Interview. (Post)Modern Aesthetics on Trial: Revisiting a Century of Avant-Gardes

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This interview is inspired by the most important working-hypothesis presented in the volume *Aesthetic Revolutions and the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements*, edited by Aleš Erjavec, that questions the legitimacy of the distinction between aesthetic and artistic avant-gardes, supported by the relationship of each concept with the modern revolutionary politics. The relevance of this contrast for determining modernity both in its ideological shape and its continuity, in the terms of postmodernity will be criticized in our discussion with professor Erjavec, reflecting on the manner in which the artistic communities representative for Surrealism, Russian constructivism, Situationist International, Dadaism, Italian Futurism, 1960s American Art, as well as for Slovenian, Mexican or Romanian artistic movements of the 20th century opened the path for different democratic or totalitarian political attitudes, practices and ambitions.

**Oana Șerban:** Professor Erjavec, your study, “Avant-Gardes, Revolutions, and Aesthetics” which sums up the important working-hypothesis advanced by the authors of each chapter of your most recent edited volume, *Aesthetic Revolutions and the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Movements*, confronts us with an unconventional and radical new perspective on the

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revolutionary patterns of modern and contemporary art. On the one hand, you do distinguish revolutionary art from avant-gardes. On the other hand, you consider that the socially critical art – what avant-gardes mostly privileged and emphasized – is partially performed by individuals, contaminated with different political commitments and beliefs, rather than movements. Even though your argument, inspired by Courbet’s artworks, supports, in this theoretical apparatus, the main distinction between the revolutionary artistic canons of the nineteenth century from those belonging to the twentieth, such an argument might be nowadays successfully applied in understanding the politicization of art, under the following question: are the artistic revolutions the consequence, or at least, the cultural subsequent expression, of the political revolutions?

Aleš Erjavec: With your question you raise some key issues shared by avant-garde art on the one hand, and revolutionary art, and politicized art, on the other. The more social antagonisms are present, the more revolutionary and politicized are the dominant art forms and the less this role today is left to the avant-gardes. Allow me to take as an illustration not New York or Paris but the Philippines: on the one hand you find there protest and revolutionary art (promoted by art critic Alice G. Guillermo), on the other you have postcolonial theory applied to the local art (past and present) championed by art critic and historian Patrick Flores. A similar torsion is to be found in South Africa, in Taiwan, and even the Balkans. In all these places exists a tension caused by torsion of these different kinds of art. The Philippino art is thus almost socialist realist, for this is the way in which local artists express themselves within the global contemporary.

In some other instances these three kinds of art have cut in three different directions across the broad surface that we call art. On European continent revolutionary and politicized art was claimed alternatively to be modernist, to be non-modernist and sometimes to be anti-modernist. In all three instances this was art that did not fit the simple and linear schema of “things” – making it an illegitimate artistic entity within art tout court. As we know the matter becomes complicated further by the uncertainties generated by different meanings of “modernism” in different countries and epochs. It was only with the advent of postmodernism
that modernism achieved some semblance of uniformity, although such perception turned out to be short-lived. Recently I edited with Tyrus Miller an issue of *Filozofski vestnik,* Vol. XXXV, No. 2 (2014) that we publish in Ljubljana, titled “Modernism Revisited.” Articles presented there offered a totally new image of modernism – of Aborigine art seen as a part of modernism, for example.

The view taken by some Eastern European authors (such as Boris Groys), as well as by some Western ones (Benjamin Buchloh or Hal Foster for example) differs from the usual perspective of two modernisms (that include the three kinds of art mentioned above).

The two most radical avant-garde movements in the avant-garde framework were Italian futurism and Russian constructivism. Here I would wish to stress that for me “the most radical” does not automatically signify “the most artistic” or “the most aesthetic.” Although “the most radical” may signify “the most provocative,” “the most daring,” the most innovative,” and “the most contemporary,” such qualifications carry import only within specific constellations, i.e. the heavily politicized ones. Politicization means not only what Aristotle and Rancière understood by politics but also the path of politics – very much in dependence to the notion of democracy. Let me take as an example the activity of the Slovenian music group Laibach for example, that in 1980 called itself by the German name for Ljubljana, thereby recalling that it was during World War Two that Ljubljana was called by the German name for the last time. Although similar avant-garde gestures were already made by Johann Hartfelder (John Heartfield), the impact of this gesture by Laibach was still strong enough to make the Ljubljana city council prohibit the group to perform in Ljubljana under the German name. What happened? – Laibach continued to perform but under a different name, and at the same time proclaimed itself a victim of the totalitarian city council. This was both a case of politicization and – with delay – of politics. It also shows what it can mean to be avant-garde.

