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## On the Avant-garde, Neo-avant-garde and the Case of Postmodernism

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Literary Studies in Poland 21, 81-106

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1989

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Stefan Morawski

## On the Avant-garde, Neo-avant-garde and the Case of Postmodernism

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More and more often we can hear voiced opinions that the neo-avant-garde has become a fashionable notion, but already over-used and meaningless. The artists, until now attached to the label of neo-avant-gardists, presently renounce such links and are determined to follow their single paths rather than move on with any herd. Charges are also being raised that the avant-garde is kept up only by inertia and undergoes external control by mass-media and their managers. Finally, the neo-avant-garde is said to pretend to be a live being but in fact it is on the verge of agony, just as the entire epoch of industrial culture, of which it is the last, outstanding product.

Outside Poland one may observe a turn towards art—often, intentionally, given a loud publicity in press—that is, a turn to expressions using well-tested means, traditional materials, finite compositions “immortalized” in the object, all this in order to check one’s own technical and artistic dexterity and win a chance for self-expressiveness along with pronounced individual creative drives. As early as the 2nd half of the 1970s I drew attention to the risk accompanying “isms” being chased by other “isms,” to barrenness of noisy advertising that is a substitute for authentic search of the sense of planned attainments, and to the doctrinal blindness which, more often than not, was in competition with unwitting deception.

I believe, nevertheless, that the judgements circulating in Poland and abroad about the decline of the phenomenon under consideration

are unjustified. Most certainly this view is grounded on a different comprehension of the latest creativity. Thus, before I approach the problem of the neo-avant-garde's bad frame of mind, it is necessary to recall and synthesize the order of things I lectured on many times from the beginning of the 1970s.<sup>1</sup>

The notion of "neo-avant-garde" cannot be understood without realizing what the preceding "avant-garde" was. There have been so many historical studies written about the latter that they could become an autonomous object of research. Numerous theoretical considerations on the subject have also cropped up. At least three researchers must be mentioned here: R. Poggioli, R. Estivals and P. Bürger. It is characteristic that these theoretical concepts were published within a period between 1962 and 1975, i.e. in the phase of the setting up of the new avant-garde which made it imperative to undertake a historico-critical analysis. There is quite a number of historiographic works concerning the new creativity, whose demarcation line is roughly put into the 2nd half of the 1950s, but these are, in general, compilations bearing features of descriptions and chronicles. Theoretical studies have been so numerous that a sizable anthology could be put together. Most often the artists themselves voiced their views, less often—critics, and least frequently—theoreticians and philosophers of art. However, it is enough to refer to the anthologies by G. Battcock, published systematically since the middle of the 1960s, and to the ambitious anthology by R. Kostelanetz, *Esthetics Contemporary* (1978). In the early 1970s, when I was starting my studies concerning the happening, conceptualism, pop- and hyper-realism—attempting to analyze these currents, isolating within their limits concrete attitudes and achievements as well as interpretation of their tendencies—such a wealth about the neo-avant-garde available nowadays was not at my disposal. I could only base my studies on documents concerning artistic praxis and commentaries (manifestoes, programmes, sometimes essays)

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<sup>1</sup> Most of these essays—after appropriate modifications—was included in my book *Na zakręcie. Od sztuki do po-sztuki (The Virage. From Art to After-art)*, Kraków 1985. Besides, cf. "Pop-art po trzydziestu latach" (Pop-art after 30 Years), [in:] *Z dziejów awangardy II*, Łódź 1989; "Mimesis i hiperrealizm", *Literatura na Świecie*, 1988, no. 3.

which added substance to it by reflecting on the artists themselves, or critics being on friendly terms with them.

My own studies on the classical neo-avant-garde and accessible dissertations led me to the following assumptions. The phenomenon of the avant-garde cannot be accounted for, assuming its continuous and universal presence in the European culture (bypassing other cultures which did not form such a notion). It is indispensable to consider the birth and transformations of this phenomenon in the historical context against the background of perturbations after the French revolutions of the civilizational, social in general and strictly esthetic-artistic nature. The avant-garde did not erupt into existence suddenly—it had its protagonists primarily in the epoch preceding it, e.g. in symbolism marked with anarchist traits and Arts and Crafts Movement, but the antecedents may be found even further back, all the way to the bohemians of the thirties and forties of the 19th century, to Baudelairian dandyism as well as the drastic programme of underscoring the ugliness of social life in the version of the early and the mature naturalists. It is already then that the canon of art putting up with reality, or idealizing it, breaks down, and it is already then that the artist becomes aware of being a pariah. It is also in that period that the idea consolidates (from young Wagner to Ruskin) to implement the ideal of social justice, among other things if not mainly, by establishing common esthetic harmony. This early formation, which I am inclined to call the proto-avant-garde, is characterized by a clear sense of alienation of the artist (against the background of economic mechanisms turning an *oeuvre* into commodity and fetishizing the relations between the makers and the recipients). It is also characterized by an acute opposition between the spontaneously developing process of democratization of culture, which entailed, i.a., trivialization and banality of artistic works subjected to the pressures of the market and tastes of the masses, and the rebellion of the masters. Avant-gardism had its roots primarily in the conflict referred to above: mass culture versus elite culture. This conflict grew stronger due to simultaneous clash of a different kind, namely, between academism and radically innovative tendencies—which, in the arrangement of the day, were, first, naturalism and

impressionism. And later on, each tendency which questioned the principle of mimesis.

