the Surrealists), an anonymous drawing reproduced in 'Le Surréalisme en 1929', a special issue of the magazine *Variétés: Revue mensuelle illustrée de l'esprit contemporain* (June 1929).

and so-called ‘primitive’, parts of the globe, by contrast, were blown up to gigantic proportions.

Some avant-gardists gradually became critical of colonial and imperialist cultural politics as well – while never going as far as to actually question the system of colonisation as such. In 1931, for instance, France organised the *Exhibition Coloniale Internationale de Paris* to push nationalism and to promote a view of France and its colonies as diverse yet in political unity. A large event that recalled the World Exhibitions, it presented all of France’s colonies and ethnological ‘races’ in stereotypical fashion. Surrealists reacted in indignation with a variety of tracts and actions. One such tract was plainly entitled ‘Ne visitez pas l’Exposition Coloniale’ (Do not visit the Colonial Exhibition, 1931). Signed by twelve Surrealists, including Yves Tanguy, Paul Éluard, Benjamin Péret and Georges Sadoul, this tract heavily criticised France’s racism as well as brutal colonising practices (discrimination, unwarranted arrests, excessive use of violence, etc). Further, the tract took issue with the way in which colonised regions were presented to people in France, as if these were tropical paradises where even uneducated (male) colonisers awaited an easy life with local women all too willing to serve them.

Considering the position of many Surrealists, it is perhaps no surprise that certain artists in Northern Africa and the Middle East felt affinity with Surrealism. In Beirut in the early 1930s, for example, a group of writers, artists and intellectuals, including Georges Schéhadé, Georges Cyr, Antoine Tabet, Gabriel Bounoure and others, met regularly and debated Surrealism. The group never became official, though, nor did it release a manifesto. However, in the late 1930s a group of young artists and writers in Egypt called *al-Fann wa-l-Hurriyya* (Art and Freedom) did. They looked at the Surrealists from a great distance, and inspired by them set out to make art freely, an art that could impact society, expand people’s experience and liberate subconscious desires. In a much-celebrated essay entitled ‘Ghayat al-Fann al-Mu‘asir’ (The Goals of the Contemporary Painter, 1938), Ramses Younan, for instance, argued that the European avant-gardes’ move away from Realism did not mean they turned their back on (political) reality. Quite the opposite, he argued, Surrealist painting deconstructed that reality and at its core thereby called for a social and moral revolution. Writer Georges Henein – often considered the leader of the Cairo-based Surrealist movement *al-Fann wa-l-Hurriyya* because he had studied in France and befriended Breton – wrote mainly in French and translated his work in Arabic. Yet some of the group’s magazines, like the short-lived *al-Tatawwur* (Development, 1940), appeared in Arabic exclusively. Like their Surrealist peers in France and many other European countries, these artists composed their own manifestos – one, tellingly, was entitled ‘Yahya al-Fann al-Munhat’ (Long Live Degenerate Art, 1938). They

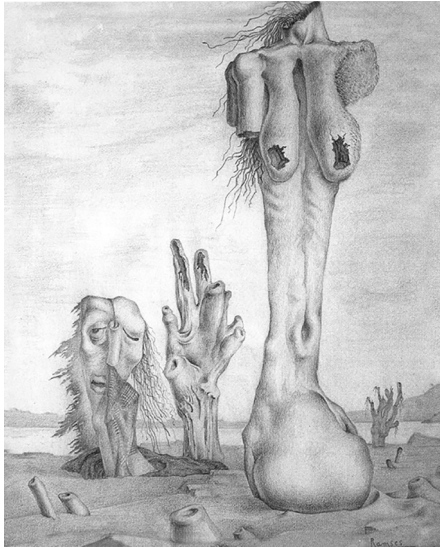


Figure 55 Ramses Younan's pencil drawing, *À la surface du sable* (On the Sand's Surface, ca. 1939). While recalling the work of Salvador Dalí (see Plate 21), Ramses Younan's dreamscape clearly takes us to a different realm. The head and limbs of the woman's dismembered body appear to be stuck elsewhere in this seemingly barren landscape, transmuting into a new organic form of life. The pond or lake in the background, along with the torso's belly, indeed, suggest a new life emerging in a world of subconscious desire and fear.

further organised their own exhibitions outside of the state-sponsored circuits, launched their own magazines and opposed political censorship in art. The movement dampened in the 1950s under increased political repression, but it left a body of visual artworks (see Fig. 55) and writings that singularly added to the archive of the European avant-gardes, and that in the course of the twentieth century would further be expanded by many others from the Arab world.

The Americas

So, yes, there was an avant-garde on the African continent too. Yet there were avant-gardes in many other non-European regions as well. The Americas, for instance, were crowded with them. Take *New York Dada*. While the label Dada was used widely here only in the 1920s, New York saw an unmistakable upsurge of Dadaist activity during the First World War, that is around the same time as Dadaism in Zürich took flight. This upsurge was caused by the arrival in 1915 of two French expatriates in New York: Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia. A sizeable network formed around both Europeans, including Man Ray, the eccentrics Arthur Cravan and Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, and members of the Stieglitz circle (associates of American photographer Alfred Stieglitz, whose 291 gallery invested a lot in promoting avant-garde art) as well as of the Arensberg circle (a group around the wealthy collectors Walter and Louis Arensberg, who among others were patrons to Duchamp).

New York Dada manifests the viral and contagious nature of the European avant-gardes' project. It often took very little (an itinerant magazine issue, a single meeting between kindred spirits) to light an avant-garde fuse outside of Europe. The subsequent development of the avant-gardes' project outside of Europe took on many shapes, however, as that project was always subjected to negotiation between local cultural concerns and the transnational impulse of the European avant-gardes. This negotiation, as shown in Chapter 5, also marked many avant-gardes within Europe. Yet to extra-Europeans a major issue in such negotiation was the avant-gardes' perceived inherent European-ness. Indeed, while the European avant-gardes in all kinds of ways voiced their discontent with the 'old' Europe, their primal concern nonetheless remained that of redefining *European* art and culture. As a result, many artists and writers, especially in the Americas, as a rule questioned how the European avant-gardes' invigorating calls for artistic and cultural renovation could be made operative in their own cultures.

Some went about this negotiation carefully. When the Canadian *Group of Seven*, for instance, aimed to shake up what they considered a dozed-off Canadian art scene, they drew only sparingly on the European avant-gardes. This loose collective of landscape painters, which operated from the 1910s until the mid-1930s, sought to capture what they considered to be the distinct spiritual character of Canadian nature. In the process they claimed to paint like no one else outside of Canada. The work of most members here was nonetheless heavily indebted to European art, mainly to Art Nouveau. Only exponents A. Y. Jackson and above all the movement's rich patron Lawren Harris felt drawn to the avant-gardes' tendency of abstraction. And only Harris in the 1930s ended up producing completely non-objective abstract art, after having been deeply impressed by Kandinsky's *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*.

Others, by contrast, felt so attracted to the European avant-gardes that they initially did not even stop to wonder whether simply copying European practices could work at all. A remarkable example here is that of twenty-one-year-old Mexican law-student-cum-poet Manuel Maples Arce. In 1921 he spent a night plastering the walls of Mexico City's streets with a newspaper-size manifesto: *Actual No. 1*. Modern technological and metropolitan advances like the radio, telegraph and aeroplane, Maples Arce argued in his manifesto, made it untenable to look at Mexico as peripheral or as lagging behind Europe. Quite the opposite, Mexicans had to cast off nationalism, become cosmopolitan and join the transnational avant-gardes. Denouncing retrospection as well as a future-oriented gaze and demanding that art become an *actualismo* (currentism, presentism), Maples Arce's manifesto championed a vision of modernity that was apparently global and not just European. His adage – 'Chopin to the electric chair!'¹ – suggested that Mexicans were simply to append themselves

to the transformation of the arts by Europeans. The implication was also, however, that if Mexicans failed to do so, eventually they would be left behind.

What Maples Arce did not yet know then was that his manifesto, issued in the aftermath of the Mexican Revolution, would usher in the movement of *Estridentismo* or Stridentism, and that in the course of a few years it would grow into a distinctly local and politicised movement with an unfailingly transnational outlook. Operating in Mexico City, Puebla and Xalapa between 1922 and 1927, Stridentism was what its name suggests: a strident bunch which meant to set forth an art of the moment. Like European avant-gardists, Stridentists opposed academic conservatism, championed modernity and technology, and sought to change not only art but everyday life as well by creating multidisciplinary performances and new aesthetic spaces in an urban environment. The movement housed writers and poets (Maples Arce, Germán List Arzubide, Salvador Gallardo and Arqueles Vela) as well as painters (Ramón Alva de la Canal, Fermín Revueltas, Jean Charlot) and the sculptor Germán Cueto, and the expanding field of its artists would over time also come to harness photographers Edward Weston and Tina Modotti. The Stridentists saw their project as a continuation of the Mexican Revolution's activist spirit, and increasingly also put their work at the service of the working class.

In various ways, in short, the Stridentists stuck close to the tenets, strategies and tactics of the European avant-gardes. Yet what made the movement rather different from its European cognates – and what simultaneously drew it closer to other Latin American avant-gardes – was that it did not simply turn to the extra-European, it *was* extra-European. When Maples Arce's poem 'T.S.H. (El poema de la radiofonia)' (Wireless [Poem of Radiophony], 1923) was published in the magazine *El Universal Ilustrado*, for example, illustrator Fernando Bolaños Cacho aptly coupled this ode to technological and global modernity and communication to the indigenous (see Fig. 56). Xavier Icaza, similarly, in his unperformable play *Magnavox 1926* (Magnavox 1926), which took as its set the whole of Mexico and staged an audience including all Mexicans, had famous Muralist Diego Rivera – the first Mexican to champion Cubism – climb the pyramids of Teotihuacán and call for creative work that continued the efforts of the pyramid builders. Icaza thus turned the European avant-gardes into an extension of local, indigenous culture. His was not, significantly, a simple call for a return to the past; it was a plea to continue what was free and ongoing in a post-colonial culture.

Avant-garde activity was by no means restricted to Mexico alone, which further housed the famous Muralist movement with Diego Rivera and the group Contemporáneos led by Jaime Torres Bodet. Movements also cropped up in Cuba (around the Havanan journal *Revista de Avance*, 1927–30), Peru (centred around the magazine *Amauta*, 1926–30), Argentina (the Florida

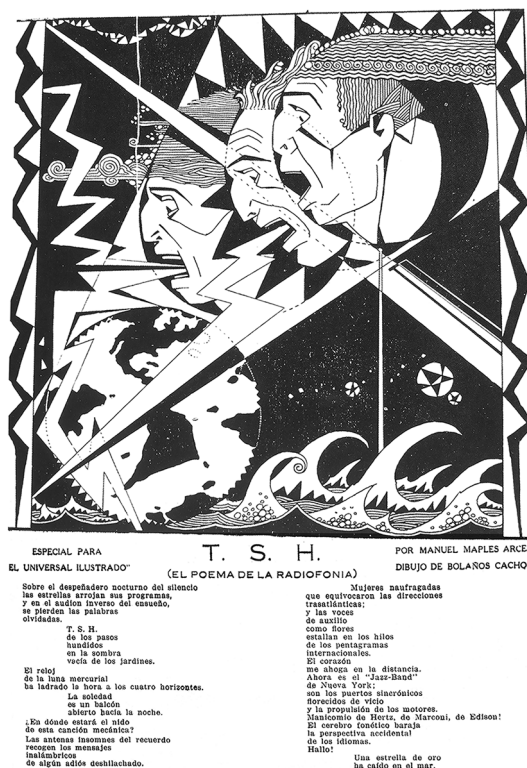


Figure 56 Manuel Maples Arce, 'T.S.H. (El poema de la radiofonia)' (Wireless [Poem of Radiophony]), illustrated by Fernando Bolaños Cacho in the magazine *El Universal Ilustrado* (no. 5, April 1923). The poem reads: 'Stars launch their programmes / at nighttime, over silent cliffs. / Words, / forgotten, / are now lost in the reverie of a reverse audion. / Wireless Telephony / like footsteps / imprinted / on an empty dark garden. / The block, / like a mercury crescent, / has barked the time to the four horizons. / Solitude / is a balcony / open onto night. / Where is the nest / of this mechanical song? / Memory / picks up wireless messages / and one or two frayed farewells / through sleepless antennas. / Shipwrecked women / lost on the Atlantic / their cries for help / explode like flowers / on the wires of international pentagrams. / My heart / drowns in the distance. / And now a "Jazz-Band", / from New York; / vice blossoms / and engines thrust / in synchronic seaports / Nuthouse of Hertz, Marconi, and Edison! / A Phonetic brain shuffles / the perspectival accidents / of language. / Hallo! / A golden star / has fallen into the sea.' (Translation courtesy of Jed Rasula.)

and the Boedo groups), Brazil (the largely São Paulo-based movements of *Modernismo* and *Antropofagia*) and Chile (most notably, perhaps, Vicente Huidobro's *Creacionismo*). When we look at individuals rather than groups, avant-gardist debate and activity further developed in Uruguay, Venezuela, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Puerto Rico. To varying degrees, all these Americans displayed a concern with the autochthonist and strived to put forth a distinctly post-colonial avant-garde that blended elements from the European avant-gardes with those from indigenous cultures. In an oft-quoted line from his *Manifiesto Antropófago* (Cannibalist Manifesto, 1928), Brazilian poet Oswald de Andrade put it as follows: 'Tupi or not Tupi: that is the question.'² Tupi was the popular, generic name for Brazilian native

Americans, and also for their language, *nheengatu*. This people living in the Amazon rainforest was known in Europe for its alleged cannibalistic rituals. Andrade's line of course also echoed Shakespeare and thus also cannibalised the famous European writer. In fact, Andrade's manifesto as a whole argued that cannibalising others' cultures was what Brazilians did best. As such Andrade turned the European perspective on its head in order to push a local, post-colonial advance. Now the Brazilians were eating the Europeans. Interestingly, his ambivalence towards established European culture was as pronounced as that of the European avant-gardes. As such, precisely the European avant-gardes' mistrust of official European culture was also what made their project so suitable for appropriation in the continent's former colonies.

'The East'

Having looked westward from the European continent, we of course must look eastward too. Many European avant-gardists did so as well. In theatre, for example, it is remarkable how often performing traditions in the East were mentioned. Avant-garde theatre reformers were generally concerned with three aspects of their artform: the relation between its elements (stage design, props, actors, lighting, sound, language, etc.), acting and the human body, and theatre's overall cultural function. Almost all avant-gardists agreed on the fact that the specificity of theatre lay in its composite nature. For instance, in his book *Wstęp do teorii Czystej Formy w teatrze* (Theory of Pure Form in the Theatre, 1920), Polish avant-gardist Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, better known as Witkacy, proposed a new type of theatre in which 'meaning would be defined only by its purely internal construction',³ that is by movement, music, form and other scenic elements. (Witkacy's own plays amounted to grotesque pieces, such as *Mątwą* [Cuttlefish, 1922] and *Kurka Wodna* [The Water Hen, 1921], which prefigured the Theatre of the Absurd.) Like others, including Antonin Artaud, who was later to develop his own Theatre of Cruelty, Witkacy believed that Asian and Oceanic metaphysical traditional theatre had always understood the real nature of the artform, because here the role of literary narrative and characters' psychology were downplayed and the complete range of theatrical elements was foregrounded.

In the early decades of the twentieth-century, travelling *Kabuki* groups and Chinese performers as well as touring Cambodian and Balinese dance troops allowed avant-gardists to experience extra-European forms of acting first hand. A famous instance was the travelling Chinese actor Mei Lan-Fang, a traditional female impersonator who was lauded by artists as diverse as

Vsevolod Meyerhold, Sergei Tretyakov, Bertolt Brecht and Sergei Eisenstein. Like Witkacy, all of these artists were profoundly taken by Asian and Oceanic theatre and dance traditions. For Witkacy, Japanese theatre especially vouched for the revelation of what he termed the ‘mystery of existence’. This meta-physical experience was what theatre had to offer to culture at large. Not everyone agreed on this, of course, but transcendental experience also played a key role in the work of Bauhaus artist Oskar Schlemmer. The main function of theatre for him was to put forth transformations of the human. As he saw it, ‘[t]he history of theatre is the history of the transformation of human form. It is the history of man as the actor of physical and spiritual events, ranging from naivete to reflection, from naturalness to artifice.’⁴ Launching new, mechanised forms of acting which built on mathematical designs, Schlemmer was particularly drawn to Javanese, Chinese and Japanese theatre. Part of the attraction for him, as for many other avant-gardists, came from the models of acting in these extra-European traditions, because the actor here, at least to avant-gardists, resembled puppets and marionettes more than anything else. The collective or generic, ego-less type these actors as well as Eastern shadow puppetry represented was greatly admired by many avant-gardists, not least because many of them opposed the traditional model in the West of psychological, ego-centred drama.

As with their encounters with African cultures, it remains a matter of debate whether all these European theatre and film reformers actually saw Asian and Oceanic theatre for what it really was, yet this uncertainty does not preclude the fact that the influence of Eastern cultures on the avant-gardes was considerable. *Imagism* is an interesting case in point. This association of English-language poets in the 1910s, including Ezra Pound, Amy Lowell, Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) and Richard Aldington, sought to put forth a poetry of clarity without ornamentation. Their attempt to get to the essence of ‘things’, that is to present objects and abstract ideas as directly as possible, was in the case of Pound heavily influenced by his study of Japanese art and verse forms as well as of the construction of ideogrammatic characters in Chinese languages, whose form often resembled what they denoted. In this undertaking, Pound was less concerned with making claims about Asian cultures or languages. His primary motivation for turning to Asia was his conviction that its arts could help him isolate new ways of expression in his own work. In a similar vein, Russian Futurist Velimir Khlebnikov in the 1910s complained about the narrowness of Russian writing, as it ignored the cultural contributions not only of many Russian legends and Polabian Slavs, but also of the Mongolians, Persians and Jews living on the outskirts of the Russian lands. Russian or ‘Slavic’ literature to Khlebnikov thus also included Asian and Middle Eastern writing. Technically, he was not wrong of course;

the Russian land mass at this point was vast. Yet Asia for one harnessed even vaster stretches of land which did not fall under Russia, and which in the wake of nineteenth-century Japonism and Chinoiserie had come to be regarded as highly refined traditionalist cultures that had developed parallel to, but largely independent of, Europe. As ever, this commonly held view in Europe requires qualification, for there was a rich variety of distinctly new avant-gardes here too.

Travelling by boat from Vladivostok, Russian Futurist David Burliuk – on his way to the USA – halted in Japan for what was to be initially just a brief stint. Burliuk set up shop in Tokyo and within two weeks organised an exhibition of Russian Futurist paintings. After a year Burliuk went to the Bonin Islands, where he painted all winter, eventually to move on by boat after co-writing the book *Miraiha to wa? Kotaeru* (What is Futurism? An Answer, published 1923) with local artist Kinoshita Shūichirō. Long before Burliuk had stopped in Japan, the Japanese had been introduced to the European avant-gardes by travelling Japanese artists and intellectuals, through correspondence with Europeans (most notably Italian Futurists), and translations of texts in local magazines. In the 1920s this would lead to Japan's own modest Futurist group and, later, to a sizeable Surrealist movement, both comprising writers as well as visual artists. Yet, above all, it was perhaps the group around the magazine *MAVO* (1924–5), which presented the most substantial contribution to Japanese avant-garde art, for more than any other group in Japan MAVO tried to reconcile two conflicting trends in Japanese culture at this time: the traditionalist approach to art on the one hand, and the Westernisation of art on the other.

A crucial figure in this undertaking was Murayama Tomoyoshi. An autodidact, he had visited Berlin and met up with Expressionists, the Cubist Alexander Archipenko, Dadaists and Constructivists. In the same capital of the Weimar Republic, in 1922, he had also exhibited work by himself in a Futurist show. Soon after his return to Japan, he became a star and self-proclaimed interpreter of the European avant-gardes. Murayama drew on the avant-gardes, but also on Marxism and anarchism, to construct a non-representational image of modernity suitable to Japanese culture. In his mind this required the complete liberation of the artist first of all. For it was only when that point had been reached that his key principle of *ishikiteki kōseishugi* (conscious constructivism) could be realised. This principle entailed the complete negation of traditional, realistic modes of representation and the construction of an abstracted or entirely non-objective expression of modern life. In practice, this led Murayama to make assemblages combining painting and collage, and to produce abstract paintings and prints (see Fig. 57). Others, including founder members Ōura Shūzō, Yanase Masamu, Ogata Kamenosuke and Kadowaki

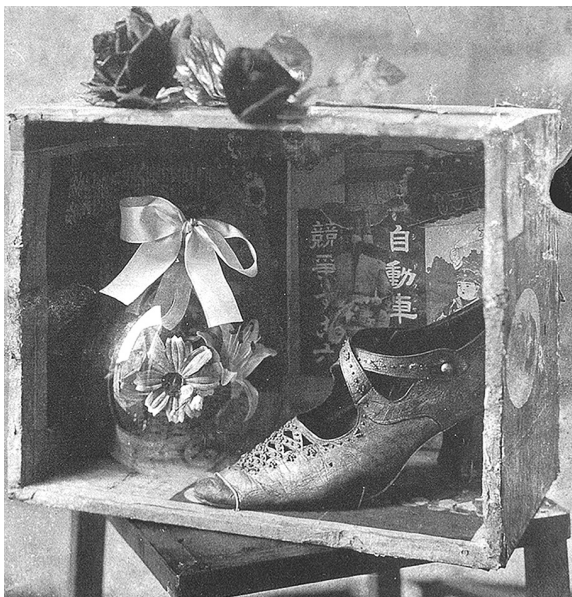


Figure 57 Murayama Tomoyoshi, *Hana to kutsu no tsukatte aru sakuhin* (Work Employing Flower and Shoe, ca. 1923), a mixed media assemblage, now presumed lost. This photograph is from the pamphlet of MAVO's first exhibition held at the Buddhist temple Denpōin, Asakusa, 1923.

Shinrō, took up Murayama's guiding principle in literature (Fig. 58), the visual arts, architecture and theatre.

Expanding the palette of artistic materials in Japanese art and writing, MAVO also moved away from official exhibition venues, exhibiting in cafés, private industry buildings and department stores. The movement's unusually chaotic internal make-up, its many interventions in everyday life, its members' extravagant dress code and its shocking and widely attended performances at first sight made MAVO a replica of the European avant-gardes, whose project too had been to incorporate as many aspects of life into art so that both would perhaps one day coincide. With the MAVO artists, however, this project gained a rather different flavour. For them, the influence of European art on Japanese culture during the so-called Meiji period (1868–1912) had cut art out of the social fabric. In their mind, indeed, Japanese cultural production had Westernised too much as it had transformed creative work in an autonomous 'fine art'. MAVO artists, while expressing their own culture's modernity, sought to push Japanese culture back to a state before this period, to a situation in which art would once again be part and parcel of everyday life. MAVO thus used the European avant-gardes to counter the increasingly pervading European influence in Japan. Interestingly, the movement made some of its most thought-provoking works after the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, which devastated large parts of Tokyo. MAVO artists instantly began to sketch architectural and urban plans for the city's reconstruction, seizing the moment to start with a clean slate and to see art reintegrated in everyday life.

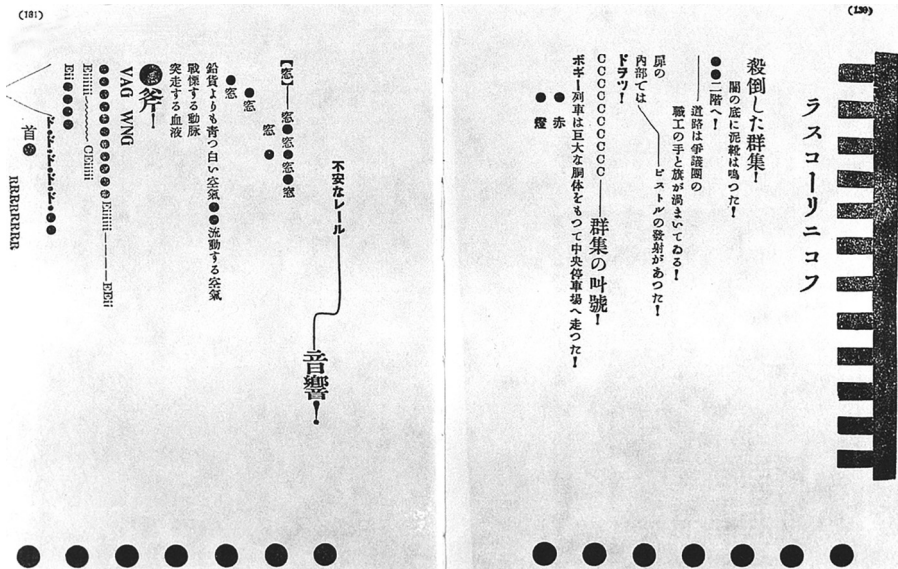


Figure 58 Double page (pp. 130–1) from Hagiwara Kyōjirō's *Shikei senkoku* (Death Sentence, 1925), an anthology of visual poetry published in 1925, with page layout and graphic design by Okada Tatsuo. The poem 'Raskolnikov' displayed here, the form of which also recalls the switching of rail tracks, reads, starting on the right page: 'The crowd is pouring in! / In the depths of the darkness, the sound of muddy boots! / • • go to the second floor! / ----- the road is swirling with strikers' hands and flags! / From the inside / the door / a pistol was fired! / **Bang!** / CCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCCC --- THE LOUD SCREAM OF THE CROWD! / The bogie train with its huge body is running unstoppable to the central stop! / • red / • light' Left page: 'Unstable rails / REVERBERATION! / window ---- window • window • window • window / window • / • window / • window / better than black from lead a blue and pure sky • • the changing sky / arteries throbbing from horror / the blood is rushing / • AX! / VAG WNG / Eiiiiii _ _ _ _ _ EEii / Eiiiiii / CEiiiiii / Eii••• / Thud • Thud • Thud • Thud • Thud • Thud • Thud / Head • / RRRRRRRRRRRRRR'. (Translation courtesy of Dimitri Vanoverbeke.)

