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A New Avant-Garde?

Gerald Keaney

Many artists who identify as politically committed are suspicious of art due to the Situationist argument that revolutionary art is impossible. If right, the argument also rules out a future artistic avant-garde. I believe that, by concentrating on the truth-telling possibilities of art, we can meet the Situationist argument. To do so, it is necessary to change the relationship art has to everyday life. We can then speculate on the form of a future avant-garde.

Key Words: Avant-Garde, Everyday Life, Truth, Situationist International, Surrealism

Art is dead, long live the new machine art of Tatlin!

—George Grosz and James Heartfield

Avant-gardes have refreshed society in the past, and the promise lingers that they may do so again. The Surrealists, for instance, reinvigorated cinema, produced much emulated poets like Paul Eluard, and even gave us Elsa Schiaparelli's shocking pink. Aficionados grasp hopefully at the excitement of avant-garde status for their favored forms, as we find (perhaps not unjustifiably) with Julien Temple's (2000) treatment of punk. If such a remembrance is nostalgic, it is also "nostalgia for an age yet to come," as the Buzzcocks sang in "Nostalgia."

A Dada intuition is that all art is conservative of the existing social order, and the Situationist International (1957–71) argued that revolutionary art is a *contradictio in adjecto*. Yet, without such revolutionary possibility, the ambitious sense in which something can be avant-garde remains elusive. Hope for more seems the prerogative of a time when intuitions about art had yet to calcify into sober assessment.

Avant-gardes react against existing formality (Burger 1974; Ades et al. 1993). It is then useful to follow a Kripkean strategy. At least this would allow anything with the right origins to count as art and permit an 'open' idea of art. Staged enactments of the everyday (Rasmussen 2009, 36) could be art as could an artifact like a urinal. I will assume that 'revolutionary art', if possible, uses art to encourage social revolution by telling otherwise obscured truths, much as left-wing realism has attempted to be revolutionary and Marxism itself claims to be objective. The 'avant-garde' adds

systematic formal innovation.¹ We can identify a strong lineage of twentieth-century artists. Dada, especially Berlin Dada, constructivism, surrealism, and then several smaller attempts lead up to the Situationist International.

Though the Situationists themselves gave us systematic formal innovation (especially *détournement*), they think of themselves as the last avant-garde and then only as theorists.² If it is impossible to apply 'avant-garde' to politically ambivalent artists in anything but a faddish manner, as Dada intuition about revolutionary art congeals into Situationist theory, the avant-garde seems impossible. And, perhaps as influenced by Marx, and yet quickly commodified, the avant-garde itself becomes the last Dada suicide. Certainly, after the Situationists, artists seeking radical social change through art can waver between art and its supposed antithesis: revolution.³

I will begin by arguing that the avant-garde requires art to be truthful about the possibilities of everyday living. Finally, this becomes an extension of the truth-telling required for revolutionary art, and art must be honest about its own relationship to these possibilities. To repeal the Situationists' verdict, I will argue that art can be truth-telling in the right way. This is in part because the avant-garde is not curtailed by realism ("correspondence"), and partly because it can negate denials of everyday possibility. The discussion permits speculation about a future avant-garde.

The first section examines the Situationists' argument for why revolutionary art is a contradiction. The second argues that leeway around the traditional correspondence idea of truth, suitable to an open idea of art, means that neither truth nor propositional content is problematic for the Situationist critique. The third section argues that what is problematic for the critique is that the failure of art to tell the relevant truths can be remedied. Revolutionary art is not a contradiction. This provides the departure point for speculation about future transformative art.

Art is a pharmaceutical product for imbeciles.

—Francis Picabia

Chatty treatments of the Situationists (Marcus 1989; Winterbottom 2002) are unattractive, given recently circulated source material.⁴ There the message is clear: capitalism is the society of 'The Spectacle,' fetishizing the point of purchase. Parading as no more than a thing, a fetish obscures the nature of the relations that

1. This raises the problem of conservative movements, such as Italian and British futurists who formally and systematically introduced movement into static media. For my purposes they would be neither revolutionary art nor avant-garde, but "group innovators in the area of form."