The autonomy/heteronomy divide was established and retained both in traditional and in avant-garde art. The heteronomous avant-garde art ended up in the politically wrong part of the art archive, although outside such an archive it strolled freely, slowly directing its
steps towards autonomy. It is such archive – kept and supported by the
grand institutions such as the Louvre and the British Museum, as well as
school curricula, histories of art and occasional plain re-awakenings of
past art – that retains the edifice called art in its place and keeps it as an
important part of culture and of various communities.

It was a great contribution of Jacques Rancière to have drawn our
attention to the fact that the dividing line between the mentioned tandem
as well as the political and the non-political is flexible and temporary.

As to the issue of artistic avant-gardes being a consequence of
political revolutions: There exists a moment (a “knot”) in the history of
most (if not all) authentic political movements in which different paths
cross and open up and in which the political and the artistic (the
“poetic”) are fused and interchangeable. This happened also in our two
countries – Romania and Slovenia in 1991 – namely, the fusion of a
political and an artistic agenda. The Kantian “enthusiasm” that such a
“moment” generated, often lasted only a short while, but still
sufficiently long to allow a new sensibility and an epochal change in our
consciousness to appear. This, then, is but a moment, as Marjorie Perloff
has called it (after Giovanni Lista), the “futurist moment” – in which the
path to the future is opened as an event. So far this event didn’t turn into
a linear historical reality. What happened instead, were once more
expectations of “exorbitant and misleading promises of an aesthetic
revolution which endeavored to transform art’s form into the forms of

Oana Șerban: Is there any distinction between aesthetic and artistic
revolutions? As it appears, the manner in which the ideologies support the
former is responsible for taking this distinction for granted. Nevertheless,
when you expose what I would call “the revolutionary rationality” of
the Italian futurism and the post-1917 Russian avant-gardes, you refer to
them as “exemplary cases of aesthetic avant-gardes”, which perform a
symptomatic need for complementing their artistic revolution by a
political one. In fact, I am more interested in how do you conceptually
distinguish artistic revolutions from aesthetic revolutions, and in how do
you identify and argue the interdependencies, not only chronologically, but
also methodologically, between artistic, aesthetic and political revolutions,
on the other hand. This very specific assumption on the historical order of an artistic revolution, followed by a political one, shows up your dedicated concern on the difficult, and yet challenging common concepts, involved by each of these “paradigm shifts”, if applying Kuhn’s definition on scientific and cultural revolutions, *in extenso*, is worthy in this context. I refer to specific concepts, such as the necessity of a revolution, its *predictability* and its *structure*. How should we consider them as components of aesthetic, artistic and political revolutions?

**Aleš Erjavec:** In my view an artistic revolution encompasses the “artistic” revolution in a traditional sense of the meaning of “art,” while the “aesthetic” involves – simplifying matters somewhat – the “artistic” fused with the “political.” To give an example: Italian futurism was an aesthetic avant-garde movement and it engendered an aesthetic revolution – demonstrating and showing the hitherto hidden or unnoticed facets of sensible reality. Let me add something very important: revolutions – aesthetic, artistic, political – are always compounds and mixtures of all three kinds of revolution.

The artistic, the political, and the aesthetic revolutions are concerned with different although interrelated aspects or segments of art and life. What each of them accomplishes is to extend and/or to change the realm of the lived world and reality, to transform our *Lebenswelt*. Today we are used to stumble upon art behind every street corner, and are therefore not so sensitive to it, its nature, and the transformations it (may) cause in our lives and in everyday experiences. In my view art carries much import in our life – not in all life and not in everybody’s, it is true – but still in a sufficient number of lives and in essential ways. Art matters – although sometimes it matters in forms that exceed (or circumvent) what we consider to be art and consider to form a part of everyday life. It is true though, that the legacy of the Frankfurt School weighs heavily upon us and often prevents us to see art instead of an infinite mass of mass culture.