The farther away we move from Europe into Asia, the more powerful and intense flashes of avant-garde activity light up. In China, most notably, as early as 1914 writers and artists became acquainted with Italian Futurism, in part through Japanese sources, and although they generally took an interest in several other European avant-gardists as well, it appears that all in all the Chinese – even those who sought to 'Westernise' China's traditionalist art and culture – kept the avant-gardes at arm's length in their own cultural production. Lu Xun, a major figure in the May Fourth Movement launched in 1919 – an anti-imperialist student revolt which grew into a much broader cultural movement of reform – begged to differ. An avid collector of both traditional Chinese woodcuts and engravings as well as modern woodcuts from (Soviet)

Russia, Belgium and Germany, Lu Xun during the 1920s and 1930s began to encourage artists to experiment with modern European artistic techniques and theories (including Marxism) in order to give shape to a distinctly Chinese modernity, one that was neither Communist as in Russia nor capitalist as in the West. In an essay of 1934, entitled ‘*nalai zhuyi*’ (Grabism), Lu Xun advocated that the Chinese take or ‘grab’ from the Europeans and other extra-Chinese cultures what they thought to be most useful and to discard or deform the rest. Grabbing from the European avant-gardes’ artistic output, Lu Xun thought, could be rather useful. His fascination with the art of woodcut printing in particular drew him to German and Belgian Expressionism – in 1933, for example, Lu Xun published Belgian Frans Masereel’s *25 Images de la passion d’un homme* (25 Images of the Suffering of a Man, 1918, see Fig. 59), a wordless ‘novel’ that recounts how a common man leads a revolt against the exploitation of the working class until he is executed. It is not so difficult to grasp why Lu Xun was drawn particularly to (avant-garde) woodcuts or *muke*, as they were called. The woodblock technique had been invented in China, and the style of Chinese woodcuts had, moreover, never been realistic in a Western sense. In a culture where art had predominantly given shape to harmony and propriety, however, the Expressionist portrayal of anguish and suffering was experienced as shockingly new. And it was this shock, derived from the presentation of human suffering, that Lu Xun also promoted through his writings and by organising various exhibitions. One of these exhibitions, held in 1935 in Beijing, showed about 600 prints and was attended by 5,000 visitors on the opening day. This gave evidence of Lu Xun’s conviction that woodcut prints, cheap and easily taught, could also be a powerful and potentially revolutionary artform.

Lu Xun eventually managed to convince dozens of artists. Indeed, by the mid-1930s a veritable Chinese woodcut movement had been set up, with outposts all over the country, yet with Shanghai, the economic and cultural powerhouse of China and by all accounts a meeting place of divergent cultures, as its apparent centre. These artists tried to act as the people’s mouthpiece and often looked specifically to agitate lower social classes in China into a struggle against imperialist forces. Li Hua’s *nuhou ba Zhongguo* (Roar, China!, ca. 1935, see Fig. 60) is a telling case. Viewed in isolation and without its title, it might trick a woodcut buff into believing it came from the hands of a European Expressionist. Lu Hua’s incisions create at once a sharp and angular effect but they are also decisive in triggering relief and tension. The contorted, naked and muscular body of a man in anguish strapped to a pole, his right hand just inches away from the knife that might set him free, shouts out here. This act of shouting, the work’s aural dimension, is what is perhaps most powerful about it. Seeing this small woodcut with a body seemingly squeezed to the point



Figure 59 Frans Masereel, *Debout les morts. Résurrection infernale* (March Deceased. Infernal Resurrection, 1917), eighth woodcut plate. Advocating pacifism, this early graphic novel calls upon the dead to bring out the futility of war.



Figure 60 Li Hua's woodcut, *nihou ba Zhongguo* (Roar, China!, ca. 1935). A figure in a pose reminiscent of Masereel's depiction of dead war victims (see Fig. 59) screams for life and freedom.

of suffocation, we imagine hearing a loud roar. The texture of that roar is remarkably complex, however, as it echoes both the voice of the European avant-gardes and that of a projected extra-European people crying out for change.

However we regard the circulation or dispersion of ideas, tactics and strategies advanced by the European avant-gardes, their global spread illustrates that the classic avant-gardes touched people in many spaces and places. We could look at other extra-European avant-gardes, but the selective survey given here should suffice to illustrate that extra-European artists and writers never plainly calqued the European avant-gardes' work or project. Instead, processes of transfer, selection, translation and hybridisation led to a fascinatingly thick and rich spread of the avant-gardes to the far corners of the planet. Whatever extra-European avant-garde we turn to, its value as a rule lies in the articulation of European avant-garde tactics and strategies with often much older, locally sedimented traditions; traditions which the European avant-gardes in turn sought to make their own – or, as the key role of woodcuts in Expressionism reminds us, had long made their own – without simply copying them. Strikingly, while European avant-gardists looked to other parts of the world to infuse their art with alternative aesthetic modes, artists outside of Europe most often drew on the European avant-gardes because they also found them remarkably suited to giving artistic shape to their own voice of dissent and their own modernity. This voice, we have seen, was by no means monological. It was always as polyphonous as that of the combined European avant-gardes. Still, there is a lot to be said for the existence of a *global* avant-garde of city-dwelling, youthful artists, provided that we recognise the key role of what Lu Xun labelled 'grabism' and identify the existence of more than the one, Western modernity. Indeed, if the European avant-gardes cannot be untied from the modern, European cultural forces which they sought to oppose, the same holds true for the extra-European avant-gardes that emerged within at times radically different material and cultural constellations.

Box 6: Ultraism and Other Isms

Avant-garde isms in circulation between 1905 and 1935 included Abstractism, Alogicism, Amorphism, Artificialism, Avenirism, Bruitism, Compressionism, Concretism, Crepuscularism, Creationism, Dimensionism, Elementarism, Eternism, Everythingism, Functionalism, Hallucinism, Instantaneism, Intersectionism, Integralism, Luchism, Manifestantism, Metaphysicism, Mozartism, Napostovism, (Neo)Plasticism, (Neo)Primitivism, (Neo)Realism, Nullunctism, Nunism, Panfuturism, Paulism, Paroxysm, Photodynamism, Poetism, Presentism, Prounism, Purism, Rayonism, Sensationism, Simultaneism, Suprarealism, Suprematism, Surrealism, Synchronism, Tabuism, Tactilism, Totalism, Unanimism, Unism, Ultraism, Veshchism or Thingism, Vibrationism, Vitalism and Zenithism.

This large number of isms – many more are discussed in this book – does not add up to the sum of the avant-gardes, as there were groups, such as OBERIU in Russia, that went by non-isms as well. For several reasons we should also not essentialise isms. As group labels, admittedly, they are useful, but it is unwise to employ them all too stringently as heuristic instruments. Sometimes isms proved little more than promotional stunts. There were in addition the mock-isms or hoaxes. These existed only by grace of a manifesto in which their supposed launch was announced. Such was the case with Tristan Tzara's Aaism, Max Ernst's Adamism, the Adampetonism of Elettrone Rotativi (pseud. Ardengo Soffici) and the Impertinentism of A. Undo (pseud. Hugo Kersten). Moreover, the deeper we delve into the archive of the avant-gardes, the clearer it becomes that solely ranking artists within isms seldom does justice to their work, as artists often drew their strength from combining facets from different isms with additional elements. In a way, every avant-gardist was his or her own ism.

Some avant-garde isms also had rather fuzzy or hybrid programmes. Take Ultraism, arguably the only distinct avant-garde group to be launched from Spain. The movement emerged after the First World War in the Madrilène literary Café Colonial where writer Rafael Cansinos-Asséns held sway. The core of the *ultraístas* was made up of poets and writers, including Guillermo de Torre, Argentinian Jorge Luis Borges (then in Madrid), Gerardo Diego, Pedro Garfias, Juan Larrea, Ernesto López-Parra, Lucía Sánchez Saornil and the Sevillan Isaac del Vando-Villar. These Ultraist poets had their books amply illustrated, especially with woodcuts, by visual artists such as the itinerant Uruguayan Rafael Barradas, the Pole Władysław Jahl, Francisco Bores and Norah Borges (sister of Jorge Luis and wife of de Torre). Their visual work, for lack of actual exhibition space in Madrid, was presented

also in the movement's magazines, the most important of which were *Grecia* (Greece, published in Seville and Madrid, 1918–20), *Ultra* (1921–2) and *Horizonte* (1922–3).

From the beginning Ultraism defined itself as 'indeterminado' or indefinite. As was stated in 'Ultra. Un manifiesto de la juventud literaria' (Ultra. Manifesto of the Literary Youth, 1919), the motto was "ultra" and our creed fits all trends, without distinction, provided they express a new longing'.¹ In sum, every youngster who was willing to cut the umbilical cord with the past and who wished to help put Spain on the map of the international avant-gardes was welcome. With such an open-ended programme which always looked for the next new thing, the 'ultra', it is unsurprising that Ultraism gave rise to a rather heterogeneous artistic output, the boundaries of which were rather fluid. Artists and writers convening under the banner of Ultraism were indeed remarkably diverse. Inspired by Ramón Gómez de la Serna's earlier efforts, they sought to rid Spanish art of tradition and convention, yet to this aim they never really put forth a cohesive programme of their own.

Ultraism is perhaps best seen as an avant-garde chameleon; depending on the angle from which it is viewed, it turns out to be a type of Cubism, Futurism or Dadaism. Poet Guillermo de Torre, for instance, tried to steer Ultraism in the direction of Futurism. In 1920, de Torre published his *Manifiesto ultraísta vertical* (see Fig. 61). Poetry had to introduce scientific neologisms and technicisms as well as experimental typography to usher in



Figure 61 Guillermo de Torre's *Manifiesto ultraísta vertical* (recto and verso), a broadsheet published as a supplement to the magazine *Grecia* (November 1920). The portrait of de Torre top left is by Uruguayan émigré Rafael Barradas, the four woodcuts are by the itinerant Argentinian Norah Borges.

a new and mechanical epoch, de Torre claimed. The 'vertical', mechanised view of things promoted by de Torre was not devoid of humour, however, and often also recalled the mechanomorphic experiments of Dada. Tzara, for instance, considered many exploits of the Ultraists, which were often marked by witty jokes, as distinctly Dadaist and published poems by de Torre, Rafael Lasso de la Vega and others in his magazine *Dada*. In the visual arts, meanwhile, Rafael Barradas promoted what he called Vibrationism, which fused facets from Cubism and Futurism to capture the universal 'vibration' of modernity. In his 1919 painting *Atocha* (named after the train station in Madrid, close to which Barradas had his studio), for example, Barradas portrayed the vitalist energy of the city in a visual language that recalled the Orphic Cubism of the Delaunays.

Part of the versatile and open-ended programme of Ultraism derived from the fact that it had a Latin American influx as well. For a brief stint, for instance, Ultraism was joined by Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro, who had earlier founded the one-man movement of *Creacionismo* or Creationism and who during his stay in Paris had become deeply influenced by Cubist poets Apollinaire, Max Jacob and Pierre Reverdy, among others. Creationist Huidobro argued during the First World War that every poem had to be seen as a new *thing* put into the world. His poetic emphasised non-figurative images and loathed verisimilitude as much as it disregarded expectations of readers as well as his own. Poetry had to be created for creation's sake, Huidobro insisted; it was to come about spontaneously, just like nature creates trees. His visual poetry also prefigured the post-Second World War explosion of concrete poetry.

In a 1921 manifesto published in the magazine *Baleares*, the writer Borges and a few other Ultraist companions suggested that the heterogeneity of Ultraism was its ultimate strength. 'There exist two aesthetics', they averred, 'the passive aesthetics of mirrors and the active aesthetics of prisms'.² Boosting the latter, Borges and his fellows claimed that Ultraism's main goal was to voice personal visions and to add to reality rather than to copy it. In the process, the movement's prism also filtered and altered aspects from many other isms, and these efforts in the 1920s were accordingly picked up by other European avant-gardes. Indeed, when in 1925 de Torre's study *Literaturas europeas de la vanguardia* related Spanish Ultraism to Dada, Futurism and even Expressionism, his audience no longer consisted of the handful of poets and artists in Spain with which the movement had begun. De Torre's readership now found itself all over Europe, and beyond.

Ultraism's amalgamating aesthetic and its pluralist creed not to have a central creed proved most successful, indeed. Although the movement in

Spain had lost momentum by the mid-1920s and although only a handful of book publications was actually produced by the *ultraístas*, their indeterminate or indefinite programme during the early 1920s made Ultraism an ideal playground for later Spanish writers and poets of the so-called Generation of '27, as well as later Spanish Surrealists, to mature in. Federico García Lorca, Rafael Alberti, Gerardo Diego, Luis Buñuel and many others were given a first chance to publish work in Ultraist magazines. Moreover, when in the early 1920s Jorge Luis Borges returned to Buenos Aires he went on to advocate his own interpretation of Ultraism through various manifestos. Latin American Ultraist magazines, such as *Prisma* (1921–2, a 'mural' or poster-size publication) and *Proa* (1922–3), added to the movement on another continent, where it took root also in Montevideo, Caracas and Santiago as a variety of youngsters there in turn felt drawn to the call to artistic arms of the Ultraists.

Part III

Times and Temporalities

Chapter 7

The Past Appropriated

The European avant-gardes' relation to the past seems rife with contradictions. Calling for the absolutely new and stressing change, the avant-gardes seem to have been united in turning their backs on the past and wanting nothing whatsoever to do with it. Yet how can something be new if there is no past to compare it with and so no way to recognise it as new? Does the new not require the old? Avant-gardists themselves often came close to suggesting that they created work *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, beginning from scratch. As F. T. Marinetti, Emilio Settimelli and Bruno Corra once put it in a manifesto: 'no logic, no tradition, no aesthetic, no technique, no opportunity' weighed on their work; they were after the 'absolute value of novelty'.¹ Ramón Gómez de la Serna put it like this: 'the only truth worth paying attention to is the latest one'.² Yet how is it possible to shut off our memory in producing art? Was this not an immensely naïve assertion? Finally, how could outgrowths of one movement, say, Surrealism in Serbia, which surged *after* the movement's emergence in France and Belgium, claim to be new as well? Was this not in manifest contradiction with the obvious fact that such outgrowths were derivations of previous avant-gardes? These and other questions make it necessary that we study the avant-gardes' relation to the past and history more closely. As this chapter shows, the 'new' of the avant-gardes was not as absolute as their at times inflammatory, antipasséist rhetoric made it sound. The avant-gardes were also not against the past as such. Rather, avant-gardists abhorred certain *approaches* to the past, and in response voiced their own singular and creative take on the past and history, their own history included.

Making the New Historical

In their writings and pronouncements, the avant-gardes often referred promiscuously to 'the new'. There was talk of a new art, a new man, a new reality, new objects, a new spirit, new organisms, new forms, a new life, new values, a new society, a new era, a new culture, and so on. Everything about them, it seems, was new and differed from the old. Already in 1913, Russian Rayonists

Mikhail Larionov and Natalia Gonchorova therefore proposed simply to drop the old-versus-new opposition: ‘We laugh at the words “old art” and “new art” – that’s nonsense invented by philistines.’³ All these claims to the new served only one purpose, they implied: to cater to the commercial hunger for novelty of bourgeois art-lovers in the West, who, as Purist Amédée Ozenfant later remarked, called Pissarro a Cubist and passed Monet for Manet. When we prick through the shallow rhetoric and dig deeper, however, we quickly notice that the avant-gardes did give the notion of ‘the new’ serious thought. In fact, they used the adjective ‘new’ in at least three different ways to characterise their own art.

First, the adjective ‘new’ was often employed in a generic fashion to refer to the impact of modernity and modernisation on everyday life. To produce an art fit for this new, modern world, the avant-gardes made their work incorporate and enter into dialogue with the new phenomena of their time. This entailed the assimilation of aspects of modern metropolitan life as subject matter, and further implied an extensive exploration of the potential aesthetic uses and repercussions of new media and technologies, new insights from science, philosophy, engineering and politics. On the basis of this, and with good reason, many avant-gardists qualified their work as new – that is, as modern. After the First World War, the blind enthusiasm for everything new and modern waned – the violent use of technology during the war alone made it all too obvious that not all advances in modern society were necessarily for the better. Yet proclamations of the avant-gardes’ novelty kept flooding their magazines and publications even after the First World War. Now even more acutely aware of the fact that they were living in an age of transition, a time of tremendous instability but also of great potential, the avant-gardes persisted in devising an art fit for their own moment and for a better time to come.

A second way in which the avant-gardes qualified their work as new was by pointing out that it added something to the world that did not yet exist. Kandinsky, for instance, was sceptical about exploring aspects of modern culture just for the sake of novelty, but he called basically every abstract work new: ‘every genuine work says, “Here I am!”’⁴ Intent on making a practical distinction between the ‘abstract’ and the ‘concrete’, he favoured the latter term because it signalled that all works that did not aim to represent or recreate the world were also the advent of new phenomena rather than derivations of pre-existing templates. We can understand what Kandinsky meant: abstract avant-garde works are always and forever new, because as singular and concrete objects they add something to the world that does not yet exist. As most avant-garde works left Realist conventions behind, it is perhaps not surprising that we often encounter variations on Kandinsky’s definition of the new in the writings of other avant-gardists as well. As Kurt Schwitters and Raoul

Hausmann put it succinctly many years after Kandinsky: 'Poetry Intervenes Now. Presence is New. PIN.'⁵ Based on the fact that individual works can be seen as new additions to the world, avant-gardists also frequently emphasised that their work gave shape to something unforeseen or even unforeseeable, that it allowed both makers and audience to experience and sense something that could not (or not yet) be captured within the bounds of linguistic or other communicative conventions.

In these first two senses of the word 'new' – the new work as modern, or as an addition to the world – it is difficult to discern how, if at all, the avant-gardes related to the old or to the past. Both senses present the avant-gardes' exploits as being 'new' because they were 'very much of their own time', possibly 'of a time to come', and perhaps even 'out of time' altogether. Yet there was also a third aspect of their work that the avant-gardes qualified as new: their distinct *procedures*. Kandinsky, for instance, also made sure to accentuate the procedure by way of which new works came about. Whatever matter or materials an artist works with, 'like a cook, [he or she] takes necessary ingredients' to produce a suitable form.⁶ The procedure, the recipe, thus turns matter into new concrete form, Kandinsky thought. By stressing this procedural aspect, he hit a vein that runs through all the avant-gardes. For while not all avant-gardists shared Kandinsky's appreciation of concrete non-representational art, and whereas some would have thoroughly disliked the comparison with cooks, they did agree that the novelty of their work resided perhaps first and foremost in the procedures they used to process given materials. The simplest procedure used was the readymade. Yet avant-gardists put forth many other procedures, too. There were, for instance, Dada's chance operations, which often went hand in glove with a mystical conviction: if, in the act of creation, we clear our heads, search for nothing and adopt an indifferent, superior attitude to all kinds of oppositions, seeing them as one, then Hans Arp and other Dadaists believed we could indeed create *ex nihilo*; things would simply happen by chance or coincidence. There were in addition the procedures of Surrealist automatism, the self-imposed constraints of geometric abstraction (such as basic colour, only straight lines), the principles of *tektonika* and *faktura* in Constructivism (see Box 7), and the adoption of multi-perspectivism in Cubism. Taken together, these and other procedures show that the avant-gardes were interested as much in *novelty* as in the experimental, improvisational and experiential act of *innovation*. As Robert Delaunay put it boastfully: 'I know all the old techniques. I want the new, the living, the unprecedented.'⁷ Or as Georges Braque phrased it in his usual concise way: 'New means. New Subjects.'⁸

Locating the new in the programmatic procedure of composing a work and arranging its materials, be it in painting, music or any other artform,

seems again to firmly ground the avant-gardes in their own moment. Yet few grasped the central role of the past in the procedure so clearly as poet Vladimir Mayakovsky in 1913: ‘The new can be not some object that is still unknown to everyone in our grey-haired world but a change in looking at relationships between objects.’⁹ There is a lot here to unpack. Mayakovsky implied, first of all, that we cannot recognise something as new when it bears no relation to the old or familiar. That we understand a work to be new or to communicate something that cannot (yet) be captured in the registers we share, is, precisely, because we share certain ‘grey-haired’ traditions and registers. Moreover, the stuff that art is made of (be it language, musical notation, colour or paint) is never new in itself; it is always already given. Only what an artist does with the materials therefore makes his or her work new. At a most basic level, the creative act thus starts off with selecting and bringing together familiar things in unexpected or unfamiliar relationships. The new of the avant-gardes, in other words, was at heart a hybridisation or reorganisation of the old. Rather than oppose the old, the avant-gardes thus set out to ‘make it new’, in Ezra Pound’s famous phrase. And this same procedural approach they also applied to art and cultural history more generally.

Making the Past New

Most avant-gardists thoroughly disliked people who just nostalgically looked back on the great artistic and cultural achievements of the past, because this somehow suggested that the art of the present, their new art, could never live up to that of the past, and that the vanished past in turn was forever to be mourned. Yet even the greatest champions of antipasséism, the Italian Futurists, never went as far as to cut all ties with the past. (It is worth recalling, for instance, that the Italians often presented their movement as a ‘cultural resurgence’ of Italy.¹⁰) Instead, the Futurists called for a change in attitude and orientation. They accentuated optimism, speed and dynamism, and advocated a healthy dose of memory loss. For merely contemplating the great past made nothing happen and immobilised. For art to become a form of action, then, the best was to turn your back to the past, look straight ahead and move on.

Not all avant-gardists turned their backs to the past that casually, however. Classics-educated and well acquainted with Europe’s many historical landmarks in the arts, several Expressionists, for example, struggled on a personal level with the past, experiencing it as a colossal weight. Some also cultivated a profound hatred for the cultural past, seeing it as the cause of everything that went wrong in their own time and calling for its complete destruction, so as to start afresh. These sentiments are well captured by *Angelus Novus* (New Angel, 1920, Plate 1), a small print produced by Paul Klee and once owned by

critic Walter Benjamin. In this work Klee left academic conventions behind, calling on a classic icon of redemption – an angelic figure – but also distorting its traditional depiction. The angel appears to be flying backwards, facing the past as if being thrown aback. What the angel actually witnesses is a matter of debate (an annihilated past? the return of God to earth?). Yet with its gaze pulled towards the past and its back turned to the future, it certainly does not see where it is heading. For some artists, then, not looking back proved rather difficult, in part perhaps because they still felt compelled to measure their own works against those of the past, wondering what they themselves would eventually leave behind, and whether it would suffice for it in turn to become a meaningful part of the cultural past of future generations.

Yet, in line with Mayakovsky, most avant-gardists tended to turn this way of considering the past around, not measuring the present against the colossal past, but viewing the past in light of present needs and desires. This approach was captured most radically by German Dadaist Wieland Herzfelde, when he wrote in 1920:

The past remains important and authoritative only to the extent that its cult must be combated. The Dadaists are of one mind: they say that the works of Antiquity, the classical age, and all the “great minds” must not be evaluated [...] with regard to the age in which they were created, but as if someone made those things today.¹¹

When the past is approached in this way, Herzfelde observed, it soon becomes apparent that a lot of it is simply dead weight that can be cast off. When we actualise the past, pull it onto the plank of the present and subject it to the needs of our own time, most things from the past just prove of no use. Viewed as such the past is not absolute and unchangeable. Like the present and the future, it is relative and malleable.

This conviction, which can be traced back to Friedrich Nietzsche's essay *Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben* (On the Use and Abuse of History for Life, 1874), caused most avant-gardists also to disapprove of so-called ‘historicism’, that is, of historians who aimed to disclose the past as it really had been. Such historicists evoked cultural historical periods as static, self-enclosed chunks of time all interconnected by an immutable chain of causes and effects. Against this supposedly objective presentation of the past as static and fossilised, the avant-gardes sought to break the past open, and to activate it in the present from their own subjective point of view. Or as Uruguayan-Catalan Constructivist devil-do-all Joaquín Torres-García phrased it in his manifesto ‘Art-evolució’ (Art-Evolution, 1917): ‘For us, nothing is definitive [...] We must find those who have the right temperament to choose

and select, spontaneously.' The aim, he added, was to be independent, anarchic, to be 'someone in time'.¹²

This step outside of conventional history pervades the avant-gardes. It is perhaps most pronounced in their wide-ranging 'primitivism' discussed in Chapter 6. The avant-gardes' search for the primitive, for an alternative originary moment from which to start afresh in the now, took on a very specific form with several artists who (had) lived around the Mediterranean. After the First World War, creators as varied as Pablo Picasso and Giorgio de Chirico drew on an old myth that viewed the Mediterranean region as an Arcadian, pagan place before the Fall, an earthly paradise far removed from the devastating modern world. Presenting updated versions of the classic nude, the still life or the landscape, their work took on different forms, but also jointly revisited a tradition at least as old as Virgil's pastoral poetry. Such so-called *neoclassicism* could be read as a reactionary return to order – provided we ignore the enormous, syncretic bodies of Picasso's nudes of the 1920s, or simply disregard the unsettlingly strange and silent dream worlds which de Chirico's paintings open up, with their combination of conventional perspective, ancient statuary and other enigmatic objects (see Plate 20). Indeed, despite the appearance of a return to some distant Arcadian past, these works are best interpreted in light of the avant-gardes' overarching approach to the arts and cultures of the past. This approach did not contemplate the past as a museum of lifeless matter to be considered from a distance. Instead, it actively turned to the past as a reservoir of topics, objects, forms and devices that could be combined, following a specific procedure, to produce a new start in the present.