The avant-garde constituted itself, however, only after experience of the *fin-de-siècle*. Social antagonisms mounted, the position of the artist was clearly and palpably threatened, culture axioms (particularly in art) in Europe were undermined by the invigorating intrusion into the artistic and intellectual circulation of non-European patterns of thinking and products (examples) of culture. The avant-garde was being born and stabilized when there was the First World War and the first unmistakable features of cultural crisis signalled their existence in an uncontroversial manner. It was amply evidenced by the concepts of O. Spengler, N. A. Bierdiayev, S. I. Witkiewicz, J. Ortega y Gasset, and also by the works of J. Joyce, R. Musil, and early T. S. Eliot. These conceptions and *oeuvres* were not homogeneous but jointly attacking the destructive forces which were unleashed by the European civilization that cultivated from the Renaissance, more and more unilaterally, the instrumental-pragmatic values. The avant-garde challenged the inherited rules of artistic creativity and, equally, all the sanctioned codes and norms. Thus, it opposed not only the trivial mass-production and not only the academic routine but also artistic schools and all other institutions which supported, as it were, the ritual character of esthetic *sacrum*. They positioned the artist in the sanctuary, isolated from the life with its maddening crowd, and supratemporal, owing to which it was safe to compensate the shortcomings and cruelties of the daily existence. Revolting against the entire system and hierarchy of values, the avant-garde was particularly sensitive to progressing disintegration of culture, yet was opposed to estheticism. Within the framework of modernism, from which the avant-garde trend emerged, the esthetising attitudes often prevailed but they found shelter in another trend which was aptly called decadentism. The latter was clearly passeistic, assuming passively the unavoidable decline of civilization. In this approach the sick souls were to be saved in the only way—i.e. by life fashioned after the work of art. Even if these two trends sometimes conflated and co-occurred in an *oeuvre* of the same author, their praxis and ideologies led in the polarized directions.

The avant-garde formation, which took shape as a type of

European subculture in the years, roughly speaking, 1905–1925, I presented in four models: *autotelic*, *revolutionary*, *heroic-catastrophic*, and *functional-utilitarian*. It would be possible, of course, to propose a different typology. Mine seems to be justified surely enough that it embraces multiplicity of artistic manifestations in all domains of art and marks what is common and most important for them. The phenomenon of the avant-garde may be characterized in the light of the adopted assumptions as a syndrome of six properties.

The first: avant-garde is featuring innovative activities (which acquire, i.a., the form of experimentation in materials, means of expression, composition, iconography, etc. The principle of mimesis is toppled, categories and kinds of art mixed, the category of beauty rejected – beauty understood as consonant harmonious structuring which gives delight to senses and satisfies the intellectual need for perfect order. There are no taboo subjects.

The second: official world outlooks are questioned. The ruling ethos is considered false, social systems—ill, institutions connected with them (especially the state with its weapons, i.e. police and armed forces)—antihuman. The faith in any religion and patriarchal gods is shaken or crumbled, there is no confidence in the philosophies known so far, the escapist-speculative ones or consisting for *ancilla auctoritatis*. Attacks are directed against manners—stagnant, puritan, supporting the collection of patriarchal-despotic rules of conduct.

The third is closely linked with the previous one by rejecting artistic and non-artistic tradition, i.e. fascination with the present and orientation on the future are accentuated. From the present such civilizational processes are chosen which promise a better future for mankind. A marked symptom of the avant-garde is the idealization of science and technology; there is a conviction bearing on them about emancipation of man not only from hunger and poverty but also from injustice and social captivity. Another manifestation of this alternative ethos is the involvement on the side of the October Revolution, or (in some rare cases) the faith in the saving power of the “return to the sources,” i.e. to dark, irrational elements rooted in the native culture, folk or national. Still other orientation—namely in the trend, painfully aware of the repeatedly oncoming historic catastrophe and refusing co-operation with totalitarian systems and access to the scientific and technological civili-

zation—the heroic effort for the sake of saving the fundamental values such as freedom and dignity. An expression of this avant-garde strategy is, i.a., revitalization of archetypes, mythologization of artistic quasi-reality. Besides, one of the possible choices is transcendence—the ultimate system of reference is the cosmic order with which psychical life and artistic expressiveness are to be in concord. Here we touch upon a feature which brings out the ideological feature of the avant-garde.

Both of these—as pointed out by K. Mannheim, the author of a classical work on ideology and utopia—can hardly be disentangled within the phases of revolutionary fervour. This was also the case of these artists in particular who reached for science and technology and for the Bolshevik Revolution not only as for decisive factors transforming, temporarily, the reality into a happier and healthier one but also for passages leading to the promised land. However, Mannheim understood ideology—and the present-day students of that problem also think that way—as rationalization of the existing state of affairs, juxtaposing it with utopia as an idea of order not implemented so far and frequently occurring as a concept of “golden age.” This everlasting order was kept in mind of only some avant-gardists. Utopism, in this sense therefore, was not a constitutive feature of this formation; nor was it the utopia of “monastic community” since the artist of the day abandoned the communes, not very numerous then, established before the First World War, and took to co-creating new societies. But, on the other hand, we may speak of the utopian tendency proper for the avant-garde, i.e. readiness to co-participation in permanently bringing the ideal of communal life corresponding to natural needs of every individual. In turn, the catastrophic model may bear witness to a negative-utopian attitude, or more precisely, to warning signals directed against naive ideologies drawing from superficial diagnosis illusory conclusions about meliorization of interpersonal relation while the socio-political hell is already present.

The forth: there is no avant-garde without intentionally underscored self-reflection, without theoretical statements. Because the world found at the outset is tumbling down—especially one’s own esthetic attitudes—it is necessary to build them anew and justify in manifestoes, programmes, dissertations. Since the sense of artistic

creativity ceased to be obvious, this fact ought to be revealed and it had to be pointed out how and why art could be legitimately validated.

The fifth: the avant-garde operates in a group fashion. Rejecting the priest-like cult of the artist, arguing with the Romantic heritage aimed at the coming of the bard-genius, the avant-garde chooses to collectively declare the “state of war” against *status quo*, although it does not downgrade creative individualities. This can be accounted for in a number of ways: as a peculiar kind of prolongation of the existence of communes or artistic clubs or as a confirmation of the final disappearance of the cultural (artistic) style before, at least, till Romanticism which combined diverse and individual creative personalities, or as an equivalent of the “collective spirit” dominating then in the socio-political sphere.

The sixth: the avant-garde is marked with a style of life filled with blasphemy and scandal which extends its real attitudes and contestation drives into the domain of manners.