**Oana Șerban:** Why should Dada be excluded from the field of those artistic revolutions that created aesthetic revolutions? Just because it proved to be the partisan of “apolitical anarchism”? 
Aleš Erjavec: Aaah, Dada. I have to admit of being insufficiently clear, for you are the second person who has criticized my position as regards Dada in the Duke book. In his review of the *Aesthetic Revolutions* book Curtis L. Carter has in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Vol. 74, No. 3 (Summer 2016), pp. 314-316) voiced a criticism similar to yours. My response to both criticisms is that while I stand by my judgment I should have made my argument more explicit. Let me explain my position now and let me do this by quoting Thierry de Duve who in this respect holds views very much similar to mine. Thierry writes: “Dada not only had no programme, it was against all programmes (...). Dada was ‘the absolute whatever’ (...). Dada never consisted of group marching in step to the same ideology.” (Quoted in *Aesthetic Revolutions*, p. 261.) Dadaism was an anarchic negation of the future. In brief, “Dadaism lacked the ‘positive’ designation characteristic of Italian futurism, constructivism, surrealism and the later avant-garde movements.” In my opinion any avant-garde requires what in 1845 G.D. Laverdant has phrased in the following way: “So that in order to know whether art fulfills with dignity its role as initiator, whether the artist is actually of the avant-garde, one must know where Humanity is going and what the destiny of our species is.” (Quoted in *Aesthetic Revolutions*, p. 263.) To summarize: the reason for my exclusion of Dada was that it lacked even vestiges of a positive program – something that all aesthetic avant-gardes possessed.

Oana Șerban: You dedicated many pages to Raciere’s considerations on the so-called unitary program of “aesthetic revolution”, distinguished by three regimes of aesthetic representation. The references, in this context, to Kant’s “aesthetic revolution” – as we see, a paradigm shift of the metaphysical discourse, in the name of rationality, following the scientific model of the Copernican revolution, to Schillers’s perspectives on the aesthetic education of the modern individual or to Foucault’s meditations on the role of representation as an ultimate form, given to the rivalry between the visible and the invisible, complete your focused analysis of what might be understood as a two main historical and, let’s say, theoretical paradigms of interpreting nowadays the aesthetic revolutions: a German and a French one. Meanwhile, you associate other
European geographical and cultural areas, such as Italy and Russia to the most important artistic movements, politically committed. However, one of the greatest outcomes of the efforts that made this collective volume possible is represented by the attempt of examining, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the manner in which the philosophical discourse, in its modern and postmodern configurations, faced almost a century of artistic movements and aesthetic revolutions. As a matter of fact, I would invite you to go back to one of the most important paragraphs of your study, which places the Marxist thought in the proximity of Ranciere’s talks on aesthetic revolutions, in order to explain it: “An aesthetic revolution may lead also to the human revolution as envisaged in the 1840s by Karl Marx: « The coming Revolution will be at once the consummation of and abolition of philosophy; no longer merely ‘formal’ and ‘political,’ it will be a ‘human’ revolution. » The human revolution is an offspring of the aesthetic paradigm.”

Aleš Erjavec: As noted, in the book that we are discussing, much attention was directed at the two most radical early avant-gardes, namely Italian futurism and Russian constructivism. Here I would like to reiterate that I do not consider these two movements to be, by being radical, necessarily artistically outstanding. No, they were of interest to me because they represent borderline cases of art – somewhat like conceptual art that analytic philosophers have continuously dissected.

As concerns Marx and the “human” revolution the situation may be less clear than it appears. We are back at the 11th thesis on Feuerbach: how does the passage from representation to transformation occur? The theoretical value of Marx’s own interpretation has often been questioned and with good reason. Recently some have argued that the manifesto supported by Searle’s theory of the construction of social reality could be interpreted as an exemplary form of “transformation,” while yet others have additionally researched the actual meaning of “life” within the constructivist setting. (Tatlin: “A brotherhood of artists and architects will be born and will create not only temples and monuments to human ideals but also complete artistic towns. To link art with life – this is the task of the new art.” (October, 1918)
Of course, this issue brings us to Leibniz, Kant’s *Ding an Sich*, and, finally, to the *Aesthetic Politics* (F.R. Ankersmit). There are unexpected but interesting theoretic links that are as of now still almost untouched.

**Oana Șerban:** You know that Lipovetsky, for example, adds to modernity and postmodernity a new cultural-historical dimension: hypermodernity. To what extent are these distinctions important for the main talk about the contrasts between aesthetic and artistic revolutions? Could they affect, until a certain point, our wide understanding on what you recognize as different “generations of avant-gardes”?

**Aleš Erjavec:** I am somewhat wary about the incessant stream of new terms. It seems that especially French authors are prone to invent new terminology, with Rancière also being one among these. One could here mention Régis Debray, Nicolas Bourriaud, and, earlier, Jean Baudrillard. Achille Bonito Oliva’s “trans-avant-garde” made to me more sense and was more needed than some of the mentioned conceptual inventions.

Terry Smith was correct in claiming that in recent past postmodernism has lost much of its conceptual value and has been swallowed up by the notion of modernism on the one hand and by that of contemporary art on the other. Postmodernism promised a lot but then failed and did not acquire long-lasting import. If we are to repeat with Hal Foster: “Whatever happened to postmodernism?” “For me” – wrote Foster in 1993 – “as for many others, postmodernism signaled a need to break with the exhausted modernism, the dominant model of which focused on the formal values of art to the neglect not only of its historical determinations but also of its transformative possibilities.” Unfortunately, it turned out, postmodernism wasn’t ready to serve as a new theoretical concept.