The so-called neoclassicist phase of Igor Stravinsky, which took off in the 1920s and was named as such for its alleged return to, or pastiche of, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music, can be considered in a similar way. Even the briefest of glimpses at Stravinsky's musical production of his neoclassicist phase – with its emphasis on rhythm and contrapuntal texture (that is, a texture of which separate voices are polyphonically interdependent, yet independent in terms of rhythm and colour), and with its expanded tonal harmonies – shows that he actually drew on a much larger and more varied set of musical and literary sources, from Bach, Beethoven and Mozart, to jazz, Ancient Greek legends, Pushkin, Tchaikovsky and Pergolesi. Like certain works of composers Darius Milhaud and Paul Hindemith of the same period, Stravinsky's neoclassical compositions thus rather selectively picked elements from the past to combine them in new relations and constellations. For instance, his stern opera-oratorio *Oedipus Rex* (1928), after Sophocles, borrowed techniques from classical as well as contemporary popular styles, picked motifs from Verdi's *Aida*, and purposely mismatched the libretto (written

by Jean Cocteau) with its musical accompaniment. The result is a sort of musico-textual 'time-knot' in which works and styles from different periods become inextricably entangled in a singularly new work. By the 1930s, neoclassicism was a widespread phenomenon in music throughout Europe, adopted by a considerable number of composers claiming to 'return to order' – and perhaps therefore appreciated also by a wider audience. Yet when we consider how freely and impetuously Stravinsky rummaged the past, his neo-classicist work is perhaps best regarded as grotesquely magnifying and thereby accentuating the approach to the past encountered in all the avant-gardes. Indeed, the past to Stravinsky also was not an absolute given, nor was it an all-pervasive determining force. It was just one other object of aesthetic play that could be roped in the project of a Total Art.

We could easily fill a book which demonstrates how the avant-gardes imaginatively returned to and roamed through the past, from prehistory to the late nineteenth century, bringing back elements, themes and forms to recombine them in eclectic constellations within all the arts. While Kandinsky, for example, was fascinated by old Egyptian art and culture, others turned to aspects of Biblical history, medieval art, the Flemish Primitives, the Baroque and so on. Naturally, considering the avant-gardes' project of putting forth a distinctly modern and timely art that could impact the world, references to contemporary artistic trends, events and practices tend to stand out in their work. But the avant-gardes also found no contradiction in anachronistically coupling such distinctly modern or contemporary aspects to references to major historical events, more mundane facets of everyday life and culture in the past, or historical genres and styles from the past.

Expressionist Max Beckmann is an interesting case in this context. Early in his career, shortly after the sinking of the *Titanic* in 1912, Beckmann began work on a monumental oil painting depicting the famous shipwreck. On top of the painting, half-hidden behind an iceberg, Beckmann put the huge ship ablaze against a dark-brown sky. In the centre and front, in chaotically gurgling blues and greens, rowing boats and bodies desperately trying to save themselves. While Beckmann did not witness the disaster himself, with this painting he claimed for himself the role of commentator on contemporary history. Yet his work also displayed thorough acquaintance with traditional genre-painting. For painterly depictions of shipwrecks of course had a long history: Francisco Goya, Joseph Mallord William Turner, Théodore Géricault, Andreas Achenbach and many others' works appear to be borrowed from in Beckmann's *Der Untergang der Titanic* (The Sinking of the Titanic, 1912–13). In his more mature work, Beckmann kept up his role as analyst of contemporary history. And while his style became more clearly indebted to Expressionism, Beckmann also kept borrowing freely from the past, often to blasphemous



Figure 62 Max Beckmann's lithograph *Das Martyrium* (The Martyrdom, 1919). This work inverts gender patterns in Christian iconography, presenting a woman, the brutally murdered Communist Rosa Luxemburg, at the centre of a scene recalling the nailing to the cross and the morning after deposition. The mourning in turn is replaced by feasting and debauchery.

effects. His lithograph, *Das Martyrium* (The Martyrdom, 1919, Fig. 62) is a fine illustration of this. Showing the dead body of Communist intellectual and politician Rosa Luxemburg (who had been brutally clubbed, shot and thrown in a canal in Berlin during the November Revolution of 1919) surrounded by a fearsome group of laughing business and military men, the lithograph unmistakably also recalled the nailing to the cross and the morning after deposition. The result of this procedure, whereby Beckmann anachronistically layered the present over the past, was a powerful indictment of the times. Although Beckmann had little sympathy for the Communists, he clearly condemned the brutal violence with which their uprising had been crushed.

All this shows that the avant-gardes, to varying degrees of intensity, turned to the cultural past and the history of the arts as vast bodies for aesthetic play. Of course, not all avant-gardists had an active interest in pursuing elements from the past, but even if they did not they were mostly supportive of peers who turned to the past and recalibrated its relations to the present. After all, raiding the archive of the past could also be seen as adding to the destruction of the 'cult of the past' and the reign of tradition. For some, especially forgotten, ignored or suppressed aspects of the cultural past (from the writings of

the Marquis de Sade to outmoded objects sold on flea markets) offered ways to start afresh in the present. What to think, for example, of the strange *objet trouvé* on the magazine cover produced by Surrealists in 1929 for the magazine *Variétés*? The object on the cover was found in a flea market in 1928 by Yves Tanguy, and itself was a bricolage of objects from the past: a black African-looking figure put on a lamppost, making the whole look like a small black monster with torso and arms. Tanguy dubbed it *Le Tabernacle (Teledioptricus Obscurae)* (The Tabernacle, Magic Transistor), and praised its haunting defiance and capacity to induce fearsome dream images. Some also sought confirmation of their project in the past by calling on universal aspects they saw operating in all of history. As experiments in geometric abstraction progressed, for instance, it was not uncommon for avant-gardists to suggest that their work was the outcome of ubiquitous and universal trends in the past. Piet Mondrian, for example, claimed that his Neo-Plasticism and the work of De Stijl more generally, were ‘the natural consequence of all the plastic ideas of the past’,¹³ but added that this was because the building blocks of his painting had always been around. Basic colours and lines had always been there. He now just combined them to set forth an art fit for the new, modern age, which according to De Stijl representatives after the First World War had come to be dominated by collective (no longer individualist) concerns; an abstract, universal art was thus called for, Mondrian thought.

In conclusion, to state that the avant-gardes collectively saw themselves as producing art from scratch would be a mistake. For they firmly rooted their project in their own time and rather freely borrowed from the arts and cultures of the past. Yet by looking at the past as meaningful only insofar as it could serve present needs – not so much respectfully conserving its heritage but selectively, and at times disrespectfully, picking it apart – the avant-gardes at first sight strike as *ahistorical*. Here again, however, they defy common sense. For the avant-gardes also invested heavily in presenting their own history.

Avant-Garde Histories

Histories of the avant-gardes by avant-gardists are almost as old as the European avant-gardes themselves. Such histories come in a great variety of shapes, but they do share a number of characteristics. First of all, they most often present the history of the classic avant-gardes as following a path of progress. Undoubtedly the most original history in this respect is that by Hungarian poet and theorist Charles (Károly) Sirató. In 1936, he published his *Manifeste Dimensioniste* (Dimensionist Manifesto) in Paris, which was co-signed by many key avant-garde figures, such as Hans Arp, Sophie Täuber, Francis Picabia, Kandinsky, Robert and Sonia Delaunay and Marcel Duchamp, among others. More than just another manifesto meant to launch an ism,



Figure 63 Naum Gabo, *Kinetische Konstruktion* (Kinetic Construction, 1919–20), a standing metal rod set in motion by an electric motor in the base to form a standing wave.

Sirató's text claimed the discovery of the basic pattern the avant-gardes had followed from the very beginning. The arts, he observed, had been set in motion by avant-gardists, each individual art progressively gaining an extra dimension: literature, once a linear, one-dimensional affair, had gained a second dimension through typographical experiments that suggested depth and movement; painting, once two-dimensional, had come to bear on space and had thus become three-dimensional, as in El Lissitzky's *Prouns*; sculpture in turn, once static, had been set in motion by early experiments in kinetic art, such as Naum Gabo's *Kinetische Konstruktion* (Kinetic Construction, also called *Standing Wave*, 1919–20, see Fig. 63), where a long metal strip standing erect in a motorised volume is made to oscillate so that it creates the visual effect of a standing wave. By setting the rod to motion, and by allowing it to move in time, this work thus created the illusion of changing volume in space, adding the 'fourth dimension' of time. (More on this fourth dimension in Chapter 8.) Art, Sirató concluded, was on the brink of becoming cosmic, conquering the whole universe.

If Sirató's sketch of the historical progress of the avant-gardes simultaneously roped in work from many movements, others presented the history of the avant-gardes more conventionally, as a succession of movements. Most often, when a new avant-garde movement was launched, it was, for example, depicted as the synthesis or selective fusion of previous experimental isms. In his book *Pittura scultura futuriste. (Dinamismo plastico)* (Futurist Painting and

Sculpture. [Dynamic Plasticism], 1914), Umberto Boccioni depicted Italian Futurism as the synthesis of late Impressionism, Fauvism and Divisionism, which had stressed either colour or form; Futurism did both. In Hugo Ball's writings a few years later, Dada in Zürich in turn was portrayed as the point in which Futurism, Expressionism and several other isms came to coincide to make a new advance. And this same operation was repeated time and again, though preceding avant-garde movements were occasionally substituted by the names of individual artists.

Second, avant-gardists most often used such histories not only to elucidate their aesthetic theory or programme, but also for (self-)promotional purposes. By describing their work as the next new thing in a distinct avant-garde lineage, they sought to promote their movements and gain institutional recognition, both within avant-garde ranks and among specialised art dealers, collectors and investors. For, if it could effectively be demonstrated that the work of a new ism was a historical aesthetic breakthrough, then this also potentially augmented the symbolical authority and market value of that ism. Moreover, once an ism had gained wider recognition, individual artists too could use their involvement in it to trumpet their personal feats and views in a historical survey of that specific ism. This is why, after the Second World War, so many former classic avant-gardists also invested in charting the history of the movement of which they had been a part.

Dadaist writer, performer and theorist Richard Huelsenbeck is a notorious case. Already in 1918, with the publication of his novella *Azteken oder die Knallbude* (Aztecs, Or the Crazy Shooting Gallery), he warned attentive readers that he was not to be trusted when it came to remembering facts correctly. When he published this novella – the plot of which resembled Georg Büchner's unfinished play *Woyzeck* (1837), a work praised by Expressionists – he casually antedated it, situating its genesis in 1912, while in fact it was clearly written much later. (We know this because, among other things, one of the novella's pivotal scenes refers to a later historical event.) This was not uncommon. In fact, many avant-gardists at some point antedated works because they felt their exploits were perhaps no longer up to speed with the newest trends at the time. Nor was it uncommon for avant-gardists to be somewhat careless or imprecise when it came to facts as they sat down to write the history of their movement. For instance, in his book-length *En avant dada. Eine Geschichte des Dadaismus* (Forward Dada. A History of Dadaism, 1920), Huelsenbeck chronicled the achievements and evolution of the movement since its inception in 1916 in Zürich. Disregarding the great variety of aesthetic views and programmes within Dada's ranks in Switzerland, Germany and France, and reducing them to one, Huelsenbeck concluded that Dada had so far been the only avant-garde movement that had simply mirrored life in an uncreatively

creative manner: emerging in a world devastated and impoverished by war, its collages and montages presented its audience only with contemporary images of a culture in devastation. A ‘mirror one quickly passes by’,¹⁴ Dada’s novelty thus resided in the absence of novelty, a feature that perhaps also made it the only avant-garde movement to effectively unite art and life. Yet, after the Second World War, Huelsenbeck’s view of Dada fundamentally changed, and based on the same documents and facts he began to rewrite the history of Dada so as to suggest that the movement had equalled the complete negation (so no longer the imitation) of the world. Rather than mirror the world, he now claimed, Dada had just turned its back on it, trying to make the most of the cultural rubbish left. After the Second World War, Huelsenbeck also came to present Dada not as a historically situated avant-garde movement, but as an (existentialist) attitude to life more generally that was of all times. In 1964 he compiled *Dada. Eine literarische Dokumentation* (Dada. Literary Documents), an anthology in German of key Dadaist texts and tracts, and here the former Dadaist even casually rewrote some of his own texts from the heydays of Dada so as to suggest that this changed view of Dada’s philosophy and aesthetics had been his, and only his, throughout. By this time Huelsenbeck, living in the USA, enjoyed quite some authority as an expert on Dada. When, for instance, Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell, as a great admirer of Dada, had finally assembled the anthology *The Dada Painters and Poets* (1951), one of the largest collections of Dada texts in English translation at this point, Huelsenbeck refused to sanction it. As a result, for a while it looked that Motherwell would not be able to publish the book. This was rather suprising given that Huelsenbeck was well represented in Motherwell’s anthology – among others, *En avant dada* was taken up in its entirety in the volume.

Huelsenbeck’s ‘creative’ attempts to historicise Dada, whether through writing actual histories of the movement or by selecting what was worth retaining in anthologies, clearly exhibit how (self-)promotion played a role. However, his appropriation of the history of Dada after the Second World War also stood perfectly in line with the avant-gardes’ more general view of history’s function. As we saw, avant-gardists were not so much interested in representing how the past had been, but in aesthetically *presenting* what it could mean in or to the present. By revising his views of Dada and claiming after the Second World War that the movement really had no beginning or end, that it was of all times, Huelsenbeck thus also extended the avant-gardes’ actualising take on the past. In a similar vein, Ramón Gómez de la Serna in his history of the avant-gardes, *Ismos* (1931), went as far as to create his own isms when he found that these better captured what it had all been about. His isms included Appollinairism, Picassoism, Seraphism (to denote the work of Cocteau), Africanism, Bottleism (instead of Purism) and Nymphism (to capture the work of Marie Laurencin).



Figure 64 Louis Scutenaire's *Pêle-mêle* (*Le Panthéon surréaliste*) (*Pêle-mêle*. Surrealist Pantheon, 1934), a photomontage with drawings on paper. From top left to bottom right: Jean-Paul Marat, Lewis Carroll, Charles Lassailly, Xavier Forneret, Sigmund Freud, Alfred Jarry, Felix Djerzhinsky, Achim von Arnim, Heraclitus, Karl Marx, René Crevel, André Breton, Lenin, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, Jacques Vaché, François-Noël Babeuf, Hegel, Tristan Tzara, Arthur Rimbaud, Lautréamont, René Magritte, André Souris, E. L. T. Mesens, Paul Nougé, the Marquis de Sade, Pierre Corneille, Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa and, finally, Jules Bonnot and six members of his anarchist gang: André Soudy, Octave Garnier, Antoine Monier, Raymond Callemin, René Valet and Édouard Carouy.

This constant revision and appropriation of the past brings us to a third noteworthy aspect of the avant-gardes' efforts to present their own history: they most often accentuate the present over the past. Consider Belgian Surrealist Louis Scutenaire's photomontage *Pêle-mêle* (*Le Panthéon surréaliste*) (1934, Fig. 64). A *pêle-mêle* is a frame with cut-outs for photographs, typically, of people of kin. This popular object and the practice of presenting our family or friends that goes with it still exist today of course. Yet various Surrealists, such as Man Ray, André Breton, Robert Desnos and Max Ernst, made the *pêle-mêle* their own to aims not dissimilar to Scutenaire's. As suggested by the alternative title of his *pêle-mêle*, 'the Pantheon of Surrealism', Scutenaire drew on this medium to depict the main figures of the movement. Among the portraits included are those of Surrealists proper, such as Belgians René Magritte, André Souris, Paul Nougé and E. L. T. Mesens as well as representatives of the

movement in France like André Breton and Louis Aragon. However, members of the Surrealist family, according to Scutenaire, further included Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, Arthur Rimbaud and the Comte de Lautréamont, figures one could indeed expect Surrealists to feel a certain kinship with. Yet quaint other figures appear in Scutenaire's *pêle-mêle* too, like the medieval occultist Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, the so-called 'frenetic romanticists' Charles Las-sailly and Xavier Forneret as well as Achim von Arnim. In an unchronological fashion Scutenaire's photomontage thus gave a snapshot of his kin *across the ages but in the now*. Indeed, together these people's lives span five centuries; in Scutenaire's *pêle-mêle* they coincide in the same present moment. Scutenaire thus made history his own. At the same time, he invited an audience to reconsider the past, to ease apart the connections historicists tell people to take notice of, and instead to find new connections and relations. In a manifesto entitled 'La Justice immanente' (Immanent Justice, 1934), Scutenaire even asserted that the *pêle-mêle* had the potential to liberate the whole of mankind: if everyone would construct their own *pêle-mêle* and create their own history or pedigree, we would all be liberated from the families and bonds that tie us down without our choosing. Judging and reshuffling the past in the present, Scutenaire at least proved less interested in writing the history of the new, and more in renewing history itself.

While Scutenaire's photomontage may at first sight not resemble a work of history, it clearly, though perhaps unusually, throws Surrealism into a historical perspective. This is the fourth and final aspect that is noteworthy about the avant-gardes' attempts to evoke their own history: they render history in unconventional ways, to say the least. Take Francis Picabia's ink-drawing *Mouvement Dada* (1919, Fig. 65), which presented the Dada groups in Paris and New York as a clock fuelled by a battery of artists from previous movements and generations, such as Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Cézanne, Erik Satie and Guillaume Apollinaire, names that to anyone slightly familiar with the avant-gardes would have functioned like indexes of great aesthetic achievements and formidable innovations. The mechanical contraption of Picabia thereby seemed to evoke a causal relation: without the battery or these innovators from the past no operating clock and no presence of Dada. Yet his drawing can also be said to have literally reset the time of aesthetic production and change. For in the drawing it is actually not that clear what comes first: the names in the battery on the left or those in the clock on the top right. Both, rather, exist simultaneously in a structural now, the one requiring the other to gain meaning, both being necessary to make the complete Dada machine work. (As an act of self-promotion, Picabia's drawing functioned well too: his journal 391, portrayed bottom right as an alarm or doorbell, was apparently the sole major outcome of Parisian and New York Dada.)

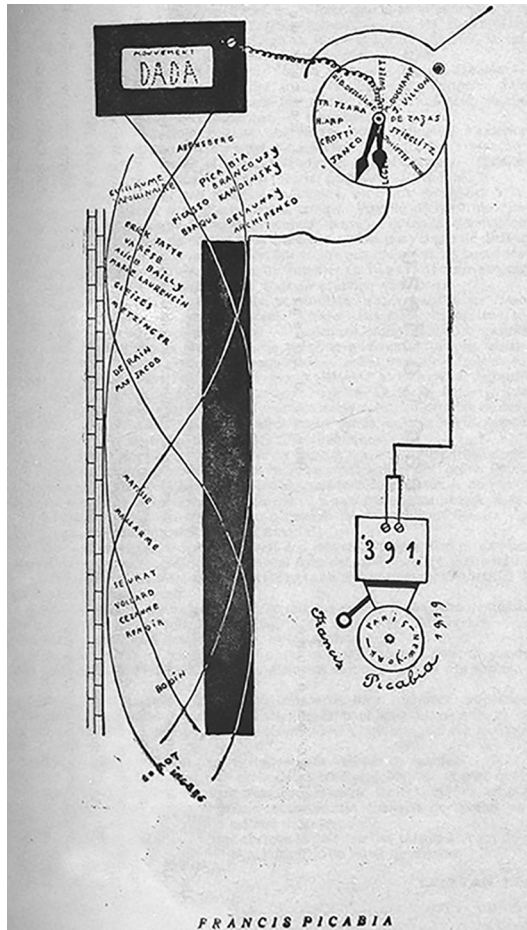


Figure 65 Francis Picabia's ink drawing, *Mouvement Dada*, reproduced in *Dada* (no. 4–5, 1919, issue *aka* the 'Anthologie Dada', international version). Depicting the Dada movement as a mechanical contraption, Picabia here extended his mechanomorphic experiments to the domain of art history.

Or consider El Lissitzky's and Hans Arp's edited volume *Die Kunstismen/Les ismes de l'art/The Isms of Art* (1925). This Constructivist visual essay took stock of the avant-gardes between 1914 and 1924, photographically reproducing works, gathering them under certain isms, and then letting them speak for themselves. The book's title page (Plate 16) is famous for its functional typography, capturing everything a reader will find inside. What is most striking about it is that it takes to the model of the genealogical tree, a much-used graphic means in history, of course. Traditionally, genealogical tree models

are employed to construct and visualise a hierarchical, developmental pattern: there once was an origin, a trunk, that over time branched out, the most recent outgrowths also being the farthest removed from the original stem. Lissitzky here clearly toyed and tinkered with this convention. He used the letters ISM as the stem or trunk of his genealogical tree. All isms covered in the book branch out as boughs or limbs of this much larger trunk. The huge vertical etymon ISM emphasises that all isms share more than sets them apart. All tied to this large trunk, the individual movements are, moreover, presented horizontally as equal and on a par. Such and other instances – many more could be discussed – illustrate how the avant-gardes also went out of their way to explore alternative ways of rendering the past. So much so in fact, that they often ended up blurring the boundaries between history and their artistic practice.

Indeed, presenting history to the avant-gardes was an aesthetic operation that did not necessarily limit itself to textual narratives as those in historical surveys, anthologies or diagrammatic presentations. Once we catch on to this, other exploits of the avant-gardes as well can be read as acts of *historiography* or ‘writing’ history. Magazines and exhibitions organised by the avant-gardes, too, for instance, often cast a specific light on the past and recalibrated its relations to or in the present. When André Breton and Paul Éluard in 1938 organised the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* in the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris, they not only allowed visitors a first-hand experience of Surrealism through various installations, such as Salvador Dalí’s *Taxi pluvieux* (Rain Taxi), an old automobile covered in ivy, with a doll with shark’s teeth as driver and a female mannequin and a sewing machine as passengers, both surrounded by lettuce and snails; the interior being constantly sprayed with water. The same exhibition also included numerous references to aspects of the long-gone past. There were allusions to medieval occultist Nicolas Flamel, to eighteenth-century German philosopher Georg Christoph Lichtenberg, to nineteenth-century writers Lautréamont and Gérard de Nerval, and so on. The medium of the exhibition too was thus employed to reshuffle the old and make it new, to create a new history for the present. The same 1938 exhibition, moreover, not only included work by French Surrealists, it also presented exploits of Europeans elsewhere and of (Latin) Americans, thereby demonstrating that Surrealism itself in the past decade had known a complex and convoluted history.

Beginnings, or Appropriations of the Past

Now that we have a clearer understanding of the avant-gardes’ approaches to the new and the past, we are also well placed to judge their pronouncements of novelty in a final context: the consecutive proliferation of single isms throughout Europe (and beyond). How was it, for instance, that long after

Cubism had emerged in France outgrowths of the movement elsewhere in Europe were also labelled 'new'? The answer is rather straightforward: like history more generally, the avant-gardes also appropriated the legacy of peers and predecessors to fit their local needs. The spread of Cubism in Europe, or any other ism for that matter, was never just a matter of transmission and tame reception or copying. Artists claiming to be Cubists elsewhere in Europe thus never really were *Post-Cubists* in the sense of late Cubists. Coming later, they were above all *Post-Cubists* in their own right, appropriating the work of their models, bringing it into relation with local, cultural aspects as well as with other isms that had emerged since. Just as no two artists produced identical and interchangeable work, so no two isms bearing the same name were alike.

Take the case of Constructivism in what is now Slovenia. Here, painter Avgust Černigoj (back from a brief stay at the Bauhaus) and theatre reformer Ferdo Delak (an admirer of the proletarian theatre of Erwin Piscator, among others) introduced their own distinct variant of Constructivism. Their main mouthpiece was the magazine *Tank*, which had only two issues, in 1927, and which was set up in part as a sequel to the then banned journal *Zenit* of Ljubomir Micić. Multilingual – *Tank* had contributions in Slovene, Serbo-Croatian, Italian, French, German, Spanish and English – the magazine's particular brand of Constructivism derived from two aspects. On the one hand, it was rather eclectic and hybrid, further borrowing elements from Expressionism and Dada, and thus fusing the need for destruction typical of these two movements, with the call for constructive clarity voiced by Constructivism. On the other hand, *Tank's* Constructivism was coupled to a distinct regional concern, because its combination of languages clearly suggested that work from 'minor' cultures equalled that of 'major' (former) imperialist cultures like those of Germany, Great Britain, France, Austria or Spain. Hence, while Delak, like Constructivists elsewhere, liberated theatre from its traditional textual and psychologising limitations so that it could become a form of Total Art, and while Černigoj turned from a flat pictorial sensibility towards a spatially aware, Constructivist visual art, both artists also collaborated to put forth a distinctly accented Constructivist programme.

Perhaps the best way to view the European avant-gardes is as an uninterrupted series of new beginnings (never absolute, always in the plural) founded on appropriation. The avant-gardes' ruptural and jolting historical evolution indeed to a large extent derived from their creative practice of appropriation, which came on the back of their more general view of the cultural past and history. For the avant-gardes the past was always two things: a reason to revolt and begin again (the conventions and traditions of the past had to be overcome, even those of previous avant-gardes), and a source for new beginnings (the past as a reservoir of options that could be reactivated to intervene and make a new start in the present). For some, like Kandinsky, a work could

be a beginning of a modest size, a suggestive opening towards the possibility of change – like the completely new dish produced by the cook combining old ingredients. For others, like the impatient Dadaist Johannes Baader, things could not change fast or radically enough. In 1919, on the cover of the first issue of the magazine *Der Dada*, he announced a new dating system: ‘Die neue Zeit’, the new time, would begin with the year of the death of the ‘Oberdada’ or chief Dada, a nickname Baader had given himself and by which he here mockingly likened himself to a new Christ. Baader’s joke – made in the midst of the November Revolution in Germany – can be read as megalomaniac, but it is also a perfect illustration of the fact that for the avant-gardes history could be rebooted at any time. Moreover, his new ‘calendar’ recalled the French Revolutionary calendar adopted between 1793 and 1805 (and, later, for eighteen days by the Paris Commune in 1871). Hence, even when the avant-gardes set out to change the conventions of time itself, they always put certain traces of the past into new relations, as Mayakovsky had observed.

