

## Recuperation and the Ageing of the Avant-Garde

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The avant-garde itself has been and remains subject to interpretation, criticism, and renewal; the accusation of ‘ageing’, levelled by Theodor W. Adorno against a specific area of the avant-garde in his 1955 essay ‘The Aging of the Avant-Garde’, is just one of those criticisms. Adorno was the foremost philosopher and critical theorist of the ‘Frankfurt School’, whose writings cover broad subjects, from music to Auschwitz, from a historical-materialist perspective. Part of his considerations on art and the avant-garde, the piece argues that the latter, in its aged state, has lost the dangerous aspect it must possess: ‘[t]he aging of the New Music means nothing else than that [its] critical impulse is ebbing away. It is falling into contradiction with its own idea, the price of which is its own aesthetic substance and coherence.’<sup>1</sup>

Peter Bürger, a critical theorist specialising in aesthetics and following Adorno’s lead, writes that ‘[t]he European avant-garde movements can be defined as an attack on the status of art in bourgeois society. What is negated is [...] art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men.’<sup>2</sup> He goes on to explain how, since these heady days of the early twentieth century, the avant-garde has itself become an institution, unable to maintain the same level of criticism and subversion it once had. He writes that ‘[s]ince now the protest of the historical avant-garde against art as an institution is accepted as art, the gesture of protest of the neo-avant-garde becomes inauthentic.’ Properly speaking, then, this investigation will be concerned with events beginning in the early days of the avant-garde with movements like Dadaism, through to the present-day institutionalised avant-garde. It will explore how the ageing that has been ascribed directly by Adorno, and laterally by Bürger, has manifested, and will suggest what it is about the avant-garde which makes such a process unavoidable and what this means today.

### I

According to Bürger, the autonomy of art from the praxis of life (the structure and activities that make up day-to-day life, the separation of work from home, etc.) instituted by Aestheticism (exemplary of what might be called *bourgeois art* in terms of its absolute compliance with the institution) was the very thing which made the avant-garde possible, and the very thing which it set its sights on to attack.<sup>3</sup> In terms of

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1 Theodor W. Adorno, ‘The Aging of the New Music’, trans. by Susan H. Gillespie, in *Essays on Music*, ed. by Richard Leppert (London: University of California Press, 2002), p. 181.

2 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), p. 49.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

the content of works and ‘artistic means’, the avant-garde is free to do what it likes, but is, as will be seen, limited in other ways.<sup>4</sup> The productive and distributive apparatus, which remains external and still exerts an influence on the avant-garde, is a harder obstacle to fight, despite its best efforts. It is for this reason that it requires examination, as a fundamental part of what causes the avant-garde to age. I will explore how it is this autonomy which itself predisposes the avant-garde to ageing. This idea is given credence by Bürger’s conception of autonomy as being born out of the fact that art had become institutionalised in bourgeois society. He writes that:

The avant-gardistes view [art’s] dissociation from the praxis of life [i.e. its autonomy] as the dominant characteristic of art in bourgeois society. One of the reasons this dissociation was possible is that Aestheticism had made the element that defines art as an institution the essential content of works.<sup>5</sup>

This, however, is simply the moment of the division of art from the praxis of life, sealing its fate of autonomy. The institution of art *precedes* this bifurcation, being itself defined as ‘the productive and distributive apparatus and also [...] the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works.’<sup>6</sup> Since the institution is defined in part by the productive and distributive apparatus, this apparatus must itself exist *externally* to art and have made art into an institution. The *internal* mediation at work is the artistic *response* to this in terms of the content of individual works, which, in taking up the institution as this content, adopts the autonomy that the material basis of the institution rendered possible. The ‘ideas about art that prevail at a given time’ are themselves the product of the nexus between the internal and external aspects of artistic production; the way in which these ideas govern reception by a *public* (whether the audience of ‘popular’ art, the avant-garde, it matters not), will be elucidated in the arguments to follow. In a world in which production and consumption is the standard model, reception will function as an aspect of the ageing of the avant-garde through gauging its ‘compatibility’ with dominant forms of consciousness.