2. I will return to the problems with using the term 'avant-garde' for theory.

3. See Davidson (2009) for an example of this. Influenced by the avant-garde, the publication containing Davidson's piece, *Rivet*, is riddled with the same tension. Art should be reclaimed as useful in radical political struggle, but at the same time is inextricably linked with conservative institutions. One soon begins to wonder what the artists associated with *Rivet* think they can achieve.

4. The recently available sources include an expanded edition of important Situationist documents (Knabb 2006). Also Keehan's (2003) excellent on-line resource preserves the modified mass-media material that illustrated *Internationale situationniste*.

produced it as well as the possibility of the transformation of those relations. People are then passive consumers, conditioned in boring urban surroundings and sold pseudo innovations. The alternative is that, by controlling the entirety of the productive process, the people could make creative use of the productive means to live lives of their own invention. The Spectacle falsely conveys the idea that ‘There Is No Alternative’ to passive consumption.

The Situationists considered propositions such as “a superior society in which all of life was under the creative control of the livers is possible” to be true. Equally, central falsities include the Spectacular idea that consumerism is a satisfying practice, and that cities can enjoyably house passive consumers. Even aleatory mass media images could then be assessed as proclaiming falsehoods. An analysis of the mode of production also yields true propositions about the function of these images (Debord 1977). This contrasts with thinkers like Baudrillard or Lyotard who believe such images to be transparently playful (Plant 1992). Yet the Situationists did not always care for rigorous argument or contest specific propositions.

Art was one area in which they did (Rasmussen 2009, 35; Plant 1990). They argued that to make art is to falsely make an utterance to the effect that creativity is a specialization and cannot be the entirety of social life. This denies the truth that *joie de vivre* can be found only in generalized creativity. So-called revolutionary art is nothing more than a best-selling fetish wherein rebellion is itself commodified. Supposedly revolutionary art will then be adduced in support of false Spectacular claims (see the material on art throughout the sources already mentioned: Knabb 2006; Keehan 2003).

To arrive at the idea that revolutionary art is a contradiction in terms, let us first consider how the Situationists thought art was doomed to be untruthful. The earlier avant-garde was already dedicated to remaking daily life creatively. Though paradigmatically modernist, their formal innovations attempted to push the boundaries of creativity into daily life (Burger 1974; Vaneigem 2001). The Surrealists, for instance, believed that art could utter truths about preconscious potential in the cause of rendering daily life dreamy (Breton 1998a; Wollen 1989). The Dadas thought that art failed to tell it like it was, about the trenches as much as about the restrictive inanity of workaday society and daily life.

From the Situationist perspective, both Dada and surrealism enjoyed a heroic phase when they refused to be silenced by art institutions. These institutions also eventually recuperated both movements, and the Situationists believed such recuperation was inevitable. Any genuine insights that previous movements had about the transformation of daily life were pretheoretic or early attempts at theorizing. Converted into art, these insights were implicitly addended with false propositions: it was “older art,” not passive consumption, that was the problem;⁵ creative fulfillment within the Spectacle is available to the “hip.” The problem here is not just the ill-fitting airs of revolutionary art. All art represents itself as a specialization in creativity outside the everyday, and all art can be commodified even if at a later date. We can then isolate a

5. This propositional view of art will be further discussed in the next section since it certainly would be strange to reduce art to true or false propositions. I am assuming that propositions are truth bearers; propositions are what can be true or false.

proposition $\hat{\theta}$, both conjuncts of which are false by Marxist lights, and which the Situationists believed all art effectively uttered:

$\hat{\theta}$: Creativity must take a commodified and specialized form.

Thus, the Situationists thought of themselves as ending the avant-garde and such specialization (see especially the material on art in Keehan 2003 *passim*). For the Situationists, the link between falsity and art was stronger than for their predecessors. In particular, the surrealists thought it possible for art to tell the uncomfortable truth. They believed they produced a revolutionary art, or, as painter Max Ernst subtitled one of his works, a “revolution by night.” The Situationists thought that as a crucial part of Spectacular falsehood, art is systematically false.