Box 7: Constructivisms

The beginnings of Constructivism are commonly traced back to Russia and more specifically to the abstract sculptures of Vladimir Tatlin from the mid-1910s. Following the example of Cubism, Tatlin's sculptures at this point consisted of a construction of separate elements (metal, glass, wood, cardboard) instead of the traditional, modelled or carved single piece. This type of work gave rise to the idea that artists made constructions akin to the work of other labourers, and especially in the Civil War period following the Russian Revolution of 1917 this idea rapidly gained support. In 1921 the first Working Group of Constructivists was set up in Moscow, comprising Alexei Gan, Alexander Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Karl Ioganson, Konstantin Medunetsky and the brothers Georgy and Vladimir Stenberg. Describing their works as 'constructions' (instead of 'compositions'), the group renounced abstract painting in favour of stern and geometric works made of industrial materials in space. The group also questioned the autonomy of art – the idea that art served no other purpose than its own – and claimed that artists, informed by science, technology and modern engineering, were to create an environment that met the values and needs of the new, modern Socialist society. Three key principles organised their creative practice: *tektonika* or tectonics (industrial materials were to be selected based on the functional and ideological purpose they were to serve), *faktura* (the materials' texture and fabric were to be studied; artists were to know the medium they used and to treat it appropriately), and *konstruktsiya* (the actual process of organising the materials).

The Russian Constructivist works produced along these lines are enormously varied. For propaganda purposes Gustav Klutsis, among others, designed temporary 'agitational' structures such as collapsible stands and portable kiosks. The interiors of workers' clubs were decorated by Constructivists; graphic design and photomontage were similarly explored and exploited, among others, in poster designs and in the magazines *Kino-fot* (1922), *LEF* (1923–5) and *Novy LEF* (1927–8). Just as German Jan Tschichold's *Die neue Typographie* (The New Typography, 1928) promoted the utilitarian use of sanserif lettertypes in different sizes, colours and boldness and an asymmetrical page layout in order to maximally support the contents of texts, so Russian typographical experiments led to unseen effective propaganda. In architecture too Moisey Ginzburg and the brothers Alexander, Leonid and Viktor Vesnin developed their own Constructivist vocabulary. Undoubtedly, Constructivism's most emblematic architectural work is Tatlin's model for a *Pamiatnik III Internatsionala* (Monument to the



Figure 66 Vladimir Tatlin's model of wood and metal for *Pamiatnik III Internatsionala* (Monument to the Third International, 1920), constructed by Tevel' Shapiro, Sofia Dymshits-Tolstaia, Iosif Meerzon, and Pavel Vinogradov. Designed as the office building for the Comintern, the international organisation of Communist parties dedicated to promoting global revolution. This anonymous period photograph of the model also displays Tatlin himself (with pipe).

Third International, Fig. 66), first exhibited in 1920 in St Petersburg. While never actually built, this work captures the spirit of the movement most vividly. This huge skeletal apparatus, meant to be a third higher than the Eiffel Tower, was to enclose four rotating volumes that were to house various offices of the Comintern, each volume moving at a different speed. Demonstrating the power of the machine and a revolutionary ethos, Tatlin's tower also meant to restore the old unity of painting, sculpture and architecture. Of similar note are the Constructivist stage and costume designs by Liubov Popova and Varvara Stepanova for Vsevolod Meyerhold's theatre productions. Rotating, revolving constructions made the stage in Meyerhold's plays look like a working machine; traditional costumes were replaced by uniform production clothing or *prozodeshda*. In the mid-1920s, Popova and Stepanova also created colourful geometric prints for fabrics that were mass produced. The Constructivists' efforts further led them to formulate and elaborate their methodology within VKhUTEMAS (the Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops). Here, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Tatlin, Klutsis and others taught the artist-engineers of the future. Or so they thought, for by the late 1920s (the start of Stalin's famous five-year plans), state officials crushed the Constructivists' project in favour of the doctrines of Socialist Realism. Many continued to work, but could do so only under strict regulations.

When in 1922, at a Congress of International Progressive Artists in Düsseldorf, Theo van Doesburg, together with Hans Richter and El Lissitzky, organised the International Faction of Constructivists, the movement also asserted itself in the West. Richter, van Doesburg and Lissitzky repudiated what they called the tyranny of the individual and claimed that art was to be systematised as a means of expression so that it could usher in communal, if not universal, progress. Their views, along with those of Naum Gabo – who like Lissitzky opposed the Russian Constructivists' denial of an independent role for art but did recognise that art could change people's living environment for the better – deeply influenced the programme of the *Bauhaus* (literally: building house), which provided its students with a theoretical as well as practical education combining the fine arts, design and industry.

The Bauhaus was founded and for the most part led by architect Walter Gropius (1919–28), and briefly thereafter also by Hannes Meyer and then Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. It was located first in Weimar, then in Dessau and shortly after in Berlin, where the Nazis eventually closed it down. Initially, the Bauhaus was dominated by artists of an Expressionist bent such as Johannes Itten, Paul Klee, Lionel Feininger, Georg Muche and Wassily Kandinsky. Aiming to bring art (especially architecture, the performing arts, design and the applied arts) back into everyday life, they replaced the old pupil–teacher relation with a community of artists cooperating, a guild or fraternity building a new society. The Expressionist teachers originally tended to go for extremely ambitious goals, projecting, for instance, in line with Bruno Taut (see Chapter 2), the construction of a glass cathedral, a society completely transformed by a new Total Art. Gradually, the Bauhaus took a more pragmatic turn, aiming for what was possible and concrete. This occurred in part under the influence of Dutch representatives of *De Stijl*, but also by a major impetus coming from Hungarians like László Moholy-Nagy (who in 1922 took up a leading role in the Bauhaus), László Peri, Ernő Kállai, Lajos Kassák and Alfréd Kemény. These Hungarian Constructivist artists and theorists, like their Russian peers, had begun to explore new technological possibilities and utilitarian applications for the arts. This also impacted the Bauhaus, where students of Oskar Schlemmer, Josef Albers, Marcel Breuer and others practised different artforms, took collective theory classes and cooperated with each other to give a *Gestaltung* (a design) to all aspects of people's everyday lives, art included.

By the mid-1920s Constructivist groups could be found all over Central Europe. In Poland, the heterogeneous *Blok group* (so called after their magazine *Blok*, 1924–6) united artists like Mieczysław Szczuka and

Teresa Żarnower, who claimed art and industry were the same and dedicated themselves exclusively to functional, industrial production. The Polish group also had members like Katarzyna Kobro and Władisław Strzemiński, who held on closely to the autonomy of art. With her sculptures, for instance, Kobro studied the movement of abstract forms in space, not unlike Lissitzky with his Prouns or Malevich with his Suprematist work, believing that her artworks could impact the living environment in a spiritual way as well. This schism within the Blok group (with one faction stressing art's autonomy, and another arguing for the equation of art and industry) lays bare a tension within Constructivism more generally, which as other isms, proved a house with many rooms. When political upheaval in Germany made (former) Bauhaus representatives flee the country, Constructivism also gained Anglo-American wings and gradually shapeshifted into new avant-garde currents. Gropius, Breuer and Moholy-Nagy fled to London, where Barbara Hepworth and Alastair Morton, among others, in turn began to add to the fascinatingly varied output of Constructivism. Bauhaus teacher Josef Albers went to the USA to teach at the newly-formed *Black Mountain College* in Asheville, North Carolina, and stayed in this unique 'artist colony' until the late 1940s, tutoring Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly and Susan Weil, in the company of fellow-teachers John Cage, Merce Cunningham and Willem de Kooning.

Chapter 8

The Plural Present

The new art of the European avant-gardes was first and foremost conceived as a timely art. Their youthful countercultural project emphasised action and artistic intervention in the world. Even the past, as shown in Chapter 7, was systematically approached in the light of their own moment. All this manifests that the dominant temporality of the avant-gardes was that of the present. Their main reason for valuing the present over the past (and the future, as we will see here) was rather straightforward: avant-gardists refused to accept that art and life were of necessity what dominant social groups and their cultural conventions made of them. Through their aesthetic practices they constantly evinced that there was much more to the present; the now held a panoply of *actual* possibilities for change, both within art and culture at large, which could be acted upon if only people would not ignore or suppress them. In their search for ways in which to free the richness and potential of the now, the avant-gardes also subjected the notion of time itself to a thorough analysis, borrowing insights from mathematics and science, philosophy and psychoanalysis, among others. Indeed, defining the now was a key issue for nearly all avant-gardists. In a way, they can all be said to have embarked on a thought experiment in which they imagined that time (and perhaps, by extension, history) had stopped, as if there was only present or now-time. What is it that we see or experience then? How can we best imagine this moment, and how can an artist best give shape to it? By discussing some of the most salient answers avant-gardists delivered to these questions, this chapter explores the complex ‘presentism’ of the avant-gardes.

Presentism

While avant-gardists can be considered time travellers who revisited the past, as shown in Chapter 7, only a handful also claimed to have travelled to or seen the future. Velimir Khlebnikov was one of them. Captivated by Pythagorean numerology and Slavic mythology, Khlebnikov during most of his adult life sought to crack the laws of time so as to be able to predict the future and

especially events of a belligerent nature. His efforts eventually settled in his strangely poetic *Doski Sud'by* (Tables of Fate, 1921), a book he could not find a publisher for and the bulk of which (more than 1,000 pages of manuscript) actually remained unpublished until the year 2000. All phenomena in time unfold according to mathematical regularities, Khlebnikov's cosmological theory dictated: related events (say, wars) occur with mathematically determinable intervals based on exponential expressions of twos (2^n) for repetitions (say, another war lost) and threes (3^n) for contrary events (a war won). Thus, viewing time as a multidimensional structure of numbers, Khlebnikov believed he could explain the past, as in this fragment, which captures 'the law of English sea power':

$x = k + 3^9 + 3^9 n + (n - 1)(n - 2)2^{16} - 3^{9n-2}$, where k = the day in 1066 when the island was conquered by the Danes at the Battle of Hastings. If $n = 1$, then x falls on the year 1174, the year of the struggle with France; if $n = 2$, then x comes out as 1227, the year of the struggle with Denmark; if $n = 3$, then x comes out as 1588, the year of the Spanish Armada. All these wars guaranteed to Albion domination of the seas. And this was indeed to have been expected, because the equation is built on the base of three, and its initial point was an English defeat.¹

Khlebnikov, who died in 1922, also made a dozen predictions, including one about the fate of the Soviet Union in the twentieth century, which somewhat eerily (though rather vaguely) foreshadowed the Cuban Missile Crisis that brought the Soviet Union and the USA to the brink of war. Whatever we make of his futurological findings, Khlebnikov seemed reluctant to accept that the course of history had already been written. His aim, rather, was to fathom the secret workings of the past so as to be able to predict and possibly change the programmed course of history. In this respect, Khlebnikov was not that different from other avant-gardists.

All avant-gardists indeed were to some degree driven by a utopian impulse, their actions and practices evincing the hope that the future would bring a better life and not just continue the dominant patterns of the past or the present. This utopian impulse waxed and waned throughout the history of the classic avant-gardes. Some avant-gardists speculated about what life in a distant future could look like. Futurist Marinetti, for instance, envisioned a world of perennial warfare among man-machines or cyborgs *avant-la-lettre*. To Marinetti this was a joyful prospect that would bring to the surface the Social Darwinist struggle for survival, suppressed in modern culture. Others, inspired by Marxist theories, actively dreamt of a classless society. Still others drew on anarchist philosophers and projected a peaceful life in which people would be given the

chance to develop themselves creatively in a social and natural environment of their choosing. Some dreamt of floating cities, or of a completely dematerialised world in which even death would have been overcome and the whole of life would be subjected to never-ending change.

Such diverse and fantastic projections manifest that avant-gardists did not agree on how exactly the future was to look. Most, unlike Khlebnikov, indeed held that the future lacked an inevitable or inescapable course. Just like the past, the future to them was multilayered and malleable. Their main reason for believing this was their conviction that within the now, in the present, a plethora of possibilities and conditions for change lay dormant, which culture somehow suppressed, ignored or tried to destroy. Unearthing these possibilities and conditions for change *in the present* was the main objective of the historical avant-gardes. (This whole book in fact can be read as an exposé of the many ways in which they tried to reach that objective.) Evidently, this operation held the promise of an altered future – avant-gardists in fact frequently referred to themselves as the ‘primitives’ of a new, but still unclear, era. Yet just as they turned to the past to find alternative origins for the present, so they lifted the future on the plank of the present and mainly looked in the now for alternative beginnings of the future. While the future, in sum, was always on their horizon, their main concern was with the present.

To say that the avant-gardes were preoccupied with the present is an understatement. It does not quite matter at which point we enter the archive of the avant-gardes, their joint fascination for the now always stands out. Naum Gabo and his brother Antoine Pevsner, in their ‘Realisticheskii manifest’ (Realistic manifesto, 1920), phrased it as such: ‘Nobody can tell us what the future is and what utensils does one eat it with [. . .] The past we are leaving behind as carrion. The future we leave to the fortune-tellers. We take the present.’² Similarly, Vladimir Tatlin’s Constructivist model for the *Pamiatnik III Internatsionala* (Monument to the Third International, 1920, Fig. 66), with its upward, diagonal direction of the spiral, did not so much point to the future, but nor did it look back. Tatlin’s vortex-like construction, leading upward, suggested that the possibilities and the conditions for change were already given in the here and now. As the English Vorticists put it: we ‘plunge to the heart of the Present [. . .] With our Vortex the Present is the only active thing. Life is the Past and the Future. The Present is Art.’³ In Cubism as well the now was accentuated. The Simultaneism or Orphic Cubism of painters Robert and Sonia Delaunay and writer Blaise Cendrars, for instance, halted in the present too. In Pierre Albert-Birot’s one-man movement of Nunism (Nowism) this was done with great humour. Aiming to promote only work that took the present as its décor, Albert-Birot’s

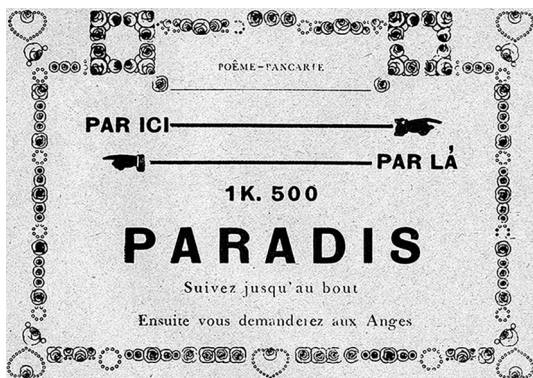


Figure 67 Pierre Albert-Birot, 'Paradis' (Paradise, ca. 1922), a 'poème-pancarte' (poster-poem). Playing with the medium of the attention-drawing publicity poster, the poem's text reads: 'This way / That way / 1.5 kilometer / Paradise / follow to the end / then ask the Angels for directions'.

experiments often yielded interesting works, such as his 1924 *poème-pancarte* (poster-poem) 'Paradis' (Fig. 67). This poem indicated the way to Paradise by inserting indexes pointing both left and right ('par ici' and 'par là').⁴ It thus short-circuited any way forwards or backwards and instead asserted the presence of angels in the here and now, echoing both the Dada and Surrealist conviction that the marvellous, if not redemption, was to be found in *this* world, if only subjects adopt a pose of receptivity. Francis Picabia's so-called *Instantaneism*, yet another one-man movement, launched in 1924, believed only in today, in life and in perpetual motion. As Hans Richter later observed, the claims of Instantaneism and especially its insistence on 'the value of the instant' could be encountered throughout Dadaism in Europe.⁵ But nearly all other avant-gardists in Europe at some point too called their share of the present.

The avant-gardes were thus interested mainly in the actual rather than in the futural. Yet the at times abstract ways in which they expressed this interest also displays their almost technical approach to time as such. Consider Dadaist Raoul Hausmann's manifesto 'Praesentismus' (Presentism, 1920), which also gave the dominant temporality in the avant-gardes a name, that is, *presentism*. His manifesto asserted that modern men and women do either of two things: either they nostalgically look back on the great past that is no longer possible, or they gaze into the future as some abstract realm of innumerable possibilities to come. To Hausmann this amounted to a denigration of the many possibilities of the present moment, if not of life as such. 'Let us get rid of [...] the prejudice that yesterday something was good or that tomorrow it will be better still', Hausmann averred. 'No! Let's seize each second today!'⁶ Hausmann's manifesto on the surface recalls Epicureanism ('seize the day'), but on closer inspection ('seize each second') it uncovers a technical fascination with time as such. Indeed, as Hausmann saw it, 'life is: to compress all possibilities, all facts into a second of tangible energy'.⁷ Now, how do we capture all possibilities of

the present? How do we grasp time as such? What, really, is time? These are, admittedly, abstract questions, which, as we will see presently, took the avant-gardes in several directions. Yet these are also logical questions in light of the avant-gardes' shared concern with the present. For any apprehension of the present of course also rests on a definition of time. Based on this observation the avant-gardes speculated that if time as such could be redefined in aesthetic terms, then maybe also an understanding of the present's rich potential could come about. In so doing, they echoed observations Romanticists like Friedrich Schlegel had made before. Yet while Schlegel, followed by many others in the nineteenth century, had toyed with this theoretical possibility, the avant-gardes in a variety of ways also put this idea into practice.

The Fourth Dimension in Geometry

For many avant-gardists any attempt to capture the present moment first had to tackle the question of space. Indeed, whether we turn to Marinetti's 1909 founding manifesto of Futurism, which famously exclaimed that 'time and space died yesterday',⁸ or to Gabo's and Pevsner's already cited 'Realistic Manifesto', which a decade later claimed that 'space and time are reborn to us today',⁹ the avant-gardes consistently coupled time to space. Their reasons for doing so were diverse, but if we momentarily stop to think that we are always *somewhere* in time, then we quickly understand why issues of space inevitably cropped up.

To fathom the secrets of space (in time) many avant-gardists turned to science in general and to mathematics in particular. Nineteenth-century higher-dimensional mathematicians had already speculated that our common perception of space might well be at odds with the theoretical possibilities in geometry. Their point of departure was that our conventional perception of three-dimensional objects rests on the axioms of Euclidean geometry: a point in space has no dimension, but when we project a single point into space we get a line; a line is one-dimensional and when projected into space we get a square; a square has two dimensions and when we project it into space we end up with a three-dimensional cube. And this is, to this day, how our culture commonly perceives space and the objects within it. Yet in theory, so Bernhard Riemann had already argued in the mid-nineteenth century, there is nothing to say that we could not take this operation further: just as we can project a two-dimensional square into space so that it becomes a three-dimensional cube, so can we project a three-dimensional cube into space so that it transforms into a four-dimensional hypercube or so-called tesseract. The problem, however, is that our human sensorium is not equipped actually to see such a hypercube in four-dimensional space. Our minds can only imagine this suprasensible dimension, and we can, at

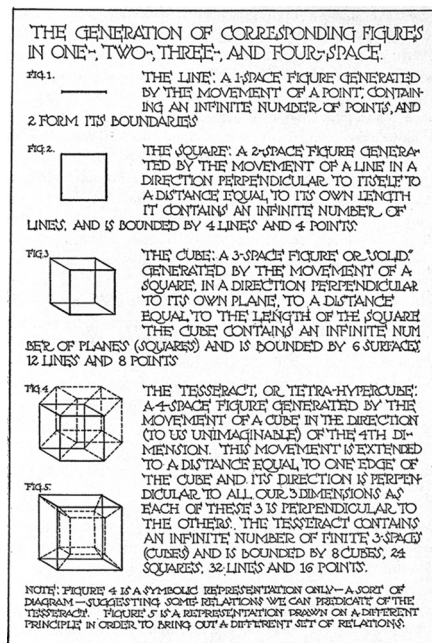


Figure 68 First plate from Claude Fayette Bragdon's *A Primer of Higher Space: The Fourth Dimension* (1913). The plate's two last drawings (bottom left) visualise how to imagine a four-dimensional tesseract or hypercube.

best, record it in a two-dimensional drawing, as in Claude Fayette Bragdon's plate from *A Primer of Higher Space: The Fourth Dimension* (1913, Fig. 68).

Many innovations of the avant-gardes, in the visual arts but also in various other artforms, in part resulted from attempts to register this suprasensible, fourth dimension as it was further theorised by logicians and mathematicians in the early twentieth century, such as Henri Poincaré and Esprit Jouffret. For the possibility of there being four, rather than three, dimensions in space convinced avant-gardists that it had at least scientifically been proven that the way in which people perceived space in the now was based on mere convention. What people actually saw was not real but an illusion. Now it was up to them to show aesthetically that indeed this was the case. Pablo Picasso, Albert Gleizes, Jean Metzinger and many others referred to the fourth dimension in this sense, asserting that their work, through the adoption of multiple perspectives, actually disclosed four-dimensional space. Guillaume Apollinaire, one of the principle early theorists of Cubism, in turn frequently called on the fourth dimension in order to explain to an audience why Cubist painting was actually more realistic than any other type of visual representation before it.

A most interesting attempt at imagining the fourth dimension can be encountered in Marcel Duchamp's *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even, 1915–23, see Plate 12).

Also known as *Le Grand verre* (The Large Glass), this Dada work tried to transform, through analogy, the world in its three-dimensional *appearance* into the *apparition* of the actual world in four dimensions. For years Duchamp puzzled over how this could be achieved, his extant notes testifying to this search. Through the use of glass, Duchamp not only hoped to achieve the effect of a work 'untouched' by the artist's hand; he also thought glass was the best medium to do away with traditional, Euclidian perspective and spatial representation. After all, we can see through glass and so *Le Grand verre* already managed to suggest one space (as depicted in the work itself) interpenetrating another space (the location in which the work was shown). Moreover, just like a reflecting mirror, glass can also suggest a spatial continuum, a projection of shapes into another flat or two-dimensional realm that at the same time has depth. Yet the most ingenious trick he pulled was in the representation of the insectile 'Bride' shown in the work. For reasoning through analogy Duchamp concluded that the best way to present figures in four-dimensional space was through capturing their shadows. Any three-dimensional object can be made flat or two-dimensional by casting it as a shadow, so why would this not also be possible with things in four-dimensional space? Suggesting that the mechanically gendered figure shown on his work was such a shadow, Duchamp could thus also assert that his work made manifest a world in four dimensions. As he later added: 'It was a bit of sophism, but still it was possible.'¹⁰

As Duchamp's remark underscores, avant-gardists were not necessarily the greatest mathematicians. Omnivorous as always, they borrowed insights from science to make them their own in their creative practice. Many Russians, for instance, also appropriated insights from the work of hyperspace philosopher Peter Demianovich Ouspensky, who believed that the fourth dimension offered an explanation for the world's many enigmas. Once mankind would have come to terms with this dimension, Ouspensky thought, our species would be able to transform its entire existence, and art, he added, was the highest manifestation of this path to cosmic consciousness. Various Russian avant-gardists identified with this view, seeing themselves as cosmic 'savants'. Composer-painter Mikhail Matyushin, Rayonist Larionov, the *zaum*-poet Alexei Kruchenykh and Suprematist Kasimir Malevich were but a few among many who believed they were actually on the brink of developing a new, scientifically founded sensibility for humanity. František Kupka saw the existence of the fourth dimension somewhat differently as proof of an all-encompassing spiritual dimension hidden from us in outer reality. That he could imagine this dimension to Kupka gave evidence of a divine power within mankind, a divine capacity we could develop further so as to eventually access all of eternity through the present moment. Kupka's view illustrates that the actual duration of the present in the avant-gardes did not automatically equal that

of a second or a flash moment; the present, Kupka suggested, may well last an eternity.

Spacetimes

By the late 1910s, Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity began to be popularised, and the notion of the fourth dimension gained an entirely new meaning in science. Einstein called time the fourth dimension. The universe consists of four dimensions, he claimed: three spatial ones (up/down, left/right, forwards/backwards) and time. For it is only through time that we can observe the continuum of movement in space. Einstein accordingly came to talk of the universe as *spacetime*. Time, Einstein also argued, can be expressed in spatial terms. The time it takes to read a newspaper article, for instance, can be measured in terms of the distance it takes while travelling by train (so, for instance, not five minutes but two miles). The absolute spatial measure of time in the universe is the speed of light, and so to measure the relations between moving objects our calculations must take into account the element of light-speed.

Much more could be said about Einstein's theory, but the basic insight that time was the fourth dimension can suffice here. For many avant-gardists it was proof of what they had thought all along, namely that time is inherent to space. After all, the most basic way in which we experience time is through our senses registering movement in space. By perceiving a child walking in the street, or hearing a clanging tramway going by, we also become aware of time passing. Viewed as such, time can never be entirely separated from movement or change in space, nor from our sensorium.

Experiments conducted by French physiologist Étienne-Jules Marey and American photographer Eadweard Muybridge (see Fig. 69) already in the

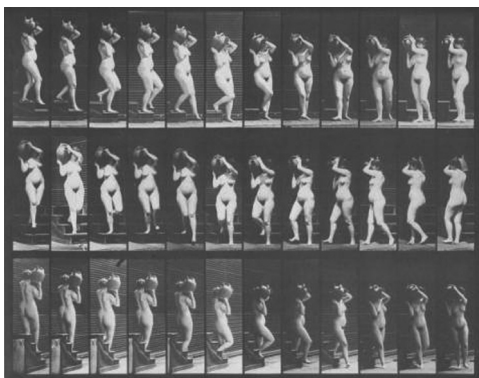


Figure 69 A nude woman descending stairs, on collotype plate 147 from Eadweard Muybridge, *Animal Locomotion: an electro-photographic investigation of consecutive phases of animal movements, 1872–1885* (1887). It is difficult not to think here of Marcel Duchamp's *Nu descendant un escalier n° 2* (Nude Descending a Staircase, n° 2, 1912), which sought to fuse Cubism with the dynamism of Futurism and was further inspired by Muybridge's and others' so-called chronophotography.

late nineteenth century had shown as much to a wider public. Capturing the trajectory of moving humans and animals, their so-called chronophotographic experiments were studied carefully by many avant-gardists, because they manifested, first, that the visual arts, traditionally seen as static and purely spatial, could also incorporate dynamism, movement and, so, time. Second, experiments like those by Muybridge showed that contrary to what had been the rule in the visual arts, not only the privileged, historical moment (the heroic battle or the crowning of kings), but really any moment in time, could be meticulously represented. These are exactly the two lessons that are combined in Futurist Giacomo Balla's *Dinamismo di un cane al guinzaglio* (Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash, 1912), which analytically evoked in a single picture frame the multiple yet mundane movement of a dog's and a woman's legs.