## II

I am going to undertake a brief case study of Dadaism with a view to demonstrating an example of the process of ageing. This is not the place to paint a picture of the entire history of Dada. Rather, what is most interesting in this instance is the lengths the Dadaists went to in order to *specifically attack* the institution of art and its productive and distributive apparatus, which is precisely the behaviour ascribed to the avant-garde by Bürger. Despite these efforts, I am left with the task of demonstrating how Dadaism too succumbed to ageing. During the nineteenth century,

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., p. 49.

6 Ibid., p. 22.

revolutionary art was caught in contradictions. It could not or would not break free of the *forms* of bourgeois culture as a whole. Its content and method could become transformations of the world, but, while art remained imprisoned within the social spectacle, its transformations remained imaginary.<sup>7</sup>

The point here is that what constituted revolutionary or subversive art in the nineteenth century limited itself, or was limited, to utilising the forms of art prescribed by the capitalistic model of production and consumption. This resulted in subversive tendencies that were weakened by the bourgeois forms they adopted.<sup>8</sup> The avant-gardists attempted to subvert this mechanism. In its heyday, Tristan Tzara was one of the founders of Dada: “[t]he separation and hostility between the “world” of art and the “world” of everyday life finally exploded in Dada. “Life and art are One,” proclaimed Tzara; “the modern artist does not paint, he creates directly.”<sup>9</sup> The Dadaists opposed the idea of art *works*, creating what they termed art manifestations instead. These were artistic productions of an ephemeral nature, attempting to escape the grasp of the object that can be turned into a work, or of the concert paired with a composition, or the text produced and reproduced. Perhaps the most famous of these are Duchamp’s *Readymades*. Certainly, these *Readymades* are still *objects* (the famous *Fountain*, for instance), but they avoid fetishising the artist in the product of their labour. Duchamp’s *Fountain* is not a product of his own artistic genius, rather:

The signature, whose very purpose it is to mark what is individual in the work, that it owes its existence to this particular artist, is inscribed on an arbitrarily chosen mass product, because all claims to individual creativity are to be mocked. Duchamp’s provocation not only unmask the art market where the signature means more than the quality of the work; it radically questions the very principle of art in bourgeois society according to which the individual is considered the creator of the work of art.<sup>10</sup>

With Duchamp’s *Readymades*, the very idea of the ‘work’ is subverted, and the realities of the bourgeois art institution are brought forward and themselves made the content of the manifestation. Yet, these forms are precisely what is considered art today in the contemporary avant-garde, where installations and total abstraction are rife: “[i]f an artist today signs a stove pipe and exhibits it, that artist certainly does not denounce the art market but adapts to it.”<sup>11</sup> This consideration of such manifestations as art (in the sense of belonging to the institution, i.e. of having aged) is not limited to new manifestations in the same vein, although these would certainly lack the critical perspective afforded by Duchamp et al. Today, Duchamp’s *Fountain* itself is considered as an example of ‘art’, rather than of ‘anti-art’ as was its original purpose. This reveals another reason I elected to look at Dadaism as the exemplar of the phenomena

7 Timothy Clark, Christopher Gray, Donald Nicholson-Smith, and others, “The Revolution of Modern Art and the Modern Art of Revolution”, *libcom.org* (1967) <<http://libcom.org/library/revolution-of-modern-art-and-modern-art-of-revolution-clark-gray-nicholson-smith-radcliffe-englishsSituationists>> [accessed 4 January 2017] (para. 7 of 39).

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., para. 8 of 39.

10 Bürger, pp. 51–52.

11 Bürger, p. 52.

being discussed; it did all that it could to subvert and eschew the productive and distributive apparatus, and yet it has still succumbed to the process of ageing.

This is because art is treated as an object of consumption by virtue of the productive and distributive apparatus and it is seen as the domain of creative specialists by virtue of the autonomy it engenders as its content. Both are compatible with capital as a result of the division of labour so essential to it. The avant-gardists do not just have to break free from the material forces that restrict them but from an all-pervasive ideology of artistic production and reception that is engendered by an apparatus that actually functions according to that ideology: one of production and of consumption. While such an apparatus and such an institution is in place, Dadaism, though it undertook anti-bourgeois behaviours, was still susceptible to a culture industry that could adapt to phenomena that actually sought to undermine it *because art's institution and autonomy had made this possible*. As Debord writes,

One of the contradictions of the bourgeoisie in its phase of liquidation is that while it respects the abstract principle of intellectual and artistic creation, it at first resists actual creations, then eventually exploits them.<sup>12</sup>

Art being a distinct yet restricted 'sphere' of bourgeois society, the culture industry need only broaden its horizons and accept its self-criticism into the institution.