Art is a lie that brings us closer to the truth.

—Pablo Picasso

It could be objected that truth seeking is not the way to understand the avant-garde. Traditionally truth has been thought to be a correspondence relation. This requires structural similarity between the truth bearer and the world (Glanzberg 2006, sec. 1.1, pt. 2). Wittgenstein (1922) used pre-modern art to provide us with a picture theory of how this worked. Representational artworks become paradigmatic truth bearers or “mirrors of nature.” These works also come to seem paradigmatically true. Yet, for the avant-garde, endless depictions of bucolic scenes and polite society gave us a distorted view and the very realism the works espoused was inadequate. But rejecting correspondence and traditional realism does not mean rejecting truth. In fact, the form of the rejection adopted by the avant-garde can ground the Situationist arguments presented so far.

Pre-modern art attempted to instantiate a correspondence relation (Reid 1964, 321–2; Casey 1970, 352), but there are problems with thinking of correspondence in these pictorial terms. Correspondence does not require resemblance. In Morse code, beeps correspond to letters without the beeps sounding or looking like the letters. Resemblance is also a symmetrical relation since things resemble each other. Yet only a truth bearer can be or fail to be truthful, not that to which the truth bearer refers, so truthfulness is asymmetric (Casey 1970, 352–3). Where art furnished Wittgenstein with a striking image of correspondence in action, resemblance between art and the life it supposedly imitates epitomizes difficulties with the correspondence theory of truth.

Philosophers have tried to rehabilitate correspondence. Equations may “correctly” describe physical laws, being structurally similar to those laws without resemblance (353–4). However, a “third man” regress looms as the correspondence relation needs itself to be correct. We need a “correct” standard to determine if we have rightly assigned correctness to the correspondence (354); this must be correct and so on. Further, it is unclear how any correspondence clarifies or adds the formal model of truth as p is true iff p (Tarsky 1944; Horwich 1998). This is an adequacy condition for any theory of truth (Fox 2008; Glanzberg 2006, sec. 2, pt. 2 ff.). Instead of further

attempts at rehabilitating correspondence, philosophers have sought an alternative account of truth.

Any of these (see Blackburn 1999 for an overview) might be more compatible with art than correctness, since scientific equations are paradigmatic for correctness. Hegel's historicism and Heidegger's existentialism are well known (Campbell 1992, chaps. 13–4). Althusser's attempt to ground truth in a relationship to class struggle is still influential (Editors 2010). The pragmatists believe that truth is what is useful. Epistemic accounts of truth hold that truth is what ideal knowers would believe (Fox 2008). The minimum account denies that attributions of truth and falsity have any metaphysical substance, deflating “true” and “false” to semantic values enabling inference (Horwich 1998; Galnberg 2006, 5.2–5.3). So art can be true or false in a number of ways instead of just by virtue of resemblance (Reid 1964, 323; Casey 1970, 355; Roskill and Carrier 1983). Even a realistic medium could provide true or false propositions about, for instance, who was present at some event (Rosekill and Carrier 1983, ix–x; Malinas 1996)—true without necessary recourse to correspondence theory.⁶

The different theories of truth could be referenced by revolutionary artists to claim that propositions are true or false given Marxist theory. Roskill and Carrier take a Heartfield photomontage with Hitler depicted receiving cash from industrialists via one of his salutes to be “a truthful statement about Hitler's backers” (1983, xi). Equally, they examine a Watteau in which the artificial and hence false view of society is paramount. These can be taken as examples of “framing” with respect to Marxism, which “turns the concern of the relativist, that each period be considered in its own terms, back upon itself. How each culture and society articulates its sense of truth is to be seen reflected in its images in the form of forces that are at work there to uphold the status quo or that struggle emergently against it” (iix).