Film as well, recording the passing and continuity of time in space mechanically, had already raised awareness of the connection between time and space. A sequence of images of a cat passing through a room literally shows us that time is a constitutive dimension of the room we are watching. Moreover, the fact that shots taken from different angles of the moving cat could, through montage, also suggest a fluid movement, made the manipulation of time somehow inherent to the medium of film. For these reasons film was often equated with the visualisation of time as such. Dadaist Viking Eggeling, for instance, before turning to absolute cinema, produced what he called 'picture roles', drawings and paintings of organic abstract shapes on long scrolls, which seemed to evolve on the scrolls in a sort of abstract, visual narrative. To grasp this narrative evolution, these scrolls, like musical scores, had to be viewed in successive contemplation, with viewers physically moving alongside them. It was only when Eggeling later turned to film that he actually made his artworks themselves move, instead of his viewers. In his absolute or graphic film *Symphonie Diagonale* (Diagonal Symphony, 1921), for example, organic shapes were made to move through abstract spaces, and image, rhythm, movement and music were brought to a synthesis. Eggeling here proved the usefulness of Einstein's theory to art, so many avant-gardists thought. For *Symphonie Diagonale* was an attempt to take his previous scroll experiments a step further by infusing them with the fourth dimension of time. Soviet cinematographer Sergei Eisenstein went even further. He compared the fourth dimension of Einstein to his technique of *overtone montage* (a complex way of editing that is meant to install a visceral awareness in viewers of the overall tone of what is shown on screen; hence, a type of montage in which the affective whole is larger than the sum of the edited parts shown in succession). Eisenstein thereby suggested that deep within the medium of film, as it were between the frames, a more fundamental understanding of time as the fourth dimension could be made manifest.

As these examples show, the most basic manner in which the avant-gardes built on Einstein's theory was by injecting the dimension of time into their art, thereby creating distinctly *aesthetic* spacetimes. Whether or not they got Einstein's theory completely right, László Moholy-Nagy emphasised, was beside the point. What really mattered was that avant-gardists came to see that spacetime as well was a medium for art. Following previous experiments of Naum Gabo, Moholy-Nagy's *Lichtrequisit einer elektrischen Bühne* (Light Prop for an Electric Stage, also known as *Licht-Raum-Modulator* [Light-Space-Modulator], 1930, Fig. 15) also gave sculpture four dimensions, by setting a three-dimensional object to motion and thus adding a temporal dimension.

In architecture, too, time was introduced as a constitutive dimension by making buildings move, or at least by having them suggest movement. In Gerrit Rietveld's Constructivist/De Stijl Schröder House (1924) in the Dutch town of Utrecht, for instance, moveable interior walls made it possible for inhabitants to make rooms wax and wane and to open up rooms from the inside onto the outside world. Other avant-garde architects suggested movement through the use of equal and flat concrete planes as façades that intersected and ran on, virtually, into infinity. The exterior back wall of Mies van der Rohe's House Tugendhat (1928–30) in Brno, for example, seemed to disappear into and run on under the ground. Others, like Tatlin, preferred spirals and upward-moving diagonal indications of movement. Still others tried to launch a new image of architecture by putting buildings on pillars, as Le Corbusier did with the Villa Savoye in Poissy (1929–30); the effect of which was that the building seemed to float. Consistently referring to their designs as passenger ships, aeroplanes, gliders or sailplanes, avant-garde architects as well, then, made space dynamic by adding to it a temporal dimension. The modern men and women who would inhabit their new spacetimes would be on the move (or forced to move), permanently.

Composers as well reflected on how to reconfigure the relation between music and time. Music is a temporal artform, George Antheil thought. Music has less to do with chords or harmonies; these were just vibrations. Time and rhythm, rather, form the real material music is made of. So, Antheil sought to renew music by also infusing it with its own fourth dimension. As he saw it, rhythmic sound, as it enters our ears, projects our bodies through time in an imaginative space. Hence, to bring about a fundamentally new type of music, new forms of time in space, or *time-spaces*, as Antheil called them, had to be developed. The new composer had to draw up scores like abstract painters apply colours and shapes on canvas, he thought: upon scores notations had to be bundled punctually in time, connected by the 'invisible' strings or lines of the score's bars. His *Ballet mécanique* (1924), a musical piece which was intended

for the film of the same name and which combined pianos with aeroplane propellers, bells and buzzers, was an attempt to realise this programme. While this composition seemed to echo the soundscape of the modern metropolis, it actually sought to move an audience through sound into an entirely new imaginative space.

Literary experiments as well projected alternative spacetimes. What to think, for example, of I. K. Bonset's 'X-Beelden' (X Images, ca. 1919)? Written by the alter ego of Theo van Doesburg and published in *De Stijl*, this poem rather creatively appropriated Einstein's theory. It evokes a lyrical persona sitting in a room in front of a window that looks out on trees and a blue sky. As three-dimensional space is here coupled to the speed of light, however, the lyrical persona is 'filled by the room through which the tram glides / I'm wearing my hat / organ sounds / from outsidersightthrough me / smash to the ground behind me / small fragments of glass / ... / SPACE / **AM I**'.¹¹ Space and time, light and sound, volume and mass, the body and its spatial surrounding, all appear elastically connected in van Doesburg's poetic spacetime. All this was in the present too, in the rich here and now.

Duration and Dreamtime

The avant-gardes' aim, we should recall, was to make manifest possibilities and conditions for change in the present, to explore the potential of the now, and this is why they questioned the fundamentals of time as well as space. Naturally, avant-gardists on this journey appropriated much more than insights from mathematics and theoretical physics alone. To many avant-gardists indeed these scientific approaches proved much too conventional. Many therefore relied on other sources for inspiration, such as the contemporary philosophy of Henri Bergson. Bergson observed how a majority of people, mathematicians and physicists included, thought about time as a mechanical, scientifically measurable affair, as clock-time. Yet to him this was not time at all. We may well feel inclined to toe the line, get up on time and work our hours, but this is not really how we experience time, Bergson believed. People sense time rather subjectively and intuitively. A minute can take ages, indeed. This manifested, according to Bergson, that time was essentially undividable; past, present and future together formed part of an uninterrupted flow of time or *durée* (duration). In his book *L'Évolution créatrice* (Creative Evolution, 1907), Bergson further claimed that time's duration, which we access through our subjective, inner experience of time, uncovered the existence of an objective *élan vital*, a vital, mystical and creative force within all of mankind that actually drives our evolution and connects every one of us. Futurist Umberto Boccioni firmly believed in his intuitive capacity



Figure 70 Umberto Boccioni, *Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio* (Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, 1913, cast in bronze in 1931). Promoting movement to a constituent element of form, and partly incorporating the spatial surrounding of his moving subject, this is one of Futurism's most famous sculptures.

to tap into this vital force. With his sculpture *Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio* (Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, 1913, first cast in bronze only in 1931, Fig. 70), Boccioni presented a massive and static, face- and armless human figure walking through space, in an attempt to intuitively isolate the forms unique to human movement through time. The result is a snapshot of bodily dynamics, but also a frozen representation of continuity or duration packed with energy.

Many Surrealists founded their alternative view of time on Freudianism. The latter suggested that time, as experienced unconsciously, in no way resembled the conscious and rational understanding of time as an entity measurable by clocks. Time unconsciously experienced equaled the time of dreams, an oneiric temporality in which bourgeois rationality made room for irrational desires and fears. Whence, for example, Salvador Dalí's oil painting *La Persistència de la memòria* (The Persistence of Memory, 1931, Plate 21). Evoking the desolate cliffs of the Catalan coast, this painting depicts four clocks, three of them with warped or melted clock faces. These can be read as representing the conventional view of time as mechanical clock-time, their melting state marking the dominance of the imagination and the temporality of dreams. The landscape setting, which contrasts natural with man-made elements, along with the fact that all the watches seem to have stopped at another moment, indeed opens up an entirely different temporality, an oneiric time filled with desire. It is hard to ignore, for example, the outright sexual significance of the amorphous figure on the ground and the dry olive tree, both draped by a melting clock. There is even the suggestion that Dalí poked fun at people's obsession with being 'on time': the enigmatic fly on one of the clocks allegedly led to all kinds of jokes about 'time flying'.

Moreover, the fourth timepiece resting dial-down and covered in swarming ants suggests that perhaps within this dreamtime a new community can take root. Dalí later shared that he had only faint hopes in conquering 'the sharks of mechanical time'.¹² This statement makes clear what might have driven him: just like the world of dreams comes to us often in a fragmented and belated (as Freud put it, *nachträglich*) way, so Dalí tried to trigger his viewers' collective yet suppressed or forgotten longing for a different mode of living in time.

No less powerful was the Surrealist sculpture of Alberto Giacometti, which in the late 1920s and early 1930s presented strange objects and assemblages that meant to unlock fear and desire and to unleash the unconscious. Giacometti's fragile *L'Heure des traces* (The Hour of the Traces, 1932, Plate 22), for instance, is so enigmatic that it is difficult not to wander off into a different 'time-zone' when viewing it, and to wallow in the convulsive aesthetic pleasure it brings. In a delicate iron construction, perhaps a cage, we find a suspended shape (much like in his more famous sculpture *Boule suspendue* or Suspended Ball, 1930–1), which at once recalls an organic beating heart and the mechanical pendulum of a clock. Irrational desire and bourgeois clock-time enter into conflict here, it seems. The plaster surface at the bottom is engraved with traces. These resemble fossils but also the surface of a moon-like star or a planet; perhaps they are the record of some dark ritual. The almost floating bodies on top of the cage are the most puzzling. They seem to be almost free from any spatial or temporal restriction. The only thing that literally ties these phallic, erotic or celestial bodies down, is the cage-like structure underneath it, the immobilising struggle between desire and reason.

Surrealists often also turned to medieval alchemy, a protoscience which had been concerned with transmuting and perfecting objects, as with changing lead into gold. Few Surrealists actually believed in such practices, but they did draw on them for inspiration to free the unconscious in the now, and to reach what André Breton, in his essay *Introduction au discours sur le peu de réalité* (Introduction to a Speech on the Paucity of Reality, 1927) punningly called 'l'or du temps', the pun deriving from the homophone phrases in French for gold ('l'or') and the outside ('l'hors'); so: the gold/outside of time. For example, André Masson in his uncensored, automatic drawings (see Fig. 71) often began from a formless dot or line, which he then transformed through free association in at times dark constellations of images (saws, knives, body parts, animals) yielding a sort of labyrinthine imagery. Through such experiments many Surrealists hoped to perhaps extract a number of archetypal symbols and allegories of a different oneiric temporality that could speak not only to themselves but also eruptively spark the imagination and desires of others.

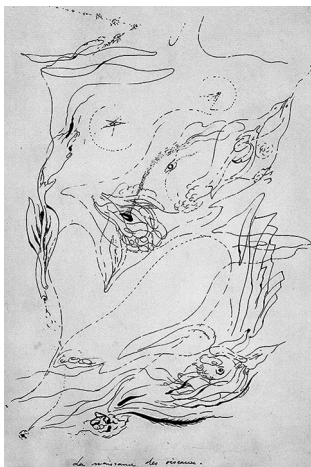


Figure 71 André Masson's *La naissance des oiseaux* (The Birth of Birds, ca. 1925), an automatic drawing that presents a (headless) woman's body from whose loins birds enter the world. Masson produced many such drawings, often conjuring frightening and nightmarish scenes.

New Social Presents

The avant-gardes' attempts to give shape aesthetically to alternative experiences of time were highly diverse. Already in 1924, looking back at all this experimentation with slight fatigue, Piet Mondrian noted that it had become impossible to hold 'universally valid principles. [Our time] sees the untenability of a fixed view of the perceptible, of an unshakable conception [. . .] It sees everything "*relatively*". This grew out of art, philosophy, science (the theory of relativity, etc.), and out of practical life itself.'¹³ For Mondrian this uncertainty necessitated a search for fundamental, if not universal, principles as well as a turn to *geometric abstraction*: placing simple geometric forms in a non-illusionistic space and combining them into non-objective compositions, to Mondrian seemed to be the way. Others felt that this cancelled out the expressive nature of art too much and like Kandinsky practised a more lyrical form of non-objective abstraction, one with no real formal constraints, thereby prefiguring the Post-Second World War rise of *lyrical abstraction*. Despite these differences, however, the goal was always the same: to make a fresh start, to find alternative notions or sensorial experiences of time (and space). Importantly, even when pushing abstraction towards the lyrical, avant-gardists also always tended to stress the collective. Indeed, whether fleshing out an abstract notion of time as the fourth dimension, or the vast realms of the *élan vital* or the unconscious, avant-gardists always seemed to favour approaches to time that did not only apply to individual subjects, but potentially to everyone. Even when they took off on rather personal enquiries, their gaze was always on others as well.

This collective aspect brings us to another important feature of the avant-gardes' shared interest in time and temporality. For everything suggests that this interest also partially came about in response to the ways in which the experience of time in society became increasingly standardised. We have

already encountered several (derogatory) references to clock-time, but what the avant-gardes and their contemporaries meant by this becomes clear only when we turn to the many economic, technological and political changes which, during the decades in which the classic avant-gardes flowered, installed a profoundly mechanical rhythm of life in the public space. The adoption of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) in the late nineteenth century, for instance, had led to the introduction of a global time order that officially put an end to the many national and regional time measuring and managing methods throughout Europe. For the first time in human history GMT made everyone on the planet co-exist in one and the same time system. Of course, people in various regions throughout Europe often simply continued to live life at their own cultural pace. Yet what connected them to others elsewhere from here on was also and profoundly a shared sense of time. Along with the growing ubiquity of train travel and ever-more exact timetables regulating the public flow of products and people, many other technological advances (such as the telephone and the radio) further added to the new standardised temporal structure of social life. The mechanical clock itself also went through significant changes. The clock as we now know it, with the sweeping, fluid movement of its second hand, was invented only in 1916. This introduced the visual representation of time-flow and suggested that mechanised time passed as smoothly and organically as natural time itself. More and more people, it seemed, came to experience time in the same way. The management of time and societies' flow of time also became a matter of politics. GMT, which had been meant to facilitate and speed up the worldwide stock exchange, further coincided in economics with the arrival of the chronometric production scheme of Fordism. Fordism was later dubbed Stakhanovism in Soviet Russia, after Alexei Stakhanov, a miner who in 1935 allegedly mined 102 tons of coal in six hours. Efficiency and the idea that time is money became the new mantras here, with the Soviet Union trying to trump Western capitalism's efficiency.

Avant-gardists on the surface seemed little bothered by this increasingly dominant view of time that took hold not just of Europe but of the entire planet. On closer inspection, however, their ruminations on the richness of the now, especially after the First World War, seem to have been pervaded by reflections on these shifts. Many Constructivists, for instance, appeared to embrace the new standardised sense of time, because it promised to do away with bourgeois individualism and made room for a new, collective temporality and subjectivity. The greater the standardisation of the rhythm of life across Europe, the greater the masses and the greater the chances of the Constructivist project to redesign life along the lines of more universal, generic aesthetic and utilitarian manufacturing principles, so many thought. Polish Constructivist poet Tadeusz Peiper, editor of the magazine *Zwrotnica* (Switch, 1922–3), coined the formula ' $3 \times M$ ' to voice his enthusiasm about

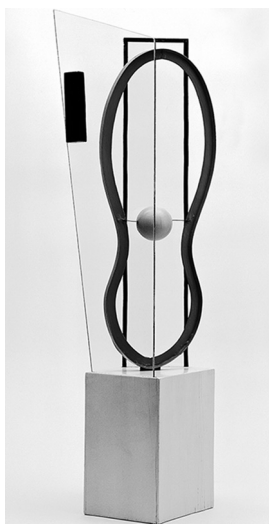


Figure 72 Katarzyna Kobro, *Rzeźba abstrakcyjna (1)* (Abstract Sculpture [1], 1924). Consisting of painted wood, metal and glass, this work was made around the time Kobro, along with her husband, Władysław Strzemiński, formed part of the Polish Constructivist Blok group. In 1926 this group was succeeded by the Warsaw-based *Praesens* (Present tense) group, of which Kobro, together with architects Szymon Syrkus, Józef Szanajca and Bohdan Lachert, and painters such as Henryk Stażewski, became a member as well. As the first issue of their journal, *Praesens: revue moderne*, made clear: ‘By way of experiment, the architectonic approach provides new opportunities, not only artistic as it might seem, but also social. For architecture changes the social pattern, as the social pattern changes architecture.’

this prospect: ‘Miasto, Masa, Maszyna’ (Metropolis, Mass, Machine). The new city, he thought, was to be conceived not only as an organic work of art, but also as a well-functioning machine in which all parts would interact smoothly, like the cogs in a clock.

Yet even among Constructivists the task was never simply to mirror the modern mechanised sense of time. Consider Katarzyna Kobro’s work. Kobro’s *Rzeźba abstrakcyjna (1)* (Abstract Sculpture [1], 1924, Fig. 72), made either in Poland or the Latvian town of Riga, moves us into a different kind of spacetime altogether. The elements of this work, each in a basic colour – the rectangular white base, the central red shape of a curve, the yellow sphere at the centre, and the two plates of glass (one with black contours and rectangular, one adorned with a black rectangular cuboid) – all interact in an arithmetical progression, visually intersecting at carefully measured places and moments. Perhaps inspired by De Stijl artist Georges Vantongerloo’s book *Réflexions* (1918), which argued that volume and vacuum (the absence of volume) are the basic categories of space (and sound and silence the basic tenets of time), this sculpture seems to play with the boundaries between the volume of its own components and the space that surrounds it, opening up a different, boundless space that we can experience only by contemplating this work, which gives way to a distinct rhythm as we follow the sequence of its elements. Little is known about Kobro’s views at this point, but the Suprematist black cuboid attached to one of the glass plates suggests that before this work was made, while she resided in Moscow, she probably also studied with Malevich. The latter, in his teaching during the early 1920s, often called

on his students to reinvent the cosmos, to draw on astronomy and create an aeronaut's vision of the universe, a four-dimensional space of solids. It may well be that this is what Kobra tried to achieve here as well, not unlike Malevich's so-called *architectons* – these were Suprematist sculptures meant as architectural models; Malevich also called them 'planits', man-made installations soaring into space and inhabited by 'earthlings'. Viewed as such, Kobra's work allegorically ushered in a radically new start in the now, away from the earth and its unified temporal regime, into a different and higher state of being in outer space, a spatial zone no longer tied to three, but to four dimensions, as Malevich thought as well. The experience of time, concurrently, is here transformed completely.

If Constructivists thus related ambiguously to the increasingly standardised temporal regime of modernity, others, like Dadaist Francis Picabia, made no secret of their outright contempt for what they saw as a progressively constrictive and homogenising modern bourgeois sense of time. In 1919 Picabia took an alarm clock, smashed it, dipped the cogs in ink and produced his *Réveil matin* (Alarm Clock, 1919, Fig. 73). With this work Picabia also recognised that modern society was increasingly held together by a mechanical, temporal contract, by clock-time. Yet by smashing the clock and creatively reassembling it to form an alternative mechanical device, he also suggested that a different temporality, and perhaps also a different type of communal life, were



Figure 73 *Réveil matin* (Alarm Clock, 1919), an ink on paper work by Francis Picabia, here reproduced on the cover of *Dada* (no. 4–5, 1919). It is unclear how (if at all) this alternative time rendering machine was to function, but that it would usher in a different rhythm of life seems to stand beyond doubt.

always possible. Man Ray's photogram *Clock Wheels* (1925), which presented the wheels of a clock in the negative, or his enigmatic *Objet à détruire* (Object to be Destroyed, 1922–3) – a metronome to whose pendulum Ray attached a photograph of a woman's eye, in part to suggest 'modern time' (here gendered as feminine because the eye was taken from a photograph of his lover Lee Miller) looking back at viewers and questioning them – came with the same clear message that time could always be conceived and experienced differently. (In fact, Ray for a while used the metronome to set the pace while painting, but eventually destroyed it as the contraption did not meet his needs.)

For the avant-gardes, in short, changing the concept and sensorial experience of time, however playful, was a weighty endeavour by all accounts. For what else did their multiple definitions and aesthetic enquiries into the nature of time demonstrate than the fact that the experience and understanding of time were based on powerful cultural and social conventions, which could always be altered? The mechanised and increasingly standardised way in which large masses of people thought about time and ordered their lives according to it, proved that what kept society together was its seemingly universal temporality and rhythm. That there were (and are) many alternative ways of thinking about and being in time available in the now thus suggested that different social and temporal contracts were possible too. Hence, by investing in the potential of the now, the avant-gardes collectively also prefigured more radical social change. For to alter time as such through art also held the potential of a different community, and, perhaps, a different society altogether. Avant-gardists by 1935 could speak with confidence and authority about this possibility, because they had put it into practice in their sub- or countercultural lifestyles. As a transnational formation, they had not only carved out their own space; they had also lived in unconventional ways, grounded on an ambitious aesthetic project that followed temporal regimes at odds with the rhythm and sense of time in society at large. This also shows, however, that it is at least ambivalent to say that, as 'presentists', avant-gardists were simply of their own time. They were so only to the extent that they wished to be part of another present they could locate or imagine in the now. This other present (or other presents) to most remained hidden by dominant views, sensibilities and conventions, however; it was not (yet) lived or experienced by the majority of people. Thus, pulling the future on the plank of the present, avant-gardists basically isolated futures anterior, futures that would or could have been beginning today.

Box 8: Surrealisms

Surrealists were united in their attempt to revolutionise human experience by opposing the bourgeois rational approach to life and asserting the value of dreams and the unconscious. In part informed by the views of Sigmund Freud (whose works were translated in French in the 1920s), Surrealists were convinced that (Western) European culture restricted human experience to a purely rational affair. Surrealists revolted against this situation and through their practices sought to explore the richness of reality once the imagination was given free reign. Shared by all Surrealists was a fascination with the magic and beauty found in the abject, the unexpected, the unconventional, the outmoded and the uncanny or *unheimlich*. All Surrealist works incite the effect of the strangely familiar and repressed. To this aim they typically bring together elements that are of themselves familiar, but in combination create something unfamiliar, spark the imagination, and give way to a sur-real (mental) image that shows us reality anew.

Surrealism is first and foremost known as a French, if not Parisian, avant-garde movement. This is in part due to the grander-than-life persona of its self-named leader, André Breton, who authored many books and pamphlets central to the history of the movement, including the *Manifeste du Surréalisme* (1924), which marked the official start of Surrealism. Breton's manifesto oriented itself mainly towards literature and poetry, promoting *écriture automatique*, a type of writing that records the flow of thought and association unhindered by aesthetic or ethical concerns. Extending Dada's previous interest in chance operations, Breton's manifesto did not exclude an expansion of Surrealism to other artforms. Yet it did denounce the bourgeois idea of 'art'. Surrealism, Breton made clear, was not a conventional *artistic* endeavour. It was an open-ended *human* quest that in theory could be joined by anyone desiring to explore dreams and the unconscious.

Breton's open call attracted a large variety of (itinerant) Paris-based writers (including Louis Aragon, Philippe Soupault, Paul Eluard, Antonin Artaud, Benjamin Péret, René Crevel, Michel Leiris and Robert Desnos), film-makers such as Luis Buñuel, photographers such as Man Ray, and painters such as Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, André Masson, Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró and Leonora Carrington. Some of these last were inspired by the *Metaphysical Art* of Giorgio de Chirico, which already in the late 1910s realistically portrayed objects in seemingly random and temporally estranging architectural settings, thereby accentuating the strangeness and dreamlike qualities of objects and spaces (see Plate 20). Surrealist painters

similarly either set out to depict dream scenes or sought to further the idea of automatism in painting, among other things through *grattage*, a technique that entails laying a canvas coated with a layer of oil paint over a textured object and then scraping the paint off so that unexpected surfaces arise – as, for instance, in Ernst's *Forêt et colombe* (Forest and Dove, 1927). Following the lead of Alberto Giacometti, the only traditional sculptor within French Surrealism's ranks, and especially his enigmatic *Untitled* (aka *Suspended Ball*, 1930–1), Surrealism in the 1930s also witnessed a wave of object-productions, such as Meret Oppenheim's *My Nurse* (1936), which presented two women's shoes, strapped by a string, on a metal platter. Such fetishist montages meant to unlock the fantasy and desire of viewers. And even in fashion, Elsa Schiaparelli, great competitor of Coco Chanel, brought a distinctly Surrealist contribution. As with other avant-garde groups of a considerable size, French Surrealism often fell prey to rows and feuds, which as frequently centred around personality issues as around more fundamental problems, such as how to relate the movement's open quest to (revolutionary) practical politics. Yet despite the rows and the many members dropping out, new members kept stepping in and the centre held – in fact, on when French Surrealism actually ended opinions differ, but that it lasted well beyond the Second World War is a universal point of agreement.

Breton travelled widely, also outside of Europe, and almost everywhere he went, Surrealist groups cropped up – French Surrealism was indeed voracious in its annexation of kindred groupings, not least when they sprang from extra-European cultures, be it in Mexico (with muralist Diego Rivera, painter Frida Kahlo or photographer Manuel Álvarez Bravo) or in Martinique, where Breton lent his support to the emancipatory *négritude* movement representative Aimé Césaire. Yet even without Breton's intervention, Surrealist groups emerged – and often close to home. In the shadows of Parisian Surrealism, for example, a far more decentred but almost equally large group of Belgian Surrealists arose simultaneously. In 1924, the year of Breton's founding manifesto, writers Paul Nougé, Camille Goemans, Marcel Lecomte, later accompanied by musicians Paul Hooreman and André Souris, launched the magazine *Correspondance* in Brussels. Each issue consisted of a one-page, coloured flyer that contained a 'tract' in which the editors rewrote texts from famous French writers, including French Surrealists and especially Breton, whose theories of dreams and the unconscious were often criticised for still being too art-minded. Thus, using texts by other authors as creative material to express their own desires and thoughts, but also to make these



Figure 74 René Magritte, *La Lectrice soumise* (The Submissive Reader, 1928). A woman reading reclines in shock after having gone through a passage in a book. Her fearful face suggests the arrival of delirious passion and perhaps even of aggression and crime; her mouth in fact appears animal-like. This moment of transition seems further accentuated by the contrast between the lit-up left section and the dark shadow on the right. As such, this work reflects the French Surrealists' aesthetic agenda of unleashing repressed ('criminalised') desires through art. Yet the work also leaves viewers in the dark as to what exactly this agenda is to lead to. As in his works investigating the conventions of language and images, Magritte in typical fashion here questioned the assumptions of his French peers.

other authors' texts say the exact opposite of the original, the Brussels group in 1926 was joined by visual artists E. L. T. Mesens and René Magritte (Fig. 74), and later by Marcel Mariën, Louis Scutenaire and a young Marcel Broodthaers, among others. While the Brussels Surrealists were sceptical of their French colleagues' theories, another group in 1934 asserted itself in the Belgian city of Hainaut, which was far more receptive to the theories of French peers. Despite differences in opinion, however, almost all Belgian Surrealists cooperated with French colleagues on several occasions, and like their French colleagues engaged in a variety of interartistic experiments that ranged from films and collective exhibitions to magazines and experimental, cooperative book projects.