All of the attributes indicated here enhance one another since they enter close relations of dependence. Thus, intended elitism follows from the described syndrome of the avant-garde features. It cut off the rebelling artists from the mass-scale philistine recipient, decrepit academics, and colleagues from the academy who remained faithful to the priestly duties of the artist. Let us stress that the avant-garde did not negate the notion of art but modified, to a large degree, its contemporary understanding. Moreover, it put to the foreground the relative autonomy of artistic activities and their eschatological potentials. Peter Bürger argues that the classical avant-garde drew conclusions from the helplessness of art and abandoned Schiller’s idea of liberation of mankind by realization of the idea of *spielender Mensch*. I believe that Bürger’s theoretical axiom runs counter to the then cultural processes and to the essential features of the formation characterized above. His mistake is based on focusing on the extreme manifestations of the avant-garde of those days—dadaism (and surrealism)—and on the Soviet productivism. It seems that these extreme manifestations, similarly to the work of M. Duchamp, were barely harbingers of what came with the next formation: the neo-avant-garde. Disrupting links with art, doubts whether artistic activity makes any sense at all, entering life

through constructive, political or engineering, activities of the artist were, in that context, amounting to attainments of great significance but it was not them that provided the shape of the classical formation of the avant-garde. The new phase of creativity, in its beginnings called, not by chance, as *neodada*, came only after 30 years. That is, after the electronic and information revolution, after defeats of macroideologies and emergence of Leviathans competing for the reign over the whole world, after the downfall of the maximalist philosophies and prevalence of the stereotype of one-dimensional man (such as described by H. Marcuse), after the theatre of the absurd, Beckett and *nouveau roman*.

If I listed the sources of civilizational and cultural transformations in a cursory manner (detailed and multisided analyses were made in the quoted book of mine) I did it in order to bring out to the fore a new situation of the artist who faced the world making it considerably difficult to continue the faith in science and technology and in political revolution plus macroideologies that were to bring mankind happiness undisturbed. T. Adorno posed a question, as it were, on the ashes of concentration camps and ruins of totalitarian systems: "How can you write poems after Auschwitz?" Then came other reflections that grew on this question. The artist—an alleged folk tribune and quasi-engineer of human souls—had a double choice: be either a courtier-propagandist or withdraw into the quiet of his household, without the slightest influence upon history which was equally, though in different edition, amoral as the history of crimes and evils masked with banal phrases about a steady progress and a march to perfect democracy. The artistic market was oversaturated with creative propositions; chances for making one's headway in this growing crowd of competitors were lesser and lesser. Manipulation by big-industry conventicles or political mass-media exerted a much stronger influence of the public than ambitious artistic production. The television mentality was formed, uniformization of information and entertainment, multiplicity and changeability of incentives led to a *global village*, announced by M. McLuhan. Successes of science coupled with technology delighted and scared artists. They delighted them with the landing of man on the moon, scared them with degradation of the natural environment and their servility to the Blakean Urizen. The importance of and respect for the

philosophical systems were ousted by the theory of information and semiotics but at the same time they were attracted by the concepts of M. Heidegger and L. Wittgenstein (in his later period) returning to the fundamental issues in metaphysics.

The new avant-garde, which I treated similarly to its predecessor in four model attitudes, tendencies and implementations (pop-art, technological, actionistic, and meta-artistic), put to a question the notion of art and any further sense of cultivating it. What, then, were the changes in the syndrome of features which we ascribed to the avant-garde formation?

Firstly, the innovative activities manifest themselves here in a totally different manner. Virtuosity, or simply, mastery understood as *techné* was abandoned when the producing of an artistic object *sensu stricto* was recognized as dispensable. Special importance was ascribed to the arrangement and the inventiveness. Form ceased to enjoy good care, any composition of a formal structure became neglected in general. The expressive properties were depreciated. In the trend of activities (happening, fluxus, performance, etc.) the making of an object stopped being essential, and in meta-art the iconic material either disappeared or consisted only for an index or diagram, not necessarily the most important one. The innovative activity is based, therefore, in this context on, above all, deleting the sense of art; the contents-form of an artistic message appears as a given world-outlook substance or the ludic element, or as some kind of non-artistic objects. Nevertheless, it ought to be stressed that the neo-avant-garde did not manage to fully come out of the area of art. Premeditated efforts were made to destroy all esthetic categories but the complete departure from composed totality did not occur even when the message was aleatoric; not all activities were deprived of expressiveness, with individuality markings retained, even when the artist kept changing his concepts and arrangements. Besides, though the iconic matter was annihilated, the artists remained inside the so-called art establishment. Fulfilling the role of an artist which was socially accepted and expected, it was necessary to give events and objects as well as reflections on the status of art the name of anti-art.

Secondly, the challenge to the current *status quo* gained strength being consolidated by the awareness of the acute crisis of the

official culture (at least for the fact that it came under attack of the youth subculture and its alternative practices in many domains of social life). One could say that the sense of lacking a home in the present-day world, alien character of its rules, norms and codes, a conviction that the artist is simply superfluous, spread on a scale never encountered before. Perhaps this is why the process of clear anarchization of world outlooks or, strictly speaking, of the attitudes of the neo-avant-garde stepped in. At the same time we observe within this formation the opposed, i.e. adaptational orientations. This means that the majority of artists, who decided to participate in mass culture or technological one, acted this way not because, as their classical predecessors, they believed in the healing power of science and technology or maintained that whatever is made on a massive scale, is serialized, banal and homely, represents the most precious values but because they considered these processes inevitable and the strongest.

Thirdly, entanglement with the present and orientation on the future came to a decidedly more polarized positions—in connection, i.a., with the above mentioned opposition of attitudes: contestation and conformism. The entire neo-avant-garde feeds on the present; it opposes tradition at least from the point of view that art must be invalidated. Responding in a mixed fashion, however, to the crisis situation within the culture dominating now, it either takes the stand outraging all utopian big or little dreams or else accentuates its utopian orientation with premeditation. This division was generally visible between the artist opting for symbiosis with mass-media, cyborgs and robots and those who exercise happenings, body performances, various kinds of actions and radically conceptualize their creativity. But even among the “technologists” we may find utopists, as R. Buckminster Fuller, prophesying the coming of “electronic democracy” and liberation of Promethean potential of man owing to the further development of pure sciences. On the other hand, not all actionists and conceptualists outline the vision of humanity that is free and just thanks to the establishment of a new ethos. In addition, this feature makes most clearly evident — and that was graspable already in the avant-garde formation—that the challenge to the world around us goes beyond esthetic boundaries.