**Oana Șerban:** Nowadays, many art consumers are quite reticent to contemporary art, in the sense of the fine arts manifestations. As a

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3 Hal Foster, “Postmodernism in Parallax,” *October* 63 (Winter 1993, 3).
paradox, even though people are seduced by the 4D techniques that the postmodern cinema embraced, in a spectacle of multilayered and narrative reality, fewer people manifest their affinity for contemporary art, blaming it for not providing a specific meaning, for being too generous in its character of *opera aperta*, for involving the authors’ skills, but not an incontestable artistic talent, for being very easy to be done. If Robert Morris isolated the artistic quality of a work of art from its aesthetic contents, through his notorious *Declaration of Aesthetic Withdrawal*, today, people lost their confidence both in the aesthetic and in the artistic qualities of a pretended artistic object. What is the relevance, in this context, of any research on aesthetic revolutions?

**Aleš Erjavec:** You raise the question of the indifference of general public towards contemporary art. In response I would point out that the contemporary situation in art is but a continuation of that which finds its roots in the 19th century and then in the 20th with its hermetic art and its Adornian elitism. In Adorno’s time (and when confronted with the culture industry) such a position may have been necessary, but this changed later on. In other words, elitist modernist exclusivism may at that time have been useful, but only for a few decades. In 1960s a survey was made in France in which people were asked which art they considered to be “of their own time.” It turned out that they considered Picasso from 1910s to be a example of such art, while in the 19th century the public recognized art made in its own time as art of their contemporaneity. In other words, since the end of the 19th century art has continuously lagged behind its own time, so to say (or, rather, the public has). This signifies that art has taken its own path, one that is separate from developments in other realms of human existence.

It is mostly in its existential role that I see the pervasive contemporary function of art. For that of course (and as Arthur Danto has observed already in 1964) to understand what contemporary art is about, one has to be familiar with a lot of philosophical literature. To some extent such an observation applies also to Robert Morris and conceptual art.
Oana Șerban: My last question goes to you, as a specific editor of this volume. If you were to take this project from the beginning, would you change the selected topics and approaches? And, taking into account that this interview is a direct dialogue with all your readers, either as amateurs or as scholars belonging to this specific domain of aesthetics, would you confess us what do you suppose being the greatest outcome of your volume and its main insufficiency or, let’s put it otherwise, disadvantage?

Aleš Erjavec: The avant-gardes remain a void: although they have been around for more than a century, they still remain opaque and only superficially grasped by theory—even when simple empirical fact are at issue. For example, only now the special role played in the development of Russian avant-garde by anarchism is coming to light.

Now to come to your questions:

(1) Would I change the selected topics and approaches in the Duke book? No, definitely not. Earlier such an edited volume was the book *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition. Politicized Art Under Late Socialism* (Berkeley 2003, Taipei 2008). This was a volume that discussed art in Russia, China, Eastern Europe, and Cuba. I The California and the Duke books were conceived not as simple collections of articles but as if each of the books was written by a single author. In such a way I was able to cover the chosen topic as a global issue, i.e. I was able to take into consideration all the illustrative and relevant cases. In the case of *Aesthetic Revolutions* the situation was to some extent similar although less demanding. I did not want to include only the traditional western cases, which is why I have brought in Latin America and once again the NSK movement. I should also note that the Duke book should be read as a sequel to the California book.

(2) What would be the main insufficiency of the 2015 book? – The book was intended to make other researchers of the avant-garde to consider the issue of the representation/transformation of historical reality by a specific type of avant-garde action.
(3) In the two mentioned books I have introduced or expanded three notions: “aesthetic revolutions,” “aesthetic avant-garde movements” and the “third generation avant-gardes.” This last issue is very dear to me for with it I have pin-pointed down a specific type of avant-garde, i.e. one that emerged with the demise of Soviet-type socialism and then mostly vanished with the advent of parliamentary democracy.

(4) An insufficiency (a deficiency?) of the 2015 Duke book is that one of the central issues of the book, namely the passage from “interpretation” to “transformation” has so far not been sufficiently analyzed and has been demoted to the immediate future. In fact, my next book (in Slovenian) will be to some extent devoted precisely to this issue.

I shall consider the book to be a failure if in ten-year’s time no one will be familiar with the terms “third generation avant-gardes” and the “postmodern avant-gardes.” Expecting “aesthetic revolutions” to become a household word would be expecting too much – although one never knows “where Humanity is going.”

Thank you for your questions.

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