By the 1930s smaller bands of Surrealists could be found throughout Central Europe as well, from Serbia (where a group gathered around Marko Ristić and the journal *Nadrealizam danas i ovde* [Surrealism Here and Now], 1931–2) and Romania (with Saşa Pană, Victor Brauner, Stephan Roll, Ilarie Voronca and later Gherashim Luca and Gellu Naum) to Czechoslovakia (where in 1934 a group asserted itself comprising Josef Šima, Vitězslav Nezval, Toyen and Jindřich Štyrský). The deeper we move into Central Europe, the more fascinating and creative its avant-gardists – some of whom today are almost completely forgotten – prove to have been. Bulgarian Georges Papazov, for example, was a widely known figure

in Parisian Surrealist circles – although (or perhaps precisely because) he doggedly refused to sign Breton's manifestos. Widely travelled, he settled in Paris during the 1920s only to return briefly to Sofia, Bulgaria's capital, in the 1930s. Always taking pride in his independence, Papazov developed an abstract type of Surrealism unlike any other, combining abstract geometric shapes from Constructivism with the Surrealist penchant for automatism and, like André Masson, mastering the art of using sand in his visual works. Papazov today is little known in Bulgaria, France or anywhere else for that matter. He is literally a figure that does not fit the (often largely Western European) isms or categories. Yet he is also the perfect illustration of the many directions Surrealism took as it propagated poetry as a form of life, *l'amour fou* (mad love), and the marvellous as an ethical and aesthetic ideal.

While the term 'surrealist' was first coined by Guillaume Apollinaire in the 1910s, and André Breton was among the leading figures to give shape to its aesthetic project, international Surrealism thus expanded to become a movement with many factions and views, the combined significance of which can hardly be overstated.

Chapter 9

The Futures of Theory

In his book *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Gardes* (1991), critic Paul Mann observed that few artistic phenomena have created such a stir in criticism and academia as the classic avant-gardes. So rich and diverse are the theories and assessments of the European avant-gardes and their legacy that Mann decided to devote a book to them only to conclude where he began: the avant-gardes, apparently, incite endless debate and generate ever more conflicting views. Indeed, we can safely state that almost all major critics of the past century have had their say on the European avant-gardes. This chapter presents only a sample of critical theories on the avant-gardes with the aim of illustrating four things. First, most theories of the European avant-gardes attach a lot of value to the term 'avant-garde'. That is why we will start with a discussion of the term itself, its meanings and its history. Second, the majority of theorists are partisans: they side with the avant-gardes and reproduce in criticism the excitement, energy and scepticism that was once there in art. Third, most theories of the avant-gardes are also histories of modern art, that is to say, they often draw out more encompassing tendencies or currents in art or cultural history, determine how the avant-gardes relate to these, and then put forth at times startling conclusions to highlight the historical significance of the classic avant-gardes. Finally, and most importantly, the bulk of theorists focus on the *future* projections and impulses of the avant-gardes, and emphasise that the avant-gardes in many ways continue to challenge what we today take for granted.

Avant-Garde

The term 'avant-garde' is an old metaphor with an interesting history. The word originates in a military context, perhaps made most famous by Carl von Clausewitz's classic study of warfare, *Vom Kriege* (On War, 1832). Here, literally, the avant-garde denoted an army's advance guard, thrusting itself forward into foreign territory, dashing itself against the armoury of the enemy, eventually at the service of battalions that follow it like a bridge of human flesh. Although we can trace the term in discussions about art far back in history, it was only in the nineteenth century that the word also began to be used widely to refer to

matters of art. Only at this point also was the term transformed into a metaphor. Where previously people primarily used it to refer to a particular group of soldiers in a situation of war, it was now used to indicate those on the battlefield of culture. Moreover, if the military notion originally had been a spatial one (with the avant-garde being defined by its advanced location on the battlefield), in the nineteenth century the term also gained a temporal dimension in that it was increasingly used to refer to factions said to be ahead of their time. Count Henri de Saint-Simon and the group around him were among the first to speak about the avant-garde in this sense. Disappointed about the restoration of the monarchy after the French Revolution of 1789–94, before his death in 1825 the Count designed a utopian plan for a future socialist state which would be steered by three groups: artists, scientists and industrialists. Of these three professional groups the artists would be the ‘avant-garde’. For Saint-Simon and his followers, artists, as people of the imagination, could develop a new sensibility that would point scientists and industrialists still stuck in set, rational ways of thinking to an alternative future. In sum, artists, plunging head first into the future, were to guide the radicals of a new state in the right direction.

The history of the term in the remains of the nineteenth century boils down to two substantial shifts. First, where for Saint-Simon there was essentially no difference between oppositional practical politics and art (both were inextricable in the struggle for his projected state), by the turn of the century the term was coined by radicals both in practical politics and in art, without these two factions necessarily still sharing the same objectives. This exemplifies that gradually two distinct ‘avant-garde’ factions with different goals had formed themselves: one in politics, and one in art. Indicative of the tense relationship between the political and the artistic avant-gardes by the end of the nineteenth century in Europe is Lenin’s 1905 essay, ‘Party Organisation and Party Literature’. As Lenin saw it, there could only be one true advance guard in society, and it was not to be made up of artists. Art was to be subservient to the political avant-garde, to the views of the Communist Party. Along with Marxist-inspired factions, many other future-oriented political radicals in the second half of the nineteenth century considered themselves to be ‘avant-gardes’ as well. Anarchist philosopher Peter Kropotkin, for example, in the 1870s published a magazine called *L’Avant-garde*.

Not all intellectuals and activists belonging to such political groups distanced themselves from art per se. Yet by the turn of the century it appears that the organic connection for Saint-Simon, between a political and an artistic avant-garde, had been cut. Indeed, a classic avant-gardist during the first decades of the twentieth century could be an avant-gardist in art without also pledging allegiance to a radical practical political programme or philosophy. Naturally, many (though not all) European avant-gardists still recognised a certain congeniality with radicals in politics – like them, after all, their political ‘brothers in arms’ opposed the status quo. Nonetheless, by 1900 defiance

of bourgeois taste and culture in art no longer ran completely parallel with opposition to bourgeois rule in practical politics. In the realm of politics such opposition implied a utopian projection of a revolutionary state. In the realm of art it implied a different goal: a world grounded on aesthetic principles, a world in which a distinct group of visionary artists put their imagination to the service of a new type of life.

This brings us to the second shift in the use of the term 'avant-garde' in the latter half of the nineteenth century. For also within the domain of art itself the term's meaning gradually altered. For Saint-Simon all of modern art was 'avant-garde'; Saint-Simon simply put artists, without much specification, at the forefront of his endeavour. The term's meaning in this sense, however, steadily shifted as well until it came to denote only a limited set of artists, a certain section within art, namely those currents and exploits that were radically anti-traditionalist. We can see this happening progressively in France, for instance, where in the 1850s and 1860s writers said to belong to the avant-garde were still often considered polemical propagandists spreading anti-establishment political views without being innovators in art. In the 1860s, for example, Charles Baudelaire wrote about the 'littérateurs d'avant-garde' in a derogatory sense in his personal notebook. Such writers, he thought, were nonconformists opposing the political establishment in their work, but they hardly added anything new in artistic terms.

By the turn of the century, the word's meaning had shifted again to signal the kind of *artistic* anti-traditionalism and experimentalism we now associate with the art of the classic avant-gardes. An avant-gardist in art here was at the forefront of his or her discipline; he or she was an experimenter who pointed the way for fellow artists in art, not in politics. Thus, by 1912, Apollinaire could write that the 'young [Italian] Futurist painters can compete with some of our avant-garde artists, but they are still weak pupils of a Picasso or a Derain',¹ without any practical political connotation being tied to his words – Picasso was Spanish, Apollinaire was born in Italy and was of Polish descent, so 'our' avant-garde did not quite mean 'the French nation's'. Distinguishing between 'our [Cubist] avant-garde artists' and the Futurists, moreover, Apollinaire suggested that the Futurists, based on their radically experimental credentials, deserved to be labelled 'avant-garde' as well; they were just on the heels of the Cubists. A decade later, books like Guillermo de Torre's *Literaturas europeas de vanguardia* (1925) made clear that more generally in Neo-Latin cultures (French, Italian, Spanish) a widespread critical discourse was in place that referred to all isms we now rank under the classic avant-gardes as *avant-garde*.

Elsewhere, however, beyond the confines of Neo-Latin cultures, the term was used far less frequently to label classic avant-garde art. Instead, the adjectives 'young', 'new' and 'modern' were employed. These words were widely used too in Neo-Latin cultures to signal the avant-gardes – in fact, they were

utilised most often throughout the whole continent. As such, we might conclude that, although the history of the metaphor ‘avant-garde’ is an interesting one, the term itself was not all that important to the artists of the classic avant-gardes. It was one of many labels they drew on to denote their work, and no more than that.

Why, then, is the term ‘avant-garde’ so ubiquitous in scholarly and critical discussions about the classic avant-gardes? To answer this question we first need to recognise that the scholarly study of the avant-gardes in the West only began to boom well after the Second World War, that is when the Cold War in Europe had already gotten into its stride. Of course, there had always been a critical interest in the European avant-gardes. Yet anyone going through scholarly bibliographies will notice instantly that the number of critical assessments of the avant-gardes rises substantially (and uninterruptedly) every year after the Second World War. Scholars working in the West during the Cold War and interested in the classic avant-gardes could not as easily (if at all) access the enormous number of avant-garde works behind the Iron Curtain, where they were often tucked away, not always with the greatest of care, in cellars of museums or libraries. Indeed, it would take until the final decades of the twentieth century for the majority of avant-garde scholars to recognise that not only had Russia played a key role in the history of the avant-gardes, but also several other countries and regions in Central, Central-Eastern and Eastern Europe. For only after the Iron Curtain was lifted did the truly magnificent works and complex role of the supposedly united ‘Eastern Bloc’ avant-garde become visible again. By that time, however, scholars and critics in the West had been studying the avant-gardes they did have access to for several decades. In the process, they turned to the cultural capitals they knew best, Paris not least, and borrowed one of the terms that frequently had been employed there to refer to the European avant-gardes. The term ‘avant-garde’ accordingly became ubiquitous rather quickly. Adding to this ubiquity was the rise, from the late 1950s onwards, of the so-called *neo-avant-gardes* – a collection of new post-war movements, including Cobra, Fluxus, Situationism, the Italian *transavanguardia*, and neo-Dada, whose representatives often drew on the label ‘avant-garde’ to signal their congeniality with artists from the previous, classic avant-gardes. It was at this point also that critics – Hans Magnus Enzensberger was the first – adopted the phrase ‘*historical avant-garde*’ to distinguish the avant-gardes of the first half of the twentieth century from the newly emerging, post-war artistic movements.

The result of all this is that we now use the term ‘avant-garde’ most often. So what? Well, as always it is worth pausing a minute to contemplate the words we use, because certain contradictory and anachronistic connotations of the term ‘avant-garde’ today tend to determine our understanding of the classic avant-gardes. There is, for instance, the perennially lingering military connotation of the term, which depicts the avant-gardes as the courageous storm troopers in art who ventured into uncharted territory to bring back

a watershed of artistic innovations. Admittedly, some avant-gardists on occasion drew on a rhetoric that recalled the 'meccanismi di guerra' (mechanisms of war),² as Marinetti put it, to stress rupture, innovation, the new and the moment. Yet use of the term 'avant-garde' in this military sense is less innocent than we might think at first. For to present the historical avant-gardes in this way also suggests that their role in art or culture was above all an expendable and subservient one. After all, a military avant-garde does not engage in battle independently; vanguard soldiers are sent out by superiors, by an elite, to whom they are replaceable.

Many critics have drawn on this metaphorical sense of the term 'avant-garde' to nuance the importance of the classic avant-gardes. Roland Barthes, for example, in a short essay entitled 'À l'avant-garde de quel théâtre?' (Whose Theatre? Whose Avant-Garde?, 1956), argued that avant-gardists were at heart always the inferior of those they disliked the most: the bourgeoisie. While avant-gardists sought to replace bourgeois taste with a new art, and even envisioned a New Man to supplant the bourgeois, their true masters, their audience, patrons and collectors, mainly came from the social group they opposed. From the beginning, then, at least in Barthes' metaphorical reading, the avant-gardes proved the plaything of the bourgeoisie. More recently, literary critic William Marx has suggested that perhaps not so much the classic avant-gardes but the less radical, *arrière-garde* artists and writers who followed in the avant-gardes' wake and made more reflected use of their aesthetic innovations, are those we should be looking at. Also drawing on the military metaphor, Marx argues that critics most often look at a small section in the 'army' of culture, mistakenly reducing all of art and literature to that small section. Art historians, Marx observes, frequently say that the twentieth century was the century of the avant-gardes. This is a gross oversimplification, he argues, because when we look at the entirety of art produced in that century, we notice that more traditional literary and artistic practices by far outnumber those of the avant-gardes. Viewed from this perspective, the avant-gardes are little more than a minor phenomenon in what was actually a century of *arrière-gardes*.

These examples show that the term 'avant-garde' clearly does matter: it colours the way in which scholars today still conceive of the historical avant-gardes, even if the term can be shown to have been of relative significance to those avant-gardes themselves. Scholarly use of the term often entails contradiction as well. For critics like Roland Barthes and William Marx, who foreground the military analogy, the avant-gardes principally belonged to their own time and culture. Not all scholars agree with this view, however. In fact, most critics and theorists to whom we will presently turn stress that the avant-gardes were *ahead of their time*, that is, *avant* in a temporal or historical sense. In general, two trends can be discerned here, both of which build on the assumption that the avant-gardes were driven by a utopian project that strove towards a new type of society rooted in art and aesthetics. On the one

hand, there are those who emphasise that the *formal* features of avant-garde art were so advanced in comparison with that of non-avant-garde contemporaries that the actual importance of their work would become visible only much later. On the other hand, there are those who argue that the utopian project of the avant-gardes was of significance not only in art-historical terms, but also in a broader, *social* sense. Here too, however, it is argued that we can only see in hindsight what the historical avant-gardes were all about precisely because they were far more prescient than their contemporaries. A strict division between these two positions does not exist; it is most often a matter of where people put the stress.

The Artistic Future Anterior

To bring out the futurity of the avant-gardes, many pit avant-garde art against kitsch. For more than one critic, indeed, the avant-gardes' rejection of tradition and heavy investment in formal innovation put their work in stark opposition to kitsch, that is to the vernacular art of mass consumption in the first half of the twentieth century. In his early essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939), for example, Clement Greenberg argued that the avant-gardes had to be seen as the defenders of artistic standards in an increasingly sterile artistic landscape. Later, Greenberg was to become known, of course, as the critic who championed the avant-gardes' attempts at artistic differentiation, that is their search for the specificity of each medium or artform. In his early essay from the late 1930s we can already see this view at work. Greenberg observed that the 'alternative to Picasso is not Michelangelo, but kitsch';³ and kitsch to Greenberg mainly meant 'academic art', work that simply follows established rules without any serious consideration of how art's medium itself could be innovated. Preferred by most, kitsch to Greenberg was the lowest form of art possible. It was enjoyed by less cultivated spectators in great numbers precisely because it instantly pleased them. Following downtrodden paths and using established artistic techniques, kitsch artists produced an art whose immediate effects on an audience had also become predictable. Avant-gardists such as Picasso, by contrast, through their formal experiments, thematised the strangeness of art and thereby alienated the less initiated art-lover. In so doing, Greenberg noted, the avant-gardes also suggested how art might further be modernised and transformed in the future. Kitsch did not. Time and again it repeated the same techniques and so prevented art from evolving. For that reason, he concluded, avant-garde art was the only (faint) hope for the future of Western culture at large, because a modern culture whose art would be taken over completely by kitsch may well be dying.

In less ominous terms, Umberto Eco in *Opera Aperta* (The Open Work, 1962) also pitted the avant-gardes against the kitsch of their time. He defined kitsch in more conventional terms, however, namely as those products that

were sold on the market of mass culture. He thus referred less to academic art than to commercially successful and mass reproduced types of painting or film, popular songs and pulp novels. Such kitsch works, Eco believed, as a rule present the already familiar or they will poach avant-garde techniques when it is assumed these will go down well with a large audience. Kitsch, as a result, does not demand much effort from its audience. It is an unchallenging, self-enclosed type of creative work that leaves no questions unanswered when we finish consuming it. An avant-garde work, by contrast, is typically open-ended: its formal complexity and disregard of convention does not allow us to simply say what it is about. An audience, as it were, needs to actively participate in the artwork, to reconstruct it and to go through the creative process of making it once more, in order to come to terms with it. Avant-garde works thereby always instil a sense of anticipation in us. Even when we finish interpreting them they make us curious about meanings and insights that may still lie dormant in them but that will come to us only later, after a second or third confrontation with them.

In *After the Great Divide* (1986), Andreas Huyssen too picked up the opposition between avant-garde and kitsch. For Huyssen, however, the critics who went before him had represented the classic avant-gardes' ties to low or popular culture in a questionable manner, because their analyses suggested that the avant-gardes somehow looked down on popular art. This Great Divide, as Huyssen called it, the distinction between supposedly 'high' or proper avant-garde art and 'low' cultural trash or kitsch, was by no means subscribed to by all classic avant-gardists. Indeed, as shown in the first part of this book, many went out of their way to have their work absorb popular cultural material. Huyssen also recalled Walter Benjamin's famous essay 'Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit' (The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility, 1935–6), in which Benjamin argued that new technologies such as film and photography opened up the possibility of mass-produced artworks, which no longer came with the 'aura' of originality and authenticity. Cheap photographic reproductions of posters of, say, a Renaissance painting, made art accessible to everyone. Drawing on Benjamin, Huyssen pointed out that many avant-gardists also considered the option of creating an art for the masses. Representatives of Constructivism, for instance, dreamt of mass-produced design objects, and in architecture too people like Walter Gropius, Bruno Taut and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe drafted plans for social housing projects (*Siedlungen* in German) which would often in part be constructed by way of prefabricated constructions. It was in this sense that the avant-gardes were perhaps truly ahead of their time. Today, indeed, such procedures no longer strike us as revolutionary; they have become part and parcel of contemporary culture.

Many other scholars have argued that the avant-gardes ran ahead of their times perhaps first and foremost in aesthetic or formal terms. In *Peinture et Société* (Painting and Society, 1952), French sociologist Pierre Francastel, for

instance, claimed that the avant-gardes' experiments in painting, from Cubism onwards, were to be seen as a perceptual revolution comparable with the invention in the Renaissance of linear perspective – a discovery generally credited to Quattrocento architect Filippo Brunelleschi. Linear perspective is the illusion that objects appear to grow smaller and converge towards a 'vanishing point' at the horizon line, seemingly creating a perfect representation of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional picture plane. It took centuries for this new artistic or aesthetic representation of space to be accepted in Western society as 'natural', Francastel argued. Over time, people in the West came to see linear perspective as an authentic rendition of the space in which they live – it thus became a new convention. What the ramifications of the perspectival revolution of Cubism will be, Francastel averred, is perhaps too early to tell; but that the Cubist revolutionary fracturing of perspective fundamentally changed our conventional view of space for him stood beyond doubt.

In *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (1985), Marjorie Perloff turned to literature in a similar fashion and zoomed in on what she considered the most interesting phase in the history of the classic avant-gardes: roughly, the decade between 1905 and 1915. During this brief and optimistic phase, Perloff argued, many avant-gardists without flinching upheld that their experimental work was preparing for a new and glorious time to come. The First World War and political reality put an end to this 'utopian buoyancy',⁴ yet these events did not succeed in destroying the avant-gardes' many feats in literature. Perloff's book charted the many formal innovations introduced by the avant-gardes. The principle force behind all these innovations was a desire to strain 'the artwork to assimilate and respond to that which is not art', such as the political manifesto or elements from 'low' or popular culture.⁵ As all these non-art phenomena were turned into art, as writers deconstructed the differences between the genres of 'prose' and 'poetry' on a massive scale and created works that brought the traditionally separated arts in conjunction, the early classic avant-gardes above all drew attention to the surface of their works, that is to the materiality of language. This set a dynamic in motion whose outcome would become clear only much later. For just as the Cubists in painting make us acutely aware of how our view of the world is always in part mediated by the conventional organisation of visual material, so too did the avant-gardes in literature make abundantly clear that conventions in language in a similar fashion define our understanding of the world. As Perloff's book reminds us, this insight would become the basis of modern, twentieth-century literary studies. The first literary critics to scrutinise the classic avant-gardes' formal experiments in the 1910s and 1920s came from the east of Europe: the so-called *Russian Formalists*. This group of young scholars based in Moscow and St Petersburg, who included Roman Jakobson and Victor Shklovsky (both of whom were close to many Russian Futurists and who even wrote experimental works themselves), firmly believed

that changes in language could also transform how we perceive the world. Their studies went on to lay the foundation for the structuralist analysis of literary works. Structuralism is the scholarly study of texts' and artworks' formal properties, of how these properties coalesce in larger structures that can also be found in other works, and of how these larger structures in turn relate to modes of representation outside of art. This important theoretical paradigm was thus in part a result of Eastern European scholars' confrontation with the classic avant-gardes. Despite their critique of structuralism, many luminaries of the later so-called post-structuralism, such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, would use the historical or classic avant-gardes as well as a *cas limite* to test their new theories. For post-structuralism also departed from the same avant-garde assumption that conventions in language define how we see ourselves, each other and the world; breaking the rules or conventions, consequently, is also an attempt to create a new world.

The title of Perloff's book, *The Futurist Moment*, was a reference to one of the first landmark studies to foreground the futurity of the avant-gardes: Renato Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1968, originally published in Italian in 1962). Poggioli attributed four basic traits or so-called 'moments' to all avant-gardes: activism, antagonism, nihilism and agonism. With 'activism' Poggioli referred to the joy of dynamism and action, the sense of adventure we encounter in all the avant-gardes. Their 'antagonism', according to the Italian theorist, resided in the fact that all avant-gardes always acted against something or someone. They divided and as a rule defined themselves in opposition to others. The avant-gardes' 'nihilism' refers to the fact that avant-gardists typically razed obstacles, destroying whatever stood in their way, if not physically then at least symbolically. Agonism, finally, stresses the avant-gardes' lack of fear of self-destruction or failure. Even knowing that an artistic experiment might fail, or that a certain ism would eventually perish, avant-gardists persisted nonetheless. These four traits elegantly capture what is perhaps best termed the spirit or mental state of *avant-gardism*. Poggioli made sure to stress that this mental state is not synonymous with, or restricted to, the classic avant-gardes. His book covered a panoply of currents from Romanticism to Existentialism. For here too, Poggioli believed, could the spirit of avant-gardism be discerned. Looking back on almost two centuries of such avant-gardism, Poggioli concluded that its origin had to be located in the French Revolution and the birth of democracy in Europe, because he believed that avant-gardism required a sense of democracy to flower; try the opposite: totalitarian regimes do not tend to tolerate the contrarian voice of avant-garde dissent. While Poggioli's book, in short, did not amount to a theory of the *classic* avant-gardes, it nonetheless became highly influential, not least because the author also stressed that all avant-garde isms to some extent were futurisms. The avant-gardes' general experience of time, their temporal horizon, was in Poggioli's view defined by the future, not the past, nor the present: 'the futurist moment' – and here is

the phrase Perloff borrowed as her title – ‘belongs to all the avant-gardes and not only to the one named for it; to generalize the term is not in the least arbitrary’.⁶ Whatever avant-gardists did, in short, their noses always pointed towards the future. Their exploits were at the forefront of modern times or modernity and so always *anticipated* a (revolutionary) time to come.

A different take on the futurity of the avant-gardes’ artistic achievements can be derived from Rosalind Krauss’ *The Originality of the Avant-Gardes and Other Modernist Myths* (1986). Here, Krauss argued that critics far too often take the avant-gardes’ claims to originality and absolute newness at face value. Nothing is ever new, she upheld; an artist can admittedly introduce change in art, but to start from scratch, to create art out of nothing is a factual impossibility. Every work has predecessors somewhere. Moreover, words in a literary text, for example, have always been used many, many times before a writer sets out to experiment with them. Inevitably, artists thus always partially fall back on foregoing techniques or materials. The importance and inescapability of repetition for Krauss explained why by 1935 we can already speak of a clear avant-garde *tradition* in art history. Indeed, the success of the classic avant-gardes to an extent derives from the fact that these artists always in part copied each other, taking art further each time by at least selectively drawing on the work of vanguard predecessors so that the new work would be recognised as *avant-garde*. Repetition further explains, others have suggested, why today we may notice that popular culture too has absorbed many aspects of the avant-gardes’ artistic output. Few people today will not know Picasso or Duchamp, and it can be stated safely that many paintings by Dalí or Mondrian now simply belong to popular culture. Furthermore, it is by no means uncommon today for publicity firms to employ collage and montage techniques, let alone the many typographical experiments and advances in print first tried by the avant-gardes. This manifests that the avant-gardes, when we look at the formal features of their work, were indeed ahead of their time, awaiting a wider audience to come that today perhaps has arrived.