Avant-gardism is essentially the conscious choice of an alternative

existential situation. In the neo-avant-garde formation this option is chosen differently than in the cases of W. J. Tatlin and A. M. Rodchenko, K. Malewicz and P. Mondrian. There the counteralienation impulse was being done through artistic matter, in the language of art, in order to show the prospect of moving into the non-artistic world. For productivists such a threshold was in the realm of things constructed in accord with engineering and architectural skills, for artists-metaphysicists—the transcendence revealing the structure of cosmos. The neo-avant-garde steps down on the ground prepared by philosophers, prophets, scientists, revolutionaires, mass-media managers, etc. Here it tries to test its own capabilities. The intention is the same as with the great protagonists: abolition of ideological mystification, establishing such a contact with nature and other man in order to authenticate the existence. These utopian projects are outlined, however, outside the scientific-rationalistic concept, today generally regarded as an error leading to wilderness. At this point K. Malewicz, W. Kandinsky, P. Mondrian and P. Klee are much closer to the neo-avant-garde utopia than their contemporary opponents.

Fourthly, theoretical statements characterize new creativity to a greater degree and range than before. There is nothing strange in this since the renunciation of art involved various justification for the undertaken artistic strategies. The extreme manifestation of the tendency was conceptualism reduced only to cultivation of meta-art in the form of philosophizing essays. But not all neo-avant-gardists claim it a necessary element of their creative praxis to proclaim programmes or manifestoes. It is true that they form a striking minority but they choose to act outside the word, and if they use the verbal material then it is not for the purpose of theorizing. At this moment I have in mind many happeners and actionists, who most certainly are satisfied with the presence of the already described justification for the anti-art of the type they realize themselves.

Fifthly, the group presentations increased. One's own personality was not underlined, and it was done quite intentionally. If, however, accent was put on some ingenious ideas, as for example, in the case of Ben Vautier, it was done with some parodistic distance. But it is necessary to remember that this anti-talentism and anti-

-narcissism, natural in the context of the neo-avant-garde premises assumed the searching for one's own identity. In the case of a given kind of action, the searching was much more intensive than the one available to the traditional artist through self-expression in his opus. More intensive and difficult because undertaken with an intention of casting off all masks, rejecting the social role, overcoming mediation, which consists of the processes of painting, sculpting, constructing literary fiction etc., undoubtedly accordant with the esthetic code.

Sixthly, the blasphemous-scandalizing act was the very negating of the sense of art. But in the lifestyle there appeared tendencies, noteworthy, much more drastic than in the previous formation, which prompted the opponents to speak of the bizarre, madness, irresponsibility of the neo-avant-garde. Suffice to recall the wave of nudist spectacles, "the misterium-orgy theatre" from Vienna, exhibiting of prettily packed excrements (Manzoni), public onanism (Acconci), and above all, self-inflicted wounds, and finally the suicidal demonstrations, as in the once notorious casus of R. Schwarzkogler. This dramatic experimentation with one's own body, with tragic finals at times, most forcefully testifies to the thoroughly existential rebellion of the present-day neo-avant-gardist. It is so beyond any doubt. However, if the only dignified response to the incurable cruelty of the world is to demonstrate this fact on himself, the neo-avant-garde is considered by its opponents as unconvincing or downright ridiculous.

Similarly to the avant-garde formation, the neo-avant-garde also constituted its specific subculture. In both of them the indicated properties support one another. But no one can deny that oppositions inside this syndrome are much more explicit and more acute than in the avant-garde syndrome of 1905–1925. Naturally, I do not have in mind the four distinguished models but the opposition of contestators and conformists. The existence of the latter is a permanently repeated argument against the avant-garde character of the new formation. This avant-gardism is regarded as an alleged one—particularly since every new "ism" is immediately tamed by managers and sold as the latest fashion products in the mass-media. I am not so attached to the term "neo-avant-garde" that I could not give it up, in spite of the fact that I find no better

word with which I could replace it. But the point is not in the name.

The new formation—and I want to emphasize it—is avant-garde because it fulfils the conditions that we adopted as characteristic for the previous formation but in a different way, connected with a new civilizational and cultural context. In spite of the fact that between art and anti-art and the so-called after-art there is a continuum, the new creativity forms an opposition to art cultivated traditionally. Although it is using emblems and stereotypes of mass culture, say in the pop-art and hyperrealistic trend, it is still on the other pole to this culture and retains its elitism. It mocks the academic principles of training the artists. If it accepts the present-day world in its all dimensions, then it does so with irony and distance in general giving its messages farcical or sardonic forms. If it gives in to the pressure of marchands and managers of public opinion, then right away it undertakes attempts to overcome itself, declares a new “ism,” neurotically seeks other solutions in order not to be taken over. To a large extent—it consists in a radical challenge to the *status quo* in most of its manifestations. Ambiguity of the neo-avant-garde in this respect remains, however, a fact. Hence its weaknesses, dilemmas, of which I shall speak in the subsequent fragment of this essay. Now it is enough to say that this ambiguity is the consequence of the uncertain status of neo-avant-garde, which is unable to move entirely outside the art establishment while it does not want to be, and cannot be, art. Besides, the ambiguous attitude follows from the strategy aimed at being creative (as an artist), often without seeing clearly what this creativity is to be based on, and from unusual difficulties characteristic for each world-outlook option in the current context of chaos and decomposition of macroideology. Since the neo-avant-garde choices are already found in the non-artistic area, they are subjected to the pressure of adaptive or contesting behaviours and styles of thinking ever more vividly. At any rate, the neo-avant-garde formation steadily saturated with the same civilizational stimulants, at odds with the official culture and at the same time not impervious to its radiation, keeps on living as a significant subculture of our days.

Let us reiterate the seminal statements that I introduced while

analyzing and explicating the characteristic facets of the avant-gardism.

1. In effect of socio-political and civilizational transformations occurring in Europe, USA, and later in other, historically advanced countries, art was either absorbed by the culture undergoing democratization or dominated by *academia*, or, as in opposition to these processes, it acquired an elite character. This phenomenon started from the thirties of the 19th century and was connected with the dominating position of the commodity economy in exchange and production of cultural (artistic) goods.