Without correspondence, art is no longer the ideal illustrative proposition of Wittgenstein's picture theory. This creates an initial problem if we want to attribute propositions like $\hat{\theta}$ to artworks. How, then, is art propositional? Reducing art to propositions like those in critical thinking texts would certainly discount the important ‘surface’ of the artwork. Barbara Kruger explicitly uses propositions, yet her work is also medium-driven.⁷ Beside unusual work like Kruger's, propositions are explicit only in literature (Casey 1970, 356) and even then problematically so.⁸ Fortunately, in following the avant-garde course detailed here, to be implicit is enough, and it is not necessary to reduce art to propositional content (359). Art can be taken at least to be uttering some truth-bearing propositions as well as furnishing surface experiences. As an example of how we can isolate implicit

6. Pragmatism, for instance, could suffice if it is defensible. Breton believed that James's ideas could underwrite such surrealist escapades as the “contemporary myth” of invisible, undetectable beings (1998b). Arguably, since this myth is not of the right kind, a Heideggerian account of truth, for instance, might not be compatible with it. In any case it is tempting to simply opt for the minimum account. The arguments for it are strong, and it would equally underwrite the way various forms of art might tell the truth, avoiding unhelpful complications.

7. For example, Kruger uses contrasts to portray the proposition *Your Body Is a Battleground* (collage, 1989).

8. If fiction, propositions can be true as well as false only under interpretation (Ellis 1974).

propositions, the Situationists determined ∂ is present in art by critiquing the Spectacle.

For the Situationists, the surface experiences of art were real enough, but the sensual mechanisms involved could and should (to avoid ∂) be used in recreation of the entirety of the social space. The results would be the Constructed Situations after which the group was named (Debord 2006). So it is unnecessary to give an exhaustive analysis of truth in art or to rule out the surface effects for the avant-garde approach. There are no semantic reasons to doubt that art utters ∂ , but there may be reasons to doubt it has to.

Revolution by Negation

This doubt causes problems for the Situationist critique of art. Consider how, on an open idea of art, artwork seems ineluctable. Even a humble urinal was elevated to art status in the company of the avant-garde. Flamboyant Situationist tracts and *détournement*, including cut-up city maps, all have the right kind of origins to be regarded as art.

This gives us an idea how we might rethink the Situationist accusation that all art effectively utters ∂ . In their tracts, the Situationists not only utter ∂ but deny it is true, so they preface ∂ with a negation sign. Any art aspiring to be revolutionary could do the same. No doubt so long as the Spectacle exists, art will be fending off a double negation of ∂ accomplished by, for instance, placing art that utters $\sim\partial$ in a trendy gallery (giving $\sim\sim\partial$). But even so, there is no assurance that at any point in time informed art will fail to utter $\sim\partial$. What we could have is more like a Hegelian struggle for truth involving the negation of previous negations.⁹

The approach makes sense of Situationist interventions. Michele Bernstein mass circulated her straightforwardly anti-Spectacle potboiler (Bernstein 2008). Malcolm McClaren claimed Debord had rung him and thanked him for getting the Sex Pistols song “God Save the Queen” to number one (Agiugah and Tschudin 2000). Granted the do-it-yourself context of the song, implicitly “God Save the Queen” might be taken to be uttering $\sim\partial$.¹⁰ The Dadas knew that conservative institutions dictate what artists produce, and thought it was difficult for art to tell the truth. But no, even in commercial contexts, more than the pressures exerted by the Spectacle does this mean art must fail to utter $\sim\partial$. Social realism may no longer be enough to be

9. Initially we would have a dialectic where art utters ∂ , the antithetical Situationist response is no art and no utterance, and the synthesis is art uttering $\sim\partial$. This dialectic would then form the starting point for another in which the synthesis was the negation of the difference between art and life. Woollen shows how this is the prime attraction of Hegel for the avant-garde (1989). See Hegel (1977) for how such dialectic pans out more broadly.