Hence, if for some the avant-gardes’ artistic output ran way ahead of the popular culture of their time, today’s vernacular culture appears to have caught up with it, almost. If for a minority of critics this also marks the end of the avant-gardes’ artistic project, others most often stress that it only adds to their lasting success. Jacques Rancière, for example, has argued that the task of an aesthetic avant-garde is not to remain ahead of its time indefinitely. In *Le Partage du Sensible: Esthétique et Politique* (2000, translated as *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*, 2004), Rancière pointed out that the task of an avant-garde in art is to create new sensibilities, new ways of experiencing and sensing the world, which eventually find their way into culture at large. Viewed like this the classic avant-gardes certainly held up their end of the bargain: in the patchwork that is our culture they clearly left their mark. But

from this perspective the European avant-gardes' artistic or formal-aesthetic futurity, the 'lead-time' of the avant-gardes, may now also be over: from our contemporary point of view, *après coup*, the many repercussions and after-effects of the avant-gardes' artistic adventure make its value all too apparent. In hindsight we can now categorise their *avant* as a *future anterior*.

Many take issue, however, with the suggestion that we may now have caught up with the classic avant-gardes. Clearly quite a few of their exploits, such as atonal or dodecaphonic music, have not quite managed to enter our everyday lives on a large scale (except perhaps in film music). Moreover, critics have mostly tended to look at the avant-gardes' artistic value by stressing the form of works. Yet several avant-gardists were drawn exactly to what escaped this category. As shown in Chapter 2, for instance, Georges Bataille foregrounded the idea of *l'informe*, the formless. As Bataille saw it, people always assume that concepts and things have a neatly recognisable form. This is not the case, he upheld. A lot of ideas (such as 'the universe', but also 'art') and things (like liquids, dust or mud) are amorphous when considered from up close. People usually shy away from such 'dirty' or 'debased' matters, but they are the core of culture, Bataille claimed. Hence, the task of the avant-gardist: to 'debase' art itself and perhaps also to find a 'form' for formlessness; not in order to register it once and for all, but to engage in an ever renewable and ever unfinished operation.

To represent the 'unrepresentable' in more general terms, according to many critics, is what ultimately drove the avant-gardes. Of course, the avant-gardes were not the first in modern art to concern themselves with such a task – the arcane notion of 'the sublime' needs but be recalled. Yet read in this way, the avant-gardes' rich aesthetic project is far from over yet; quite the opposite, it continues to generate and enrich ever more works, and in the process also keeps on challenging the way we think about art.

The Social Future Anterior

Many have argued that the avant-gardes were not only about bringing forth the new in art; they also sought to build a new type of society. At the very least, the avant-gardes always entail a dimension of social critique that harks back to the history of the term 'avant-garde', which throughout the nineteenth century signalled a certain kinship between more left-leaning political views and innovators in art. Julia Kristeva's *La révolution du langage poétique* (Revolution in Poetic Language, 1974) offers an interesting point of entry here. Drawing on psychoanalysis and implicitly also on the history of the term 'avant-garde', Kristeva's intricate study departed from two insights. First, that towards the end of the nineteenth century the political avant-gardes (be they of a Marxist, anarchist or other oppositional bent) were increasingly marginalised by more dominant political strands and ideologies. Second, that

the radical project and energy unleashed by these political avant-gardes, starting with the Post-Symbolists, was displaced to the realm of literature and art. By deconstructing the grammatical, symbolic and semiotic codes in which traditional writing and art had been composed, and in launching their own, alternative, open-ended systems of signification, the avant-gardes in Kristeva's view continued in the realm of art the struggle which radicals in politics had begun. Every avant-garde work, she claimed, is to be read as a revolution: upsetting conventional means of representation and dominant views of subjectivity and sexuality, the 'poetic language' of the avant-gardes always suggests how alternatives to ruling ideologies can be envisioned. An avant-garde work from this perspective always brings the *promise* of social change.

Philosopher Gilles Deleuze has interpreted avant-garde art as a search for models of embodied thinking in which the mind, the body and technology merge in new and free ways. Oversimplifying, Deleuze posited that when we analyse the formal complexity of a work, especially those works that represent humanlike figures, we find ourselves thinking the painting or reading the painting as thought. Particularly with works that represent anthropomorphic figures, our minds then drift towards inhabiting the strange bodies depicted, bodies to which we attach all kinds of sensorial capacities (taste, touch, vision, etc.); in the process it is as if we become something other than ourselves. As these bodies, for example in El Lissitzky's *Neuer* (New Man, 1923, Fig. 75), take on highly unnatural and often abstract or technologically manipulated shapes, avant-garde works offer us a virtual experience of new ways of being, redefining how we think about gender, race and sexuality. The lasting strangeness of these humanlike figures, in short, invites us to rethink not just how we relate to each other as embodied subjectivities; they also challenge us, more fundamentally, to think beyond the concepts that already define our collective thought.

That avant-garde works prompt us to question ourselves and the society we live in is an insight many scholars have put forth. Umberto Eco, for instance, has made this point with reference to atonal music. Consider Anton Webern's *Symphony*, Op. 21 (1928). Less than ten minutes, this atonal symphony written by means of the twelve-tone method, rejects the rules of the tonal system in music. Webern's composition to this day thereby alienates many listeners. Yet it does more than that. 'By rejecting a musical model', Eco claimed, 'the avant-garde musician actually rejects (more or less consciously) a social model'.⁷ Indeed, music is not consumed in a social vacuum; the artform always says something about the culture in which it is produced and consumed, approvingly or otherwise. The very fact, therefore, that most people enjoy classical tonal music more than atonal compositions signals a type of social critique, however underdeveloped, on the part of the composer. A piece of atonal music after all appears to say to those who find it ugly or unbearable: 'I do not fit in your world; your world is unfit for me.' As such, atonal music suggests that it

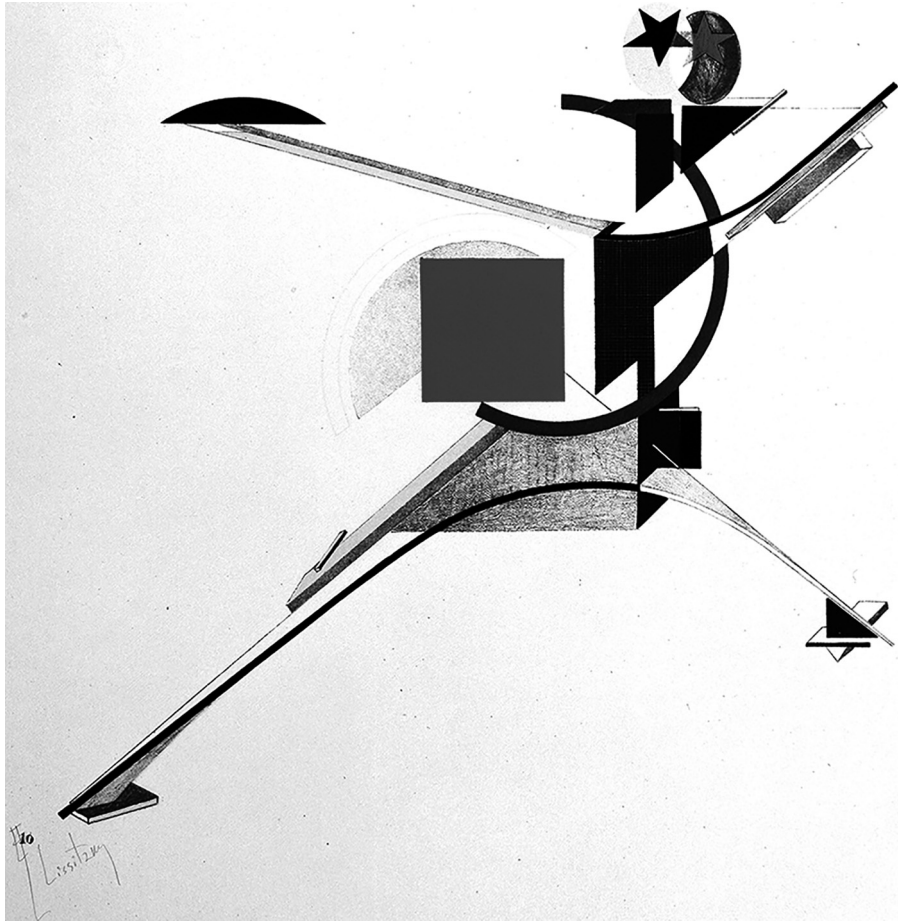


Figure 75 El Lissitzky, *Neuer* (New Man, 1923). A colour lithograph that was part of a portfolio commissioned by a lithographic printing house in Hannover. The portfolio was produced at only 75 copies and its title referred to *Victory over the Sun*, the opera first performed in 1913 in St Petersburg. Like other images in the portfolio, this one represents a character in the opera. Compare to Malevich's earlier Cubo-Futurist sketch of the same character's costume, Fig. 10.

can only thrive in another social constellation, a different community to come that will perhaps be less concerned with the visual and will also make room for real listening instead of mere hearing.

The famous Frankfurt School representative Theodor Adorno was very sceptical about the belief in progress implied by the term 'avant-garde', because he argued that the social model which (at least some) avant-gardists criticised the most was that of bourgeois capitalism – and Adorno cherished only faint hopes ever to witness a world in which money would not come first. Nonetheless, considering how far removed works like Webern's *Symphony* stood from

the world of consumer culture, from a culture industry that recognises only what can be commodified and sold, the true avant-garde, Adorno claimed, formulated a negative critique of the social context in which it circulated (a ‘negative dialectics’). For atonal music such as that of the Vienna School does not say explicitly that it is unfit for the world as it is. Its *form* only says that in the negative. It thereby resists becoming a commodity or product for rapid consumption, and as such, again only implicitly, in the negative, criticises a market-driven (art) world.

A far more radical assessment of the European avant-gardes’ social critique can be found in Peter Bürger’s *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Theory of the Avant-Garde, 1974). One of the most cited books on the avant-gardes, Bürger’s seminal theory advanced two theses: first, that the classic avant-gardes desired to reunite art and life, and, second, that to this aim they sought to destroy the autonomy of art. Let us look at both of these theses in more detail, starting with the first. To make his first point Bürger schematically distinguished three phases in Western European art history: sacral, courtly and bourgeois art. In the first phase of premodern times, he argued, ‘sacral art’ had the status of a collective ‘cult object’, that is it was fully integrated in communities and inextricable from a religious worldview shared by all. Moreover, art here was a handicraft, and not individual artists but a collective of laymen produced it. A medieval cathedral, for instance, could take centuries to build and involved hundreds of anonymous workers. Furthermore, people enjoying such sacral art did so collectively as well. ‘Sacral art’, in brief, was a communal affair in all respects.

In a second phase, from early modernity onwards, things evolved, and especially in ‘courtly art’ (think Louis XIV) this becomes rather apparent. Here aristocrats began to demand that art represented their power, bestowed onto them by God. To this aim they commissioned works from known, individual artists, who often travelled throughout Europe to serve various royal families and noblemen. The organic, premodern connection between art and society was thus cut on the side of art’s production – art increasingly became a specialised affair; what was once a craft that could also be executed by laymen gradually became an advanced, professional practice that was to add splendour to the nobility’s name. Key to the rulers remained that the art they commissioned was still enjoyed collectively, either in small elite groups at the court (as with music recitals or portrait art adorning palace interiors), or by larger groups of subjects forming the nation whose powers the nobility embodied.

In the final, modern phase of ‘bourgeois art’, which blossomed from the eighteenth century onwards, the face of art changed once more. Buying art by individual artists to decorate their own private interiors, the bourgeoisie in Bürger’s mind disconnected the production and reception of art completely from public or communal affairs. If bourgeois art was to represent anything, moreover, it was the self-image of the new dominant social class.

Accordingly, works had to represent a world familiar to the bourgeoisie, preferably in a realist fashion; anything too out of the ordinary was deemed upsetting or lacking decorum. By the time we arrive at the turn of the century, Bürger claimed, this long process of change appears to have resulted in a situation where art had become a fully autonomous and professionalised realm, cut off from the rest of society. Late nineteenth- and turn-of-the-century Aestheticism would make this process complete when it launched the adage 'art for art's sake', *l'art pour l'art*.

Enter the European avant-gardes around 1905. In Bürger's scheme they do not quite fit the dominant trend of their own 'bourgeois' period or phase in art history. For one, avant-gardists liked to work in collaboration and formed movements or isms. Their views on artistic production, moreover, often appeared to imply that everyone could become an artist like them. Tristan Tzara's manifesto-poem 'Pour faire un poème dadaïste' (To make a Dadaist Poem, 1920), for example, stipulated that poetry could be written simply by cutting words out of newspapers and pasting them together in random order on a page. In so doing, Bürger claimed, Tzara basically suggested that everyone could be an artist. As such, the avant-gardes seemed to hark back to the production of 'sacral art' in premodern times, which was built on the principle of collective handicraft. Their art also did not represent the self-image of the bourgeoisie – formally, it denied exactly what a bourgeois audience liked the most. Collages and photomontages, instead of presenting a familiar world, went in the exact opposite direction and reproduced a fragmented, open-ended world. Finally, the avant-gardes clearly also desired that their work be enjoyed not so much by individuals in private but by larger groups in the public space. Considering their penchant for performances and their stress on action, Bürger asserted, there can be no doubt about this. His conclusion accordingly was straightforward: if we look closely at the historical avant-gardes we can see that they essentially wanted to install a modern (that is, desacralised) variant of premodern art. Thus, they went back to the premodern past, projecting its partial return as a possibility in the future. If this prospect was ever realised, art and life would once again be reunited; and the desire to reach this goal, Bürger asserted, was the force that drove all the avant-gardes.

Now, to attain their goal – and this was Bürger's second thesis – the avant-gardes faced an enormous challenge: they had to fully uproot the modern, bourgeois idea of art as an insulated, specialised affair with its own, autonomous value, and to this end they also had to bring down the institutional organisation of art (art schools, state institutions, museums, etc.), which materially isolated art from the rest of society. Only then could art and life be reunited once again. Here, however, Bürger concluded, the avant-gardes failed. 'Art', indeed, still exists. Today still we attach special value to it, and its production, distribution, education and reception can still fall back on its own, specialised

institutions as well. Nonetheless, Bürger suggested, the value of the European avant-gardes, what made them truly *historical*, was that they undertook one of the most radical projects ever witnessed in art history.

Their project, Bürger further remarked, while unsuccessful, was also left *unfinished*. In a way it was as if the avant-gardes had begun building a new, modern cathedral, but then had to abandon it, leaving it incomplete. Consequently, nothing is to keep artists today from picking up their project again and taking it further. German critics Wolfgang Asholt and Walter Fähnders, in part inspired by philosopher Jürgen Habermas, have argued something similar. In their view the avant-gardes began a project that was only partially completed: like fragments their works today remind us of the possibility of seeing their ambitions through. A key point for all these critics, however, is that a genuine avant-gardist who today wishes to extend the project of the historical avant-gardes cannot simply continue their formal experimentation. There can only be talk of a true avant-gardist today if an artist is primarily concerned with destroying the autonomous status art still enjoys. As many of the formal features first tried by the historical avant-gardes now belong to the mainstream in art, a contemporary avant-gardist will thus also have to develop other tactics and strategies. On what these alternative tactics or strategies should be critics disagree, but to the present day this disagreement fuels countless debates.

Bürger's theory is important for two reasons. First, endowing the avant-gardes with a great deal of heroism, his book suggested that the avant-garde not only criticised the world intellectually, but he went on to claim that they were also revolutionaries *in practice* who set out to act on and alter society. Second, he brought the first sociological account of the sudden and explosive entrance of the avant-gardes on the early twentieth-century art scene. Many have pointed out, however, that his account does not quite mesh with historical facts. Whereas questions can be posed about Bürger's first thesis and its depiction of art's history, his second thesis especially seems problematic – that is, the assertion that the avant-gardes sought to destroy art's (material) autonomy. True, avant-gardists opposed the conventions of bourgeois art, but they nonetheless saw themselves as creative *artists* of a different kind. Hence, to say that all of them wished to destroy the autonomy of art is perhaps a step too far. In fact, as the first part of this book illustrates, with their own galleries, schools, networks and magazines the avant-gardes did lay the foundations for an entirely new institutional context in which a collective, Total Art could thrive. They thus proved rather successful, because they did alter the institutional infrastructure and material conditions for art. Avant-gardists also expanded art's scope and reach in an unprecedented fashion by having art absorb many non-art aspects of 'life'. Hence, all along, it was a *different* art, a Total Art, that was their shared and primal concern.

The problem with Bürger's second thesis is best brought out by turning to architecture, which perhaps more than any other artform is always caught in a tension between its autonomous status as an artform on the one hand and its technical and functional dimensions on the other. This tension is thematised in Marxist urban historian Manfredo Tafuri's *La sfera e il labirinto* (The Sphere and the Labyrinth, 1980). Tafuri read the classic avant-gardes in all the arts as a complex response to the chaos which the modern metropolis confronted them with. Alienated by the bustling and rustling life of the modern city, and by the overstimulation of the nerves that accompanied it, the classic avant-gardes essentially followed two trajectories in an attempt to capitalise on the energy the city released. Some chose to capture the sensual and nervous 'shock' of the big city's sprawling desires and impressions in works that duplicated this shock-effect and added more chaos to the discord that was already in circulation (as in the fragmentary collages and photomontages of Dada or Surrealism). Others developed techniques with which the city's chaotic impulses could be domesticated in an orderly fashion (as in the strategy of differentiation developed by De Stijl, in the tactic of abstraction, or in the Total Art project of the later Bauhaus). Chaos and order, the labyrinth and the sphere, irrational subjectivity and rational objectivity, eccentricity and organisation, thus proved contradictory forces in the historical avant-gardes. For Tafuri, however, the origin of these contradictory compulsions was one and the same: the modern, capitalist city. The metropolis with which avant-garde works and techniques sought to come to terms had after all come about in the course of the nineteenth century as an infrastructural space for modern industry and finance. In Tafuri's mind, not many avant-gardists were aware of the fact that they were actually advancing creative modes to alleviate the stress and chaos of modern capitalism, which the bourgeoisie, those ruling the city, could co-opt and put to practical use elsewhere in culture.

Tafuri claimed that just a few avant-gardists realised that only when the capitalist city itself would be transformed in its entirety they could aspire to a more fundamental role in culture. Karel Teige was one. His 1932 proposal for what he called the 'Minimum Dwelling' offered a blueprint for a new way of living that rethought the functionality of the domestic space. Built on the assumption that the New (Soviet) Men and Women would live as equals and that the nuclear bourgeois family would disappear, Teige's architectural plans eliminated the marital bed and introduced collective laundries, canteens and kindergartens to take over the housewife's duties. Teige's plans were never realised. Avant-garde architects who did manage to get their projects built inevitably fell prey to the reality of bourgeois technocratic rule. While many avant-garde architects after the First World War, most notably those associated with the Novembergruppe, the Bauhaus and not least Le Corbusier, engaged in urban planning and went on to design social housing

for the masses (as opposed to ‘unique’ or single bourgeois homes), their work always met with the limitations imposed on them by municipal bureaucracies. Here again, in short, the avant-gardes were made to comply with the city’s governing powers, going along only half grudgingly. For Tafuri, the utopian impulse that appeared to ground the avant-gardes’ project was thus in all respects unfit for the social context in which it arose. When thought through, he upheld, true avant-garde architecture, paradoxically, would have stopped being architecture altogether. This would have marked the end of art as a bourgeois enterprise, as in Tafuri’s analysis architecture was the last vestige of the artistic avant-gardes’ radical project – but giving up the autonomy of art (or at least the illusion of that autonomy) was a step the avant-gardes were not willing to take. Thus, Tafuri’s assessment in part echoed that of Bürger, but whereas the latter still claimed that the project of the avant-garde was unfinished, for Tafuri the curtain had long fallen: all architects can do today, even those claiming to be inheritors of the classic avant-gardes, is to further ‘decorate’ the world of big capital. There can be no avant-garde architecture, only an avant-garde critique of architecture.

As Fredric Jameson sums it up: an avant-garde art ‘of the future will be concretely and practically possible only when the future has arrived, that is to say, after a total social revolution’.⁸ It is this utopian impulse, this desire for a new and perhaps more just world stemming from within art, that nonetheless continues to challenge and prod us today, critics like Slavoj Žižek and John Roberts claim. Others add in haste, though, that they find it highly unlikely ever to witness a moment when art will once again acquire such a prominent social role. For many scholars, indeed, the other social future which the avant-gardes pointed towards (whatever it might have been) is now a future anterior as well. Consider the title of T.J. Clark’s book: *Farewell to an Idea* (1999). Clark, whose majestic readings of artworks makes his study highly recommendable, looks back on the avant-gardes with a great deal of nostalgia and concludes that we must bid farewell to the idea that art could ever again fundamentally change society.

The notion of an avant-garde that sets out to prepare a better future, Bruno Latour has observed with melancholy, increasingly has been avoided in recent critical debate. As Latour sees it, the term ‘avant-garde’ has been ‘pushed aside by other forces, moved to the rear guard, or maybe lumped with the baggage train’.⁹ Philosopher Alain Badiou recently noted that ‘more or less the whole of twentieth-century art has laid claim to an avant-garde function. Yet today the term is viewed as obsolete, even derogatory. This suggests we are in the presence of a major symptom.’¹⁰ It would lead us too far to determine what the sources of this symptom could be – perhaps, some have argued, we can no longer imagine a future that is not a plain continuation of our present, dominant culture. Of course, even if this is true – and provided that it is also correct

that today the term 'avant-garde' for most artists and critics is problematic – then all this is less an issue for historical avant-gardists than for their theorists. For it is not because at least some critics and artists today feel that the word 'avant-garde' comes with an unbearable weight, that the work of the historical avant-gardes itself would have lost any of its radiant appeal.

Other Times, Still

As will be clear hopefully from the critical views discussed above, avant-garde scholars often extend the spirit of avant-gardism encountered in their object of study: their analyses tend to be antagonising and critical, they focus on the avant-gardes despite their alleged 'failure' and, above all, they cling on to the future alternatives (or alternative futures) promised by the classic avant-gardes. It is not so difficult to see why many critics associate the avant-gardes with the future. There was the call for perpetual innovation, the projection of a New Man, the rapid succession of isms, all of which seemed to thrust the historical avant-gardes forward so fast that it almost looks as if they ran ahead of their time. Yet not all thinkers have taken the *avant* of the avant-garde to literally refer to a futural thrust. As to how we need to define the avant-gardes' own sense of history and view of time, however, critics are not of one mind. In his book *Los hijos del limo* (Children of the Mire, 1974), Mexican poet Octavio Paz traced the roots of the avant-gardes' project to the Enlightenment and to Romanticism. The latter launched a rebellion, continued by the historical avant-gardes, against the central tradition of the West since the Renaissance. The Renaissance in a way codified Occidental culture, Paz claimed, by tracing its roots back to Greco-Latin Antiquity and coupling it to Christianity. It was this tradition, further elaborated in Classicism, that modern artists from Romanticism onwards opposed. Art since Romanticism stands out, Paz asserted, for its constant search for a new counter-tradition. French and English Romanticists, for example, often tended to look to the newly emerging nations as cultural counter-models. Romanticist poets in Germany looked to India, Arabia, and to occult and mystic traditions developed alongside official Christianity. A century later, Ultraists and other avant-gardists in Spanish America would similarly turn to their local, native American traditions and cultures. In so doing these Spanish Americans were not that different from their continental peers, Paz claimed. For what else was Cubism, for instance, than an attempt to break with the linear perspective introduced in the Renaissance by thinking through the Classical Euclidean conception of space? And why else did Cubists, like so many other European avant-gardists, turn to 'primitive' African art? The Surrealists, but also many other avant-gardists, moreover, were rather preoccupied with hermetic and occultist traditions. In turn, Anglo-American avant-garde writers, such as Ezra Pound, looked to Dante as a model. The list of authors

and artists discussed in Paz is much longer, but the cases mentioned here suffice to highlight his main point: since Romanticism art and literary history have not ‘progressed’ nor looked exclusively to the future; history has spiralled and moved in endlessly varied cycles to form an overall counter-tradition of the new. ‘The modern age’, Paz posited, ‘is the first to exalt change and convert it into its foundation’.¹¹

In *The Politics of Time. Modernity and Avant-Garde* (1995), Peter Osborne reached a rather different conclusion. For Osborne, it is the function of the avant-garde to upset how we think about time and progress by enabling us, ‘like the child, to “discover the new anew” and, along with it, the possibility of a better future’.¹² Osborne is not alone in this conviction. Art historian Hal Foster, in his book *The Return of the Real* (1996), drew on Sigmund Freud’s notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action) to present the advent of the historical avant-gardes as a traumatic event that ruptured the symbolic order. To Foster the avant-gardes presented something so radically new in art and society that the potential meanings of the avant-gardes only show themselves dispersed over time, in countless reenactments by subsequent (neo-avant-garde) artists who *reconnect* with the historical avant-gardes in order to *disconnect* themselves from the context in which they work. Foster’s subtle mode of looking at the historical significance of the classic avant-gardes problematises the difference between cause and effect, as well as between past, present and future. An artist in the 1960s or today, for instance, who repeats a technique practised by a historical avant-gardist, in Foster’s view at once reignites the work of his or her predecessor, and in a way becomes part of this previous moment in art history, while simultaneously standing for a genuine avant-gardist in his or her own time. French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard throughout his career looked at the avant-gardes in a related way. For him, too, the avant-gardes presented a trauma of sorts in modern art, which later artists, but also theorists, try to come to terms with. Unlike many other critics we have discussed here, Lyotard also upheld that the future anterior of the avant-gardes, that which will or would have been, has not yet shown itself. For the avant-gardes in his mind form a temporal anomaly as it were, a formation that never fully coincides with our own moment. The real question classic avant-gardists continue to pose, Lyotard argued, is ‘Do we know what art is?’; and the answer they give is always ‘Not yet.’ Perhaps because of this an all-embracing theory of the avant-gardes belongs to a future anterior to come as well.

Box 9: New Objectivities

In 1928 Karel Teige, leader of Czech Poetism, claimed that ‘the last glimmers of the “-isms”’ could be witnessed, immediately adding that numerous ‘uncharted territories and blank spaces on the aesthetic map’ remained to be explored.¹ This was an apt observation, for although it is true that avant-garde activity on the European continent waned in the 1930s, the immensely complex endeavour of the avant-gardes can hardly be said to have reached a decisive conclusion.