2. The avant-garde formation was constituting itself in the early 20th century while the opposition among the three above mentioned patterns of art gained strength. The notion of art was deeply modified by it but not relinquished. The eschatological vision of art and its autonomy – pushed into the background or invalidated in the preceding century – became fundamental principles for this formation, and their function was a global resistance put up against the axiological norms and practiced ways of human coexistence. The avant-garde frame of reference was the crisis in the European culture which was taking shape and signalling its presence.

3. The progressing decomposition of culture led to growingly acute conflicts between the artist and his employers. The utopian faith in emancipational capacities of science and technology as well as social revolution, promoting him to the role of a folk tribune and an “engineer of human souls,” turned out to be deceptive. After the Second World War, a decade later, it was replaced by other utopian projects—reaching for transcendence or communal existence, or the attitude of *homo ludens*, whereas adaptational standpoint was juxtaposed to the listed projects. It is in this shape that the neo-avant-garde formation was born and consolidated. It put the notion of art to a question.

4. Between the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde formations occurs continuity and, at the same time, discontinuity. The continuity is evidenced by announcements of the first within the temporal limits of the first formation and also by the theatre of the absurd as well as *nouveau roman* as transitional phenomena of significance, building the historical and cultural continuum. Discontinuity is based on radical rejection by the neo-avant-garde of the sanctioned

categories of esthetics and on the striking transformation of artistic practices.

5. The art undergoes gradual erosion within the framework of the neo-avant-garde practice but the latter is unable to free itself completely from esthetic categories nor undermine *art establishment*, i.e. a set of institutions regulating social roles in this field.

6. At the sources of the growing problematization of art and status of the artist we observe his mounting sense of alienation, uncertainty concerning the sense of his creativity related to total contestation of the given social order. The avant-garde artist in the field of art keeps challenging inhuman reality and struggles to humanize it and bring it home. The neo-avant-garde artist, aware of defeats and helplessness of his predecessors, carries on the same struggle within the limits of anti-art and non-artistic reality.

The above statements have been worded in such a way as if they described unique phenomena only, that is, as if they constituted *singular* statements devoid of theoretical significance. In fact, every one of them should be formulated in the following way: "Whenever it happened that..." The phenomena of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde appeared in diverse temporal and spatial contexts, however their totality forms the subcultural formation discussed here. To put it briefly, the statements concern *recurrent* facts and, therefore, they can be regarded as general statements.

The statements 1–4 are a set requiring no justification. But it is necessary to justify the latter two, which are of hypothetical character linked with the theoretical notion of the avant-garde. The last one is the leading hypothesis that is at the foundation of the assumption about decomposition of artistic praxis *sensu stricto* as well as of the notion of art. All of the above statements lead to common consequences and support one another. I take into account both the systems of artistic beliefs and an objective configuration of social relations, which induces alienation processes and the sense of dispensability of the artist. Within the framework of the totality of subjective-social activities I remember about the system of critical and theoretical beliefs accompanying the history of the avant-garde (i.e. artistic praxis) since its hatching all the way to metamorphosis of the last 3 decades.

The research results remain in the relation of (indirect) correspon-

dence<sup>2</sup> to the contents of social experience I was provided with by all the studied materials, and in the correcting relation as regards the existing main theoretical propositions (Poggioli, Bürger, Estivals, etc.). Thus, the description and analysis of the studied phenomena led me to the hypotheses propounded here and these, in turn, dictated proper systematization of the material plus the cutting out of appropriate types (structures) of the avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde as an object of examination. The theory of avant-garde, as I expound it, is essentially a critical theory of cultural deformations, mystifications and shortcomings of socialization of human existence in the spirit of Frankfurt School.<sup>3</sup> I believe that explication and understanding are not mutually exclusive. The explication of birth crystallization and transformation of the phenomenon of the avant-garde in the context of the developmental process of art, and the thought about art within the last 2 centuries, against the background and in dependence on general processes, can be made more profound owing only to hermeneutic operations. The latter render it possible to understand motivation and objectives of the artistic praxis as well as critical and theoretical ones. It would be necessary, at any rate, to say that it is not the very explanation "Where from? How? Why?" that consists for the point of arrival but the constituting of the significant totality which is the phenomenon of avant-gardism. Thus, the hermeneutic approach takes advan-

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<sup>2</sup> I borrow the term "correspondence" from J. Kmita, *Z problemów epistemologii historycznej (On the Problems of Historical Epistemology)*, Warszawa 1980, pp. 122–127. The fundamentals of my research are based, using the language of Kmita's methodology, on correspondence rules, particularly with the theory of Bürger, addressed to the same historical premises. Moreover, I think that the same relationship occurs between my concept and the inspiring work of a religious thinker H. R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (Leicester 1970) which, in accord with my premises, presents the avant-garde revolt as a symptom of decomposition of culture principles binding so far, but it departs from my assumptions on account of a different *Weltanschauung*.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. M. Horkheimer's classical dissertation "Traditionelle und kritische Theorie" (1937), [in:] *Die gesellschaftliche Funktion der Philosophie*, Frankfurt am Main 1976. Horkheimer wrote: "Die Selbsterkenntnis des Menschen in der Gegenwart ist jedoch nicht die matematische Naturwissenschaft, die als ewiger Logos erscheint, sondern die vom Interesse an vernünftigen Zuständen durchherrschte kritische Theorie der bestehenden Gesellschaft" (p. 156).

tage of studies on macro- and micro-processes within the society and history in order to uncover the sense of what forms the object of its analysis. The world-outlook assumptions are present in the artistic endeavours and attainments; no less than they cannot be eliminated in socio-philosophical and historico-philosophical considerations. That is why analyzing and explaining attitudes oriented on negation of the *status quo* or on conformism inside the neo-avant-garde formation. I sympathized with the first one, that is, brought my evaluating stands.

I am fully aware of shortcomings pertaining to the sketched above theory of the avant-garde. Primarily because even if one adopts my assumptions one can ask with justification whether it is at all possible to offer a theoretical solution of this phenomenon, i.e., whether its forms different in time and space can be linked within the limits of one subcultural formation. The problem would be much easier if the avant-gardism appeared much earlier and if one could expect that it would occur in future in analogous conditions. However, the first possibility is excluded by the socio-historical explanation carried out here as regards the phenomenon itself, and as to the second one—it is necessary to remain silent. There is no consolation in the fact that so far any other, more satisfactory, theory of the avant-garde is unknown. This has to be accepted with conscient humbleness but also realized that there are limitations imposed by the axiological studying of processes which are ongoing and which, at least partially, are of our co-authorship.