It is because art had become fragmented behaviour (that is, physically dispersed like rubble throughout a world whose primary interest in it was in terms of profit; sparse colour amongst the dull greyness of daily life) usually limited to hypostatisation as 'works', and access to artistic means had become restricted to those within the institution. Thus it was nigh on impossible for a comparatively small avant-garde collective to do any lasting damage to the producer-consumer relationship. Furthermore,

[The] upsurge of real, direct creativity [that characterised Dada] had its own contradictions. All the real creative possibilities of the time were dependent on the free use of its real productive forces, on the free use of its technology, from which the Dadaists, like everyone else, were excluded.<sup>13</sup>

The limitations enforced by the conditions I have described are perhaps best illustrated by a Dadaist manifestation that was perhaps one of the most successful in subverting the artistic institution. *Dada Night* involved a riotous display encouraging audience participation in artistic production, with Tzara's poem 'The Fever of the Male?' proclaiming that

the tumult is unchained hurricane frenzy siren whistles bombardment song the battle starts out sharply, half the audience applaud the protestors hold the hall in the lungs of those present nerves

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<sup>12</sup> Debord, Guy, 'Report on the Construction of Situations and on the International Situationist Tendency's Conditions of Organization and Action', trans. by Ken Knabb, in *Situationist International Anthology*, ed. by Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 1995), pp. 17-25 (p. 17).

<sup>13</sup> Clark and others, (para. 7 of 39).

are liquefied muscles Serner makes mocking gestures, sticks the scandal in his buttonhole / ferocity that wrings the neck / Interruption..<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, it was a total negation of traditional art but only on a very limited frontier. This admittedly impressive tumult of anti-bourgeois behaviour and eschewing of social norms was, by virtue of the fact that it is inscribed with a label and confined to *art*, or even *anti-art*, still not on the level of the praxis of everyday life; the producer-consumer relationship remains in place. Moreover, it is an inherently fragmentary behaviour made intrinsically artificial by its constructed nature. This fragmentary nature is ensured by the division of labour, which secludes all such behaviours within the realm of art.

Nor was Dada immune to this internal combustion. Francis Picabia, an important figure in Dada in France and the United States, withdrew from the movement in 1921, stating that '[t]he Dada spirit really only existed between 1913 and 1918[.] [...] In its desire to prolong its life, Dada has shut itself up within itself.'<sup>15</sup> As soon as artistic tendencies become ideology, that is, at a remove from the *necessity* of their critique, they lose that vital aspect: danger. Taken seriously as an art movement, Dada was dead.

### III

One of the principle components of autonomous art, particularly in music, though applicable anywhere, is the notion of art as a *work*, which, as has been seen, the Dadaists tried and ultimately failed to completely subvert. The notion of the *work* is applicable to all forms of art in its dominant as well as its experimental forms. Lydia Goehr elucidates the notion of the work-concept in *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*. While Goehr is evidently writing about music and the various intricacies of music as art play a part in her conception of the work-concept, it does allow for the illustration of a certain element of what happens when art is treated as an object of consumption. She writes that

Since 1800, works have been titled in such a way as to indicate their status as independent, self-sufficient works. Thus, some works have been given titles indicating their status as completed, individuated works, inextricably connected to their composers, and devoted to purely musical matters.<sup>16</sup>

The language Goehr uses in relation to the work-concept is telling: the words 'independent' and 'self-sufficient' are reminiscent of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, which is an aspect of the alienation essential to a society based on commodity exchange.<sup>17</sup>

However, artworks as commodities are, I assert, a special kind of commodity that enact a form of reification unique to this kind of production. Bürger writes that artworks, '[b]eing arrested at the

14 Tristan Tzara, cited in Robert Motherwell (ed.), *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (San Francisco, CA: Wittenborn, 1981), p. 240.