Histories of the classic or historical avant-gardes often close by pointing out that in the 1920s and 1930s, European art gradually ‘returned to order’ and put an end to decades of uninterrupted avant-garde experiment. This view is not entirely convincing, because the situation proved much more complex. First of all, as various cases discussed in this book manifest, there were many artists who simply continued to explore the blank spaces on what Teige called the avant-gardes’ ‘aesthetic map’. We need but recall the several hundreds of (non-objective) abstract artists in the 1930s – many of whom were fêted in Alfred Barr’s exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* in 1936 at the New York Museum of Modern Art – or the continued activities of the Surrealists throughout many parts of Europe. Moreover, the so-called ‘return to order’ itself proves to have been rather disorderly. When Jean Cocteau published his collection of essays, *Le Rappel à l’ordre* (The Call to Order, 1926), a book that generally is seen as a key text in the ‘return to order’, he wished to show how specific Paris-based artists like Picasso and Braque after the First World War began to explore a living classicism, an avant-garde neoclassicism that explored the continued relevance of key moments since Antiquity in European art history and culture. By no means did this ‘return’ characterise the entirety of European avant-gardes, however. Moreover, at the same time the phrase ‘return to order’ was also used to characterise the rather different phenomenon of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (commonly translated as New Objectivity) of the 1920s and 1930s. This movement was often said to advocate a simple return to nineteenth-century Realism infused with avant-garde techniques. Such divergent returns to order, in any case, at best evince a multifarious *desire* for order, a crisis within the avant-gardes’ ranks that could not be solved – for if anything sat badly with the avant-gardes it was order and identity; indeed, even in calling for order they collectively only created more disorder.

The causes for this crisis or desire for order were in turn complex. No doubt, changed political and social circumstances fed into the crisis. By the mid-1920s there was the widespread recognition among avant-gardists

that the (end of the) First World War had not brought about the expected overthrow of the 'old' Europe; a new social present (at least in the west and centre of Europe) was not for any time soon. By the late 1920s many also realised that the USSR was perhaps not the alternative they had hoped for. Indeed, there was the concurrent rise of populist and dictatorial forces which in many parts of Europe, from the west to the east, from the north to the south, pushed back the avant-gardes' actions and interventions in the public space, if not annihilating them in the 1930s. The 1920s also saw the unprecedented growth of mass popular culture, which prompted some avant-gardists (at times under external pressure) to simply give up the idea of producing art and to lend their services to the realm of mass product design – in the sarcastic words of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz: 'Motto: the customer must be satisfied. Misunderstandings are ruled out.'² These and other factors, like the global economic crisis of the 1930s, explain why Teige saw the avant-gardes' activities diminish gradually, and while those who stayed at it on occasion desired for order.

At least as significant was the fact that the avant-gardes as a whole had come to a certain age, that artists now could also look back on an impressive legacy that had been constructed over several decades. Already in the 1920s this insight prompted the Polish '*a.r.*' group (the 'revolutionary' or 'real avant-garde' artists Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro and Henryk Stażewski, along with poets Julian Przyboś and Jan Brzękowski) to set up an extraordinary collection of European avant-garde works within the Museum of Art in Łódź. Finding a museological destination, in Poland, but also elsewhere in Europe and the USA during the interwar period, to some avant-gardists signalled the end of an era of countercultural revolt. It proved the bankruptcy of the avant-gardes, a moment of irreparable disillusionment, too. For others, awareness of the avant-gardes' rich history resulted in a moment of thorough self-reflection, but not in giving up. Yet where to head? What 'blank space' on Teige's map to take on next?

The movement of *Neue Sachlichkeit* is a good illustration of the fact that by 1930 the avant-gardes had lost nothing of their stubborn energy. The *Neue Sachlichkeit* in Germany is commonly said to have persisted until 1933, when the Weimar Republic officially came to an end and the Nazis seized power. (As always, there were also equivalents of the New Objectivity in various other cities, countries and regions.) Post-Expressionist, the *Neue Sachlichkeit* gathered a variety of tendencies to move away from the subjective, idealist and abstract trends in Expressionism prior to the early 1920s. In architecture it is often seen as synonymous with the so-called *Neues Bauen* or New Building, which



Figure 76 Georg Grosz, *Die Stützen der Gesellschaft* (The Pillars of Society, 1926). This New Objective work portrays the principal objects of Grosz's scorn: the nationalist (with monocle and swastika), the journalist (with moustache and upturned chamber pot), the chubby socialist (with excrements as brains), the priest and the aggressive soldier. These people did an awful job at representing society, Grosz thought, so he took it upon himself to artistically represent and document society in their stead.

developed functionalist housing projects without ornamentation, a form of pragmatic Constructivism, then, with toned down utopian aspirations. Most emblematic in the visual arts were Otto Dix, Georg Grosz (see Fig. 76), Max Beckmann, Rudolf Schlichter and Christian Schad. Often also termed Verists, these artists recorded everyday mundane subjects, with a preference for the more seedy aspects of bourgeois leisure and nightlife, scenes of dehumanised social misery, crimes of passion and prostitution. Stylistically rather diverse, drawing on a panoply of techniques previously developed by the avant-gardes, their work, rather than Realist, is best characterised as grotesquely real or hyperreal. This also applies to *Neue Sachlichkeit* literature, for example, where Joseph Roth, Alfred Döblin, Kurt Tucholsky and many others incorporated techniques developed earlier by the avant-gardes, from typographical experiments to the montage of multiple perspectives, typically eschewing the representation of characters' thoughts so as to leave the moment of judgement to the reader. In film too, George Wilhelm Pabst, among others, turned to everyday subjects and inanimate objects in the modern metropolis, with real-life cinema settings and a neutral tone devoid of emotion. Showing the real thing, documenting the alienation and dehumanisation of the modern metropolis, these artists' implied message was rather clear: is this what we desire? Is this the world we wish?

Viewed as a whole, Neue Sachlichkeit did not just recombine older techniques and topics of the avant-gardes, however, nor did it simply *return* to nineteenth-century Realism. It also took the avant-gardes in a new direction and extended their project, as outlined in Chapter 3. For what else was Neue Sachlichkeit than an orchestrated attempt to further expand the domain of art by bringing into art the non-art practice of journalism? Thus, once again enlarging the terrain of art, and ending with the rise to power of the Nazis, Neue Sachlichkeit manifests that the ‘returns’ to order that marked certain centres of the avant-gardes during the 1920s and 1930s did not signal the end of the avant-gardes’ undertaking. Admittedly, the avant-gardes in many parts of Europe were halted by external force, but not out of some internal necessity. The world of non-art would keep on changing, indeed, and so the story of the classic avant-gardes was left unfinished and open-ended.

Conclusion

En route

So how do we best remember the classic or historical European avant-gardes? As a powerful flash of lightning? As a formation once there, now gone? Like the protagonist in Aldo Palazzeschi's novel *Il codice di Perelà* (The Codex of Perela, 1911)? A Futurist novel still read in Italian high schools today, this book describes how a man of smoke, Perelà, enters a city, is appointed to write the law, only to be imprisoned and to disappear into thin air again. Or, perhaps, as a formation of young artists who witnessed and responded to one of the most daunting periods in modern European history? Like the main characters in Blaise Cendrars' *La prose du Transsibérien et de la Petite Jehanne de France* (Prose of the Trans-Siberian and of Little Jehanne of France, 1913), which tells the story of a sixteen-year-old boy and a girl called Jehanne travelling by train from Moscow to Mongolia through an apocalyptic landscape of war and revolution that is at once mesmerising and frightening? Or as a lasting provocation? As for instance the allegorical Franz Müller in Kurt Schwitters' short story (with the long title) *Franz Müllers Drahtfrühling, Erstes Kapitel: Ursachen und Beginn der grossen glorreichen Revolution in Revon* (Franz Müller's Spring Wire, First Chapter: Causes and Start of the Grand, Glorious Revolution of Revon, 1922). First published in *Der Sturm*, this absurd narrative recounts how a man, simply by standing still and quiet in the street, unchains a revolution as more and more people gather around him in incomprehension.

Of course, the avant-gardes were all these things and more. The present book was conceived as a portable, Duchampian *boîte-en-valise*, a miniature museum with multiple points of entry, precisely to illustrate that the avant-gardes are best approached from a variety of angles. To look at them only as a phenomenon in the history of the arts, and an important one at that, as done in the first part of this book, is not quite telling the whole tale. For as shown in the second part of this book, they were also an important counterforce in cultural history more broadly, the lasting impact of which can be felt to this day. As manifested by the third part of this book, the avant-gardes can also be regarded as questioning conventional views of time and history, as a formation

‘outside of time’ that perhaps continues to speak to and question us. For all these reasons the classic or historical European avant-gardes are best studied from multiple perspectives, with each perspective on them unearthing a new facet that often contradicts another. Indeed, only a dialectic approach, that is one that relates all parts to each other and to the whole, allows us to grasp the avant-gardes. We can read their works for form (or formlessness), we can interpret them as critical interventions in cultural history, we can approach them as comments on the avant-gardes’ own history or as allegorical reflections on the nature of art and time more generally. Yet when we do not do all these things, we always miss part of the avant-gardes’ energetic undertaking. This, indeed, proves the biggest challenge: to contain their untrammelled and radiant energy. For 1935 did not mark the end of the avant-gardes’ energetic enterprise. By that time already their energy had been dispersed on a global scale and after the Second World War it would surge up again with great strength in the so-called neo-avant-gardes, which would require a study like this one simply to do justice to them.

Today, the avant-gardes are all around us; first and foremost in the museums, libraries and other cultural venues we frequent. The history of the arts has since taken many turns, yet the avant-gardes’ portable works continue to circulate widely, albeit now very much as part of our cultural heritage, in the canon and in large-scale exhibitions often visited by thousands of people. This book touches upon a mere fraction of works in circulation nowadays. It is only a beginning, a portable atlas to facilitate the further navigation of the avant-gardes’ terrain.

Notes

Introduction

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2. In the case of the Arbeitsrat we need to add that this was right after the First World War, when Germany literally had to be rebuilt. The Rat's promotion of architecture was in part motivated by the decimation of architects during the war. New architects needed to be trained urgently.
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Chapter 3

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Chapter 4

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Box 4

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Box 6

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Plate 1 Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus* (1920). Oil transfer and watercolour on paper. Currently held at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, this work in part owes its fame to one of its former owners, critic Walter Benjamin, who interpreted it as capturing the angel of history. With its back towards the future, Benjamin thought, the angel is blown away by the storm of progress as it helplessly witnesses the towering debris of the past.



Plate 2 Ludwig Meidner, *Apokalyptische Landschaft* (Apocalyptic Landscape, 1913). This oil painting presents the modern metropolis as a site of apocalypse and destruction. Many Expressionists believed that to construct an alternative world, the present one had to be demolished first.



Plate 3 Wenzel Hablik, *Grosse bunte utopische Bauten* (Big Colourful Utopian Constructions, 1922). Oil on canvas. An example of Hablik's efforts to radically redesign the social space in architecture by giving the imagination free reign and disregarding practical constraints.

Plate 4 Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.)* (The Young Ladies of Avignon, 1907). This oil painting portrays five nude prostitutes in an angular and distorted manner, with the left three women's faces inspired by an Iberian style, the two on the right echoing African masks. In part because of the angular presentation of faces, this work is often said to have ushered in the movement of Cubism.



Plate 5 Georges Braque, *Compotier et verre* (Fruit Dish and Glass, 1912), consisting of charcoal and cut-and-pasted wallpaper with gouache on white laid paper; subsequently mounted on paperboard. This Cubist work is considered to be the first *papier-collé*.

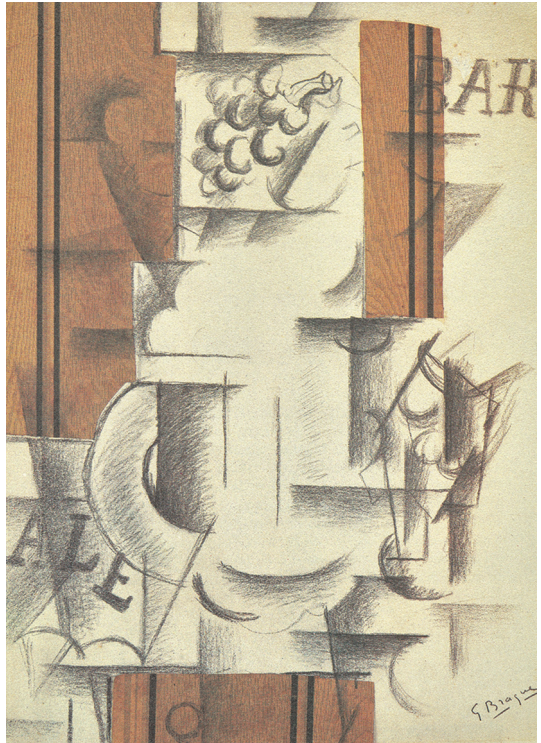




Plate 6 Robert Delaunay, *Une fenêtre* (A Window, 1912). Oil on canvas, part of a series of studies by Delaunay made in front of a Paris window looking out on the Eiffel Tower. This series initiated his move to non-objective abstraction and to the celebration of pure colour and light. Here already colour is exploited as a source of visual rhythm.



Plate 7 Liubov Popova's Cubo-Futurist oil painting *Puteshestvie zhenshchiny* (Travelling Woman, 1915). Unlike the often static and domestic subjects of Cubists, this work let Cubist techniques loose on a dynamic 'New Woman' moving through space.



Plate 8 Wyndham Lewis, *The Crowd* (ca. 1914–15). As individualised engineers bottom left walk off with their construction blueprints, a mass of workers top centre appears to be unchaining a revolution. And while the framed section with engineers below left allows us a sense of distance and perspective, the rest of the painting presents us with variously framed and over-layered or intersecting images of the same city, provoking us to find a bearing in a world beyond conventional perspective.

Plate 9 Raoul Hausmann, *Der Geist Unserer Zeit – Mechanischer Kopf* (Mechanical Head [The Spirit of Our Age], ca. 1920). This assemblage consists of a hairdresser's wig-making dummy, a crocodile wallet stuck to the side and back, a ruler, a pocket watch mechanism, a bronze segment of an old camera, a typewriter cylinder, a segment of measuring tape, a collapsible cup, the number 22, nails and a bolt. Like the Dada work portrayed in Fig. 43, Hausmann's *Mechanischer Kopf* ridiculed the tenets of bourgeois culture, including its obsession with clocks and being on time.



Plate 10 Sophie Täuber, *Untitled* (*Dada Head*), 1920. Oil on turned wood. A good example of the many everyday objects (here a hat stand) avant-gardists redesigned in their effort to bring all of non-art into the domain of art.





Plate 11 A photograph (dated 1933) by Wilhelm Redemann of Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbau* in his studio and family home in Hannover, started by Schwitters in 1923 and aborted in 1937 when he fled from Nazi Germany to Norway. This gigantic assemblage in constant flux – Schwitters worked on it throughout the period – disappeared and now has an almost mythic status in modern art and design history. It consisted of paper, cardboard, pasteboard, plaster, glass, mirror, metal, wood, stone and electric lighting.



Plate 12 Marcel Duchamp, *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even, 1915–1923), a freestanding assemblage that consists of two panes of glass (now broken) with a variety of materials including lead foil, dust and fuse wire. Also known as *Le Grand Verre* (The Large Glass), this extraordinary piece of craftsmanship evokes an erotic encounter between an insectile bride (top panel) and her timid bachelors (below), who find themselves surrounded by mysterious mechanical contraptions such as a chocolate grinder. Duchamp had the work accompanied by a textual addendum to prevent purely visual responses to it and to advance conceptual interpretation as well. The textual complement gathered notes and scraps, eventually collected as loose (and incoherent) sheets in a large green box in 1934.



Plate 13 Hannah Höch, *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser Dada die letzte weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands* (Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany, 1919–1920). Photomontage with watercolour. Dynamic and layered, this large photomontage rearranges images and texts from mass media to criticise and engage the modern world. An important subtext in this work, with its teeming images of sportswomen, female dancers and other women figures, is the potentially new role of women in the post-First World War era. The reference to the kitchen knife in the title too plays with the tension between the everyday ‘feminine’ object of a kitchen utensil and the process by which Höch used it to advance a new type of art.



Plate 14 Sándor Bortnyik, *Az új Ádám* (The New Adam, 1924). In the upper left corner of this oil painting a Suprematist Proun work by El Lissitzky. While Bortnyik felt drawn to many aspects of Constructivism, this work evinces his critique that at least certain Constructivists were a little wide-eyed when they envisioned an almost in- or post-human type of subjectivity to supplant bourgeois identity. For on close inspection, Bortnyik's 'new' man proves to be a fragile and fashion-savvy automaton, a mechanised bourgeois.



Plate 15 Cover of *ReD* (*Revue Devětsilu*, no. 3, 1927) designed by Karel Teige. The magazine referred to the group Devětsil, initially based in Prague but soon with factions elsewhere as well in the Czechoslovakian Republic. The group was founded by poet Jaroslav Seifert and devil-do-all Karel Teige, among others.



Plate 16 Cover of El Lissitzky's and Hans Arp's volume *Die Kunstisten/Les ismes de l'art/The Isms of Art* (1925). One of many books produced by avant-gardists in an attempt to make sense of the development and various currents within the avant-gardes' ranks in Europe. Tellingly, while making this book, Arp and Lissitzky constantly fought over how to present the history of the avant-gardes.



Plate 17 Cover of *Veshch. Gegenstand. Objekt* (Object, no. 3), designed by El Lissitzky and published in Berlin in 1922. *Veshch* was the birthplace of *Veshchism* or Thingism – in the editors' view, all artists created objects (from houses and poems to pictures and music), and it was with the creation and design of new, functional objects in all the arts they wished to concern themselves.



Plate 18 Cover of *LEF: Levyi front iskusstv* (Left Front of the Arts, no. 3, 1923) with a photomontage designed by Alexander Rodchenko. The journal came about at the initiative of poet Vladimir Mayakovsky.

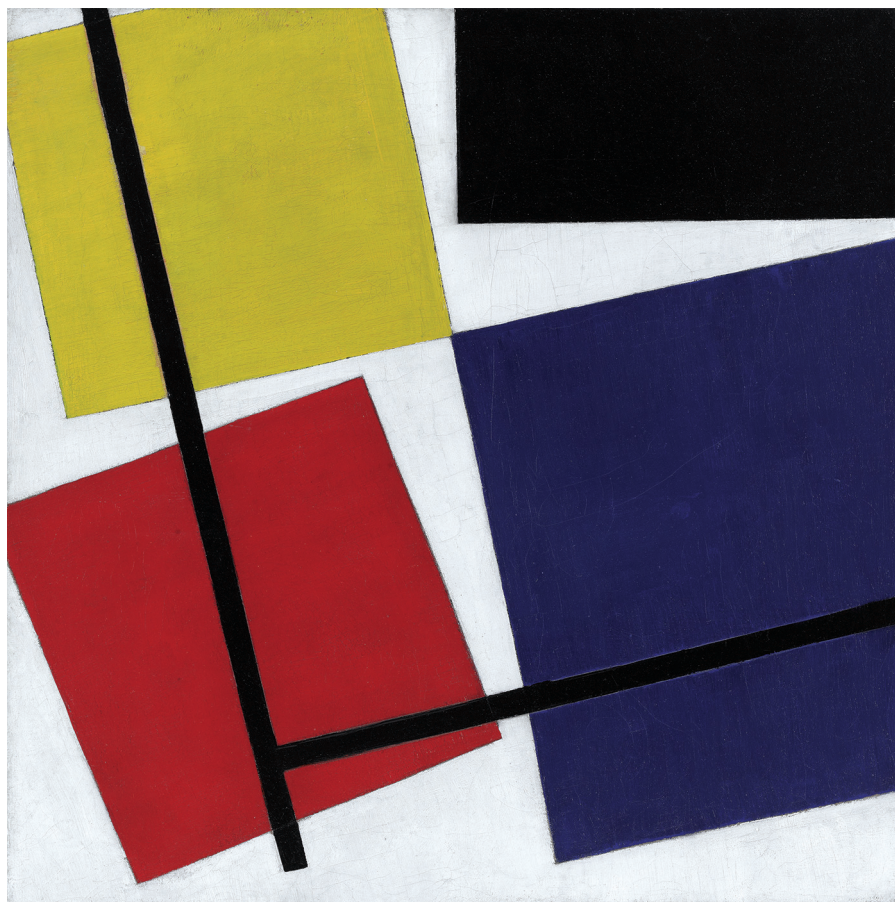


Plate 19 Theo van Doesburg, *Simultane contra-compositie* (Simultaneous Counter-Composition, 1930), a non-objective geometric abstract oil painting. A prime example of Art Concret, that is a type of non-objective abstract art that refers to nothing but itself. The use of black, blue, red, white and yellow is clearly indebted to the Constructivist programme of De Stijl, which prescribed the exclusive use of primary colours.



Plate 20 Giorgio de Chirico, *L'Énigme d'une journée* (The Enigma of a Day, 1914). A dreamlike landscape that tests the boundaries of verisimilitude and human reasoning to suggest that certain truths exist outside of us. An example of Metaphysical Painting, also practiced by Carlo Carrà, which sought to uncover the mysterious aspects of the world by bringing familiar elements together, often using unnaturally stark contrasts, in estranging constellations. This painting was particularly admired by French Surrealists, who used to discuss it at length and shared their phantasies about it. The image of the modern train protruding the dream would also reoccur in many Surrealist works of a later date.

Plate 21 Salvador Dalí, *La Persistència de la memòria* (The Persistence of Memory, 1931). This small oil painting, which has been interpreted in a variety of ways (from a self-portrait to an exploration of the *vanitas* motif), offers a nice illustration of Dalí's paranoiac-critical method, of self-inducing hallucinations in an attempt to access the subconscious.

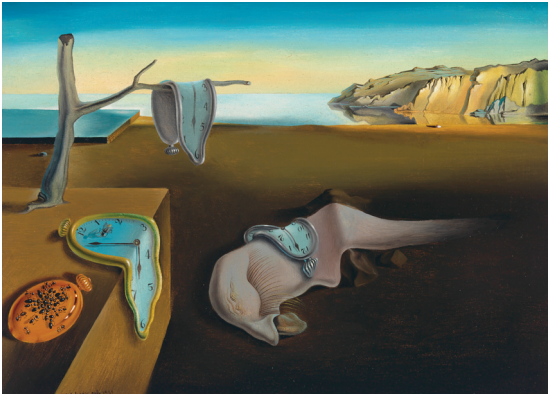


Plate 22 Alberto Giacometti, *L'Heure des traces* (The Hour of the Traces, 1932). Painted plaster and metal. A late Surrealist sculpture of Giacometti, which like Dalí's *La Persistència de la memòria* and many other works discussed in this book, appears to invite us to reconsider our shared experience and understanding of time.





Plate 23 Srečko Kosovel, *Leteča ladja* (Flying Ship, ca. 1926). The Slovenian poet Kosovel was of key importance to the development of the avant-gardes in the Karst region. Most of his work (spanning Expressionism, Dadaism and Constructivism) was published only (long) after he died at the age of 22, but his known work offered many others a model to follow. Like many, Kosovel had high hopes in the prospect that the new Soviet society taking root in Russia could overthrow the status quo in Europe. This collage's text, in which capitalisation is mostly arbitrary, reads as follows from top left, zigzag to bottom left, then to far right: 'Flying ship / "Bloody cardinal" / elite object / the death of a human fly / republicans / for / in Balkan countries / Explosions / Orient / space / l'art vivant / a cinema hall / 9 / equality / revolution of the president of the Czechoslovak Republic / and / rapprochement between Yugoslavia and Russia Belgrade, 25 July. / a passionate woman / Parisette / Parisette / Export-index / federalists / struggle / 26 / industry / 1 / millions from Russia / Communism and sexual instincts / before the recognition of soviet Russia?' (Translation courtesy of Aleš Erjavec.)

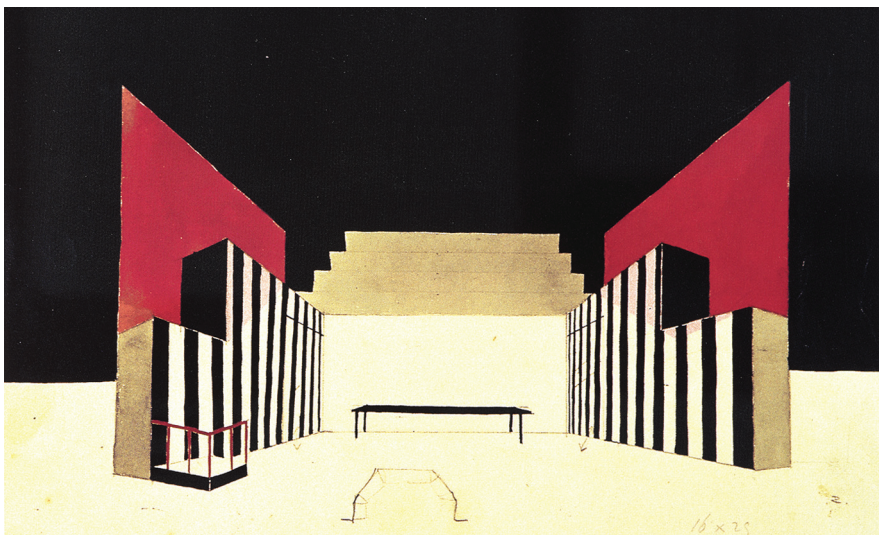


Plate 24 Zdeněk Rossmann, stage set design for the production of Otakar Jeremiáš's opera *Bratři Karamazovi* (The Brothers Karamazov), Brno, 1929. Aquarelle on paper. Rossmann, a former member of the Czech Devětsil group and a founder of the Bratislava Left Front, is known best for his work (and teaching) in typography, which followed the Constructivist model of the Bauhaus, where he was a student. His many stage set designs too, however, evince that in many areas of Europe avant-garde experimentation continued throughout the late 1920s and 1930s.