## 2

If I managed to defend the presented concept of the avant-garde transformations against the background of changes in culture, taken in general, then my considerations about the crisis situation in the neo-avant-garde movements will be more justified, and this is what I started from and now I return to. The bad frame of mind of the neo-avant-gardist, which I mentioned at the outset, seems to have 4 mutually interacting reasons.

Firstly, after the 25 years of the neo-avant-garde practice there came a natural state of weariness. It is a phenomenon only too well-known in the history of culture and art, so it would be rather

unusual if a vigorous and spontaneous movement kept on going, in the case under our scrutiny. This weariness is even more understandable because the neo-avant-garde formation was marked by a frenetic chase of "isms" and the very fact of questioning of art thus the pressure for continuous inventiveness plus shocking of the qualified recipients of art must entail creative exhaustion. Besides, intellectual demands posed by the neo-avant-gardists themselves, also contributed to this situation. After ceaseless attacks on the artistic body and also provocation addressed to the followers and sympathizers of the new creativity by means of less and less fresh manifestoes, programmes, extra-esthetic concepts – shortage and flagging of thoughtful energy was to be expected.

Secondly, the moment when promotion of a new "ism" was dropped (the seventies brought only hyperrealism, photomedia and performance, and excessive theorizing stepped in) the impression of void appeared. Artists backed away from group activities and returned to their own studios, unable to go back to cultivating art in the traditional manner but also they were uncertain whether the stakes in the neo-avant-garde they betted on were still worth playing. One could even be more acute in comments: in the face of stabilization within the neo-avant-garde formation many artists experienced the sense of the lost game because the differences between the original and the duplicated concepts, between the pioneering stimulation and the mannerism plus buffoonery, were almost gone.

Thirdly, none of the dashing declared "isms," even the most contesting ones, did survive the levelling off or some sort of neutralization in effect of the overpowering influence of mass-media. The slogan that anything that the artist conceives and declares (including delivery to exhibitions of one's carnal intimacy or even a photographed sexual intercourse with a woman who died a while before) is admitted as art turned instantly into a rule that anything is purchaseable and advertisable. Transcendence and revolution for sale, somebody's intimacy promoted in TV, protesters against *status quo* as well as opportunists subordinated to current conventions of social life, from the point of view of marchands and managers equally deserved popularization.

Fourthly, as much as the entering of technological civilization

and mass-media did not pose problems (when the artist decided to be in favour of the adaptive option), the entering of all other non-artistic practices extended the state of anxiety and risk. The socio-political involvement undoubtedly provided satisfaction and at times euphoria. However, rejecting fallible macroideologies it was necessary to tread on slimy ground, trying out commune life, usually for a short time, or building alternative institutions, barely sprouting and exposed to very serious blunders. What is most important, it was necessary to orient oneself on patient and long-lasting search for such a social model that could break up the existent Leviathans. The heroic orientation that, as the French students proclaimed in 1968, it is necessary to demand the impossible since only the present-day's impossibility is the desired reality of tomorrow, cannot veil and remove the fact that it is an option bordering with uncertainty whether this utopian project is implementable at all. The transcendent experiences, when attempts were made to authenticate them, i.e. to move from spasmodic or ecstatic psychodelic "trip" to profound religious illuminations, turned out to be generally inaccessible or accessible with enormous difficulties. Besides, they carried one away from not only social matters but also from contacts with the closest relatives which had to be built up anew and in a different way than through transcendence of the pantheistic type or through mystic epiphanies. The revolution in manners and sex brought back sense to bodily existence and nobilitated nakedness but it could be only a prelude to self-realizations of own potentials. It was similarly so with other options and projects. And at that, none configuration of this kind automatically solved the problem that the neo-avant-gardist grappled with (and still is grappling with) it: how to be creative in a specific way, i.e. to retain artistic identity and at the same time realize it outside the area of art. All in all, the neo-avant-garde in its most ambitious embodiments was meeting with the most hurting contrasts while entering life with its dilemmas and traps. Here, therefore, its weaknesses were revealed in the most dramatic way and they were multiplied by the utopian assumption that existential order could be created independently from the always mystified and mystifying ideology. This is clearly proved by defeat of outstanding artists such as, for example, J. Beuys and O. Mühl. The first one made millions

with selling out his own contestation; Mühl's commune turned into barracks.

If we look carefully at the listed reasons, it is striking that there is as much co-existence as there is antinomy. In both these manifestations one should see the reflection of tensions filling up the current structure of civilization and culture. There is little doubt that we live in the transitional era of the Alexandrian type. Conflicts swell, solutions—even the best ones—are only fragmentary and quickly become outdated. It indicates the obviousness of the lasting of the neo-avant-garde formation, which in its own way processes and condenses the mentioned tensions putting forth the same question about the sense of existence but in the light of going out of art toward non-art. Thus, the decline of “isms” bears testimony only to acquisition by the neo-avant-garde formation of static and perhaps regressive features; nevertheless, in relation to traditional artistic subculture, innovatory activities are kept up. The best proof is the return to *events* and *activities* in the *performance* movement, to pop-art (modified by conceptualist consciousness) in the hyperrealistic movement, to technological anti-art and conceptualism in photo-media. The capabilities present in that formation have not been quite used up. Let us note that complete renunciation of the frequently theorizing self-reflection is not true in reference to these 3 trends of the 1970s. As regards internalization of creative motivations, privatization of attitudes, separation from these difficult options, which I sketched out above, one should not prematurely assume that it is a common phenomenon and that those paths have been forgotten forever. The neo-avant-garde, anyway, has included such creative strategies which are based on the so-called new gnosis, on intensification of experience here and now, on intimate contacts with nature. These are, after all, emancipation projects, equally pertaining to this formation as the eschatological attitude. It is true that no “ism” was formulated in this context but *explicite* or in supposition the artist acquires a certain style of being creative as the most proper way. Such style, true, is not dogmatized but the neo-avant-garde taken *en globe*, i.e. as a subculture formation, does not tolerate dogmatism since one “ism” waives another, the competing one. So they all invalidate themselves as the sole article of the artistic breviary.