15 Francis Picabia, cited in Motherwell, *The Dada Painters and Poets*, p. 183.

16 Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 228.

17 Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1986), p. 165.

handicraft stage of production within a society where the division of labor and the separation of the worker from his means of production becomes increasingly the norm would thus be the actual precondition for seeing art as something special.<sup>18</sup> This is, I believe, what is referred to by Goehr's remark, referenced above: works are *inextricably linked to their composers*. The rise of art as a *work* being synonymous with the rise of commodity exchange is no accident; it is clear that art considered as a *work* in this closed, autonomous way is art considered as a *commodity*. More than that, this is a form of *reification*, wherein the *creative faculties* are reified and considered possessions of objects rather than of people. An element of free activity is, in accordance with the *division of labour* essential to capitalist society, reified and contained within objects and remains the purview of a certain privileged group of people.<sup>19</sup> These restrictions are both material and ideological.

Despite this, the artist remains, by virtue of their special kind of labour, attached to the product of that labour, through a kind of fetishisation which Duchamp attempted to avoid. Certainly, the contemplative attitude may still prevail as the artist stands before their work that has been shipped off into a world of its own; there is still an element of alienation that is occurring. However, the alienation that manifests in art is of a different kind to that of the typical commodity, which gains a life of its own separated from the hands of labour. The *work-commodity*, as I will refer to it, carries its 'labourer' with it as a fetish. This has a cataclysmic effect on the consumers, or *spectators*, of the *work-commodity*. Art is considered a 'special' kind of labour and its commodities more 'human' because it is in bourgeois society the locus of behaviours which may be seen to go against the grain to escape the mundane. This confers a special status on the producer of the work-commodity, who is carried with it, as the purveyor of *humanity* in the face of ceaseless rationalisation. However, as Adorno remarks, 'industry makes even this resistance an institution and changes it to coin. It cultivates art as a natural reserve for irrationalism, from which thought is to be excluded.'<sup>20</sup>

I argue that it is not the *artist* who finds their creative faculties objectified in art; it is obvious that their form of commodity production, while still involving an element of appropriation, does *not* possess the same level of alienated labour as that of the regular commodity producer. The alienation that manifests in the *work-commodity* is that of the *consumer* who, in standing before and contemplating the creative product, finds the creative faculties of the human confined to the object they see before them. They subsequently become alienated from their *own* creative faculties, for they do not, and cannot, take an active part in the spectacle they see before them. Therefore, because reification takes hold the hypostatisation and thus the ageing of certain modes, styles etc. can come about in changing attitudes which are not themselves predisposed to *creativity*, only *consumption*. This shows that the avant-garde, like art in general, is subject to the productive and distributive forces that give way to the institution of art and its resultant autonomy. This means that the division of labour, which is necessary to the commodity-structure and the phenomenon of reification, is allowed to exert its influence on the avant-garde. It is this

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18 Bürger, p. 36.

19 Ibid., p. 32.

20 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 426.

‘cutting off’, engendered by the division of labour, reification of creativity, and art’s resultant autonomy, which I believe creates the conditions that seal the fate of the ageing of the avant-garde.

#### IV

In ‘The Aging of the New Music’, Adorno ascribes to New Music a sense of ‘false satisfaction’, which he regards with suspicion.<sup>21</sup> In avant-garde tendencies this could constitute, for instance, the feeling that an end goal had been reached, or that some technique has been perfected, resulting in the ‘stabilization’ or *freezing* of certain techniques, which would immediately make those techniques both insular and ‘disinterested’ in their reason for being. The autonomy of art, creating artistic ‘spaces’ cut off from everyday life, brings about artistic specialists who occupy this space. Afflicted thusly, the avant-garde itself was populated by specialists. This creates a kind of *echo-chamber* wherein practice, in spite of the best efforts of each tendency’s ideologues, eventually becomes disconnected from what might be vulgarly termed *social reality*.<sup>22</sup> In the case of New Music, Adorno writes that ‘[w]hile they embrace New Music as if it were an unavoidable task, their own inculcated taste balks against it; their musical experience is not free from the element of the non-contemporaneous.’<sup>23</sup> This is an after-effect of specialisation; in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno would tout the need for a certain kind of naïveté in art, which would allow the individual artist not to be afflicted with the now useless methods and reasons of the past.<sup>24</sup> This, I argue, can *only* happen in a non-reified world, where art is not an object one contemplates, or a career one has but a vital fact of everyday life praxis.