10. We should note that, as the single rocketed up the charts, The Sex Pistols signed to a multinational record company rather than engaging in do-it-yourself praxis. However, the broader context of the band included groups of people involved in do-it-yourself creativity such as the Bromley Contingent, initially, at least, creating their own fashions, dances, and publications, while the Sex Pistols mocked and attempted to swindle companies such as Virgin and EMI. Marcus (1989) has some details.

revolutionary, but art does not have to mislead us about the possibilities of everyday life.

Conclusion: The Next Avant-Garde?

So there can be revolutionary art, and we can now undertake some concluding speculations about the form of a new avant-garde. Concrete examples are hard to come by since this avant-garde is yet to exist, but there can be a new avant-garde if revolutionary art includes systematic formal innovation.

Consider a short recent intervention on the subject of a new humanities by Paul Magee. He begins with climate change, noting that metaphors of economic growth suffer by contrast with the scientific facts of ecological destruction. His diagnosis: “poststructuralist arguments based on the idea ‘that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as objective truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint ...’ as ... attacks upon objective truth concern scientific truth-claims ... [are] embarrassing” (2009, 455). The debate over whether creationism should be taught further justifies Magee’s contention. Yet it is awkward to apply “avant-garde” to theorizing. Formal innovation does not have an obvious corollary in theory. The lack of creativity in daily life might be redressed directly by innovation (e.g., more exploratory punk fashion and graffiti art are attempts). At best, theorizing would reflect, owl-like, on the redress. But granted the avant-garde is truth-seeking, it must agree with Magee. Poststructuralism could not inform a new artistic avant-garde, as influential as it has been since Warhol.

There are two ways to utter $\sim\partial$ and so satisfy the precondition of being revolutionary: explicitly or implicitly. If artists took up the explicit option, self-reference would be mandatory. Neoism is an indicator of how this might work, a movement interested in the editorial presentation of propositions of which could include $\sim\partial$.¹¹ Implicitly, a Brechtian alienation effect is promising. Films along the lines of *Being John Malkovich* or *The Truman Show* could be at least revolutionary art if truth telling about society and $\sim\partial$ replaced any relativist ideas. The films could be avant-garde if part of a concerted exploration of form. Do-it-yourself rebellion could be either explicitly or implicitly truthful (hence revolutionary), and it suffers few formal constraints (hence avant-garde). The best of punk are preliminary indicators of how this might work—perhaps Nick Cave’s humorous self-deprecation (sometimes explicitly $\sim\partial$) or Jordan’s over the top fashion (implicitly $\sim\partial$). Zines may be better indicators still (Black 1994).¹²

11. Use of propositions and argument may be one thing physicist David Bohm has in mind when he advocates that art move away from symbolism (1998).

12. Black argues that zines have more content and that underground artists have more room to be both truthful and formally investigative than “alternative” figures in the entertainment industry. Findlay’s (2009) documentation of some unrecognized Australian do-it-yourself performance groups (e.g., Splinters Theatre of the Spectacle) suggests dramatic and innovative on-the-street statements of $\sim\partial$.

Again, though, the new avant-garde does not yet exist. Indeed, we find content is often lacking in Neoism.¹³ This problem could be remedied by concentrating not just on $\sim\emptyset$ but on the importance of argument, an advance on the declamations of *détournement*. The aestheticization of formal logic would be a natural addition to the Neoist arsenal. Do-it-yourself is also often unreflective. This problem could be addressed if DIY as a learning process (see Keaney and Keaney 2007) aimed to be revolutionary and then avant-garde.

There is no reason Marxist framing has to exclude other truth-seeking framings, such as a Darwinist one.¹⁴ Julie Rrap, for instance, already uses computer-manipulated graphics to contest the overuse of neo-Darwinism. She does not seem interested in $\sim\emptyset$, so could fail to be revolutionary. Even so, truth-seeking artists like her are not doomed to failure.

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13. For instance, the confused *Rivet* publication referenced earlier had a Neoist flavor.

14. Though he is not a Marxist, Richard Dawkins (1998) has in mind a future art in which science, not religion, provides the frame of reference.

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