If my concept of the neo-avant-garde is convincing, there is no justification so far for saying that this formation is over. It is necessary to admit, on other hand, that its getting more static is the preliminary signal of petrification and that the noticed signs of return to cultivation of art and concentration on one's own *ego* consist for an alarm bell signalling appearance of unclear processes which in all likelihood will put an end to the neo-avant-garde's existence. In Poland such an alert was caused by T. Kantor's *Umarla klasa (Dead class)* and it marks not only an outstanding personality but also an acute artistic self-knowledge. Let us remember, however, that the past quarter of a century of the neo-avant-garde movement corresponds more or less to the time span of the avant-garde formation. If the neo-avant-garde lives longer it is because passing into a new and unknown epoch is much more entangled and incomparably more difficult. The neo-avant-garde closes a cultural cycle, it develops what appeared only as a germ in the avant-garde but it also announces something that is ungraspable as of today. The historical lesson tells us that, after the drying up of inspirations for the avant-garde, its traces and influences functioned in the meantime (theatre of the absurd, Beckett, *nouveau roman*) and did not die even during the 1950s and 1960s when the new formation already took shape. Thus most certainly the new artistic subculture of the 1955–1980 period will not, possibly, disappear entirely within the next 2 decades even if it grows rigid and loses its *elan vital*. At any rate, it is not up to us to pass a death verdict for it. It would be, anyway, an indirect sentence for our tragic and entangled experience of the time of historical Golgotha and civilizational convulsions.

This syndrome of Golgotha and convulsions gave birth to the postmodernism, the phenomenon unusually fashionable from the beginning of the 1980s and already boasting a considerable number of bibliographical items. As we know, the notion itself and its accompanying term are at least half a century old. But the approach, presently followed by various quarters promoting it today, was introduced by American scholars and critics I. Howe, H. Lewin and L. Fiedler between 1959 and 1960. They defended the position that the visible degradation of the high culture circulation for the benefit of mass-media and artistic culture coupled with them under-

mines the foundations and principles of the modernist orientation. During the last decade this notion was linked with a set of elements which I already characterized as the neo-avant-garde, i.e. simultaneously continuing and clearly modifying anything that was proper of the trend known as modernism. Such an attitude to the problem under consideration was taken by Dick Higgins, an artist and theoretician, in his *A Dialectic of Centuries* (1978) and also Matei Calinescu in *Faces of Modernity* (1977). Ihab Hassan, who had contributed much to the career of the notion of postmodernism, moved in the same direction—from *Paracriticisms* (1975) to *The Right Promethean Fire* (1980) — juxtaposing the new phenomenon and modernism, which embraces, according to the quoted works, the classical avant-garde of the 20th century. Thus, in Hassan's views, postmodernism as a cultural subformation of our times embraced, i.a., the neo-avant-garde movements. The clear substantive and temporal contours, however, have been blurred and equivocated by the same author in his latest books, i.e. introduction to *Innovation/Renovation. New Perspectives in the Humanities* (1983) and *The Postmodern Trend* (1987). Undoubtedly, Hassan deserves the credit for focusing our attention on the fact that postmodernism is ungraspable in a way other than aporetic (technophiles versus technophobes, new gnostics versus bards of Scientific Reason—now incorporated mainly with the semiotic theory as a matrix of solid knowledge—conformists versus destructors of *status quo* and visionaries of a new deal). He pointed out also that it consists for a general-culture phenomenon which cannot be reduced only to creativity that is called artistic regardless whether this qualification raises doubts or even objections. It is characteristic that philosophers rushed in with support for this new trend, mainly those of the latest Paris school which rooted itself also in the USA presently. Primarily I have in mind Jacques Derrida as well as G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, J. F. Lyotard and J. Baudrillard, although the latter assesses differently the same testimonies of current civilization and culture. In the philosophical sense postmodernism rejects (in accordance with the assumptions of the mentioned Parisian school of thought) classical categories of substance, beginning, telos, etc. for the sake of intertextual play. Treating philosophical reflection as critical-literary one or just the writer's self-knowledge, postmodernism in fact regards brittleness and uncertainty of philosophy's status as the object of its considerations.

Philosophy becomes self-addressing, harassed by incessant questioning as to its own identity. All in all, the reflection acquires meta-philosophical form, analogous to what conceptualism and its derivatives had already attained in the post-art.

Things are different in the case of postmodernism in the artistic sense. The term and its parallel concept underwent a significant transformation in comparison to their usage and understanding in the 70s. Then postmodernism meant the same or almost the same as neo-avant-garde. With the beginning of the 80s it started to be opposed to the whole avant-garde movement, i.e. its classical (1905–1930) and also second phase (1955–1970). This very sense overcomes the conceptual tendency to cultivating meta-art because it returns to traditional forms of expression. Its initial premise is eclecticism equally applied to content and form, equally concerning undertaken motifs and means of expression. Anything goes, even premeditated “copyrighting” of the bygone trends is permissible. This attitude has found the strongest expression in the latest creativity of architects; the base for it was provided by Ch. Jencks in his books published since the mid 1970s. Another manifestation of it is the latest trend in painting known *Neue Wilde*, that outside the FRG spread mainly in Italy. Critics, as for example, Wolfgang Faust or Achille Oliva, proclaim “hunger for paintings.” Painterly action is demanded—we are told—not only by artistic instincts but also by the old and young audiences bored with anti-art. It is not known if things are really that way. What is known, on the other hand, is that those paintings sell extremely well and their producers plus the marchands draw enormous profits from it. This creativity feeds on semi-products. Fully aware that all the criteria for a work of art are fallible, it renounces virtuosity on purpose, haunts the spectator with grotesque and farcical elements bordering on pathology, kitsch, and trivial iconosphere of folk fantasy. Its secondary value is programmed in a premeditated way. In its means of expression it resorts to expressionist tradition but cleans up expressionism of its nucleus, i.e. metaphysical aspirations and the tragic sense of human existence. *Neue Wilde* maintain that neoconservatism is worth as much as pathetic incantations about unending progress. Art is to consist for a mark of civilizational decay and an unfettered play of the artist, who paints as he pleases. It is difficult, therefore, to treat works of the most outstanding