The contemporary avant-garde, as the neo-avant-garde defined by Bürger, is comfortably at one with the institution of art in bourgeois society in that it is a wing of the culture industry and can no longer stake claim to attempting to attack the institution of art. Its claim to protest and the possession of revolutionary characteristics are fraudulent. This provides an insight into the other reactionary characteristics of the neo-avant-garde. Where Bürger claims that ‘the claim to protest can no longer be maintained’,<sup>25</sup> I assert that in its place has arisen a reactionary sphere of *recuperated activity*. We exist in a time when the *behaviours* of the avant-garde, if not their political motives, are an accepted and commodified aspect of the culture industry. This allows capital in providing the artistic ‘space’ for the neo-avant-garde to flourish without posing any danger to the productive and distributive apparatus that it has become comfortable with to recuperate, or co-opt, revolutionary tendencies within the artistic space. Art, as perhaps *the* place of ‘play’ within bourgeois society, is seen as the place where such desire for experimentation and subversion can be catered for. Free play, subversion, and experimentation become fundamental parts of a progressively nuanced culture industry, and so pose no threat.

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21 Ibid., p. 181.

22 Alannah Marie Halay, ‘Recognising Absurdity through Compositional Practice: Comparing an Avant-Garde Style with being avant garde’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Leeds, 2016).

23 Adorno, ‘The Aging of the New Music’, p. 184.

24 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 427.

25 Ibid., p. 53.

Martin Iddon characterises New Music in the present age as being a kind of subculture akin to Goth. He writes that

Certainly, there is a competitive edge, and not only that expressed through the presence of actual competitions. In the context of those competitions within the subculture, though, it will be no surprise to hear them described as having “a distinct, if complex set of rules.” This might relate to another overheard fragment of conversation, though I have heard similar comments at various new music events in various places: “Ah, so that’s what you have to write to get played around here!”<sup>26</sup>

This behaviour is not, of course, restricted only to music. In my own experience as a writer of so-called avant-garde or experimental poetry, I have been told that the best thing to do is to write ‘to’ other authors/poets, in accordance with my point about the echo chamber. This formation of style is, I assert, one of the primary reasons for the *freezing* of artistic techniques within tendencies that are supposed to provide them with a higher sense of ‘fluidity’.

The ‘specialists’ I have discussed are not simply the artists; rather, they make up each of the many subcultures (if one is to assent to Iddon’s perception of the current state of things) by being the artists themselves; the audience or readership; the critics. Further, Iddon notes that in terms of music, the *record labels* fall into the ‘specialists’ category: ‘[a] brief look over my own CD shelves suggests to me that I have a vastly higher proportion of CDs from labels like Kairos, Mode, NMC, Metier, Montaigne, Naïve, Col Legno, Accord, and Hat Hut than I do from the majors’.<sup>27</sup> This falls in line with Adorno’s identification of the functioning of the culture industry, when he writes that

Marked differentiations such as those of A and B films, or of stories in magazines in different price ranges, depend not so much on subject matter as on classifying, organizing, and labeling consumers. Something is provided for all so that none may escape[.]<sup>28</sup>

This, I believe, encompasses the state of the neo-avant-garde. A wing of the culture industry whose claim to protest is satiated and fallacious is made up of specialists whose function is either to produce or consume. The contemporary state of what remains of the avant-garde is fully complicit with the institution it once tried to subvert. It has its consumers and its producers, a relationship wholly compatible with the commodity structure of everyday life. It is, by virtue of the phenomena to which it is susceptible, easily subsumed by the culture industry. It ages and ends up on display; tired, rotting, useless. The institution neutralises subversion. Art existing as a collection of *works* in the first place allows it to do so.

<sup>26</sup> Martin Iddon, ‘What Becomes of the Avant-Guarded? New Music as Subculture’, *Circuit*, 24.3 (2014), 51-68 (p. 66).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, ‘The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception’, trans. by John Cumming, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso Books, 1997), pp. 120–167 (p. 123).

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