representatives of this trend—J. Schnabel, W. Baselitz, E. Cucchi, etc. — as something better than as a very distant relative of artistic heritage. That is, rather neither post-art nor art. If postmodernism were to be based on this model of artistic undertakings, then it should be conceived as total resignation not only from utopian thinking and lasting values but also from any rebellion and attempts at wrestling with current culture and civilization. Eclecticism and impotence combined with a nihilistic attitude seem indirectly to correspond to the arguments put forth by the said philosophers. Since there are no certain systems of reference, since cognition of objective dimensions of reality is not accessible, since the only rational play is that of senses (or pictures) and continuous reinterpretation of always fragile sense of any whole (structure), since there are no other rules besides those owing to which each time the given text is organized, then the artistic creativity is condemned to noisy and artificial expressiveness. It has to draw ecstasies primarily from today's urban spectacles. Its return to tradition is perverse. It is propelled not by nostalgia for values lost or fundamental, which still have not been embodied, but by storing of heterogeneous elements in the stock of contemporariness full of hagglers. Through such returns one does not respect cultural continuity. Reversely, one cuts it in half, putting past and present into one basket. If such an approach to postmodernism is right, then a reflection is born whether hyperrealism was not in fact postmodernistic already—as was excellently shown by Jean Baudrillard.

Is then the boundary between neo-avant-garde and postmodernism sufficiently clear to be able to juxtapose these phenomena. At the most one could say — following the anthology of H. Foster, *The Antiaesthetics. Essays on Postmodernist Culture* (1983), especially the statements (*ibidem*) by Gregory Ulmer, and an earlier study by Ch. Butler *After the Wake. An Essay on the Contemporary Avant-garde* (1980)— that postmodernism in a conscious way narrowed the area of the neo-avant-garde drives and searches enclosing it mainly in the attempts to reproduce ready-made artifacts and to collide diverse types of texts. This narrowing is enhanced by another property of the neo-avant-gardism which in the present tendencies grew to acquire the central significance, namely by disrupting the contact with historical linearism, i.e. with the idea that what is last is most precious and it is a starting point for the responsible

artist. In effect of this shift of interests and attitudes the pluralism of egalitarian options is accepted as normalcy. Which turns into a merry-go-round vortex of the co-present “isms” including all traditional styles and canons. Let us stress that this tendency was not to such extent tolerated by the neo-avant-garde since it moved from one “top” movement to another of this kind and only after some years the various trends as if merged building one pattern of simultaneous diversity. An additional distinguishing feature is the neo-avant-garde’s way from art to reality whereas postmodernism took a contrary direction. Some critics say that in the postmodernist eclecticism or perverse infantilism there vibrates the nostalgia of universal and unequivocal values and that these artists enact an intuitive pilgrimage to the original sources of magic. I find such statements to consist in sheer wishful thinking. They transformed the present-day panorama—no doubt about it. But do they really drive to unearth the elemental energies? On the contrary, the postmodernism developed and enhanced these tenets of the neo-avant-garde which can exert a suicidal blow to the foundation of our culture. Among them, the cranky pluralism. The Paris philosophers comment this pluralistic opulence as a sane reflex against all forms of totalitarianism, a version of which is to be exactly the dogma of being avant-garde. Baudrillard is the only one who argues—and I agree with him—that it is perfumed trade, a mark veiling the rot fumes of social life which is uniformed, subjected to the dictatorship of replaceable impulses of advertising and already unaware of its own alienation. Hence there is, among other things, a total blurring of differences between lofty and low cultures although this programme is not always fully implemented which, at any rate, points to the neo-avant-garde pedigree of this phenomenon. Hence, finally, the parody motif that can be grasped in this syndrome. Noteworthy, the motif found its strongest expression in literature, i.e. in the well-known theorizing statements of John Barth and Umberto Eco and, what is most important, in their creative practice, similarly as in the writings of, for example, R. Federman, D. Barthelme or W. H. Gass. By the way one has to note that exactly these writers as well as consciously eclectic architects praised by Charles Jencks in his *Language of the Postmodern Architecture* (1975) were in the preceding decade the harbingers of the postmodern trend, crystallized only in the 80s. However, before they were located as

the part of the neo-avant-garde syndrome. From the vanguard point of today their importance grew to the status of the predecessors. Pondering on this phenomenon and the mentioned belles-lettres one must yet emphasize that the revival of the esthetic paradigm only seemingly reappears in all these instances. Parody and pastiche, intellectual play, hiding of the author's self and at the same time the conceptual omnipresence and omnipotence order us to conclude that here we have to do with a specific variety of the neo-avant-garde creativity not far away from, for example, the *oeuvre* of Ph. Sellers or J. Borges. Thus these latest attempts thematically respond to the same challenges and tell of a dramatic turn in civilization and culture which called into being the neo-avant-garde subformation. The identical with mine conclusions are arrived at, according to my understanding and discernment, in the highly instructive works: *Performance in Postmodern Culture*, ed. by M. Benamou and Ch. Caramello (1977), *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture*, ed. by K. Woodward (1980), and Ch. Caramello, *Silverless Mirrors, Book Self and Postmodern American Fiction* (1983).

Assuming that I succeeded to show that postmodernism, hurting and narrowing the wealth of the neo-avant-garde area, simultaneously opposes it and after all stems from it—any declarations about the death of the neo-avant-garde subformation have to be judged as premature. On the other side perfectly justified are observations pointing to the increasing weaknesses of the trend. The weaknesses were strikingly revealed and intensified by the postmodernist practice in the context of the philosophical thought, which—as Deleuze and Guattari put it—is unable to reach any roots of the world and is sentenced for intertwining bulbs (*rhizomes*) only. The Weberian “disenchantment of the world” comes close to its final boundary, i.e. its second embodiment. Namely, the intellectuals themselves proclaim bankruptcy of all emancipatory aspirations and utopian projects. Despite all above-mentioned symptoms of decline the neo-avant-garde matrix is still ready, at least from time to time, to bear the challenge with regard to *status quo* and even produce the blueprints which remain at odds with the otherwise postmodernism all-permissiveness and complacency.