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SUBVERSIVE ARTISTIC STRATEGIES OF THE AVANT-GARDE AND THE CRISIS OF MODERN EXPERIENCE

Abstract: The purpose of this essay is to present several important changes in the sphere of modern experience and the strategies of the neo-avant-garde which correspond to them. Subversive practices of the avant-garde, as well as the neo-avant-garde, are inscribed in the new systems of cultural functionalization, which in many of their manifestations, on the one hand, lead to the loss of art's critical potential. On the other hand, however, the potency and the staying power of the avant-garde in its new form – despite numerous declarations of its death – lie in its critical re-immersion in contemporary human experience and in preserving the tension between engagement and critical distance characteristic of the experience of late modernity. This, however, requires the reworking of the old formulas of anti-modernist protest and the fragile alliances with postmodernism.

Keywords: neo-avant-garde, crisis of experience, subversion, cultural functionalization, artistic criticality, new materialism, facticity of experience.

1. Introduction: The gambit of the avant-garde

From the perspective of contemporary art, as well as the philosophy of art, the historical avant-garde¹ was a “time bomb” – a phenomenon whose impact became

¹ In this text, I will be using three terms: historical avant-garde, neo-avant-garde and post-avant-garde. “Historical avant-garde” will have the meaning given to the term by Peret Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde (Theorie der Avantgarde)*, and it will include Dadaists, early Surrealists, Russian avant-garde after the October Revolution, and – with some reservations – Italian Futurism, German Expressionism, and Cubism. In Bürger's view, the hallmark of the historical avant-garde was reintegrating art into life praxis. Therefore, by adopting this hallmark, Bürger effectively excludes neo-avant-garde movements (since the 1950s). For this reason, in the case of the neo-avant-garde, which I am concerned with, I will adopt the set of meanings assigned to it by Hal Foster in his canonical work *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*. According to his definition, the neo-avant-garde includes movements since the beginning of the 1960s, which used the strategies of the first avant-garde. According to Foster, these were: constructivist analysis of the object, photomontage, and ready-mades. Post-avant-garde – also following Foster as used in his discussion of postmodernism as a belated version of modernism – will mean the movements which employ the artistic strategies of the first avant-garde, but, at the same time, distance themselves from them on a meta-critical level.

apparent only in hindsight. Marc Jimenez dubs this hidden logic a “gambit”. It seemed fitting to begin with this term, not only because it literally means an opening, but also because it reflects the ambivalence and the paradoxes of the history of the avant-garde. In chess, a gambit is used as an opening strategy. It is a maneuver which consists in sacrificing a figure or a pawn in order to quickly move on to attack. According to Jimenez, in the interplay of the aesthetic and the cultural, the gambit was Duchamp’s gesture, which gave rise to the strategy of the avant-garde.

The first revolutionary avant-garde made the opening move on the “great chessboard” in the new play between the artistic (and in the background: aesthetic) and the cultural (and in the background: economic, political). If we are to remain faithful to Jimenez’s comparison, let us ask which of the “chess pieces” have been sacrificed. What was the price that the avant-garde had to pay for the famous (and according to Bürger – defining) collapse of the distance between art and life? Undoubtedly, it came at the cost of the idea of the autonomy of art developed in the course of the history of philosophical aesthetics that found its confirmation in the artistic practices of the preceding periods. It also paid with aesthetic differentiation and its criteria related to philosophical premises, as well as the formula of aesthetic and artistic criticality as an established form of distribution and management of the space of artistic practices. Duchamp’s gambit ushered in a new way of employing these practices, however, at the price of the old formulas of artistic autonomy and aesthetic criticality. Still, it is important to note that these were old formulas.

The gambit of the avant-garde was not only an intentional move on the part of a lone, genius chess player, but, in a sense, a strategy imposed by the collective subject – as much an act of freedom and protest as a gesture symptomatic of the process underlying its emergence; and by this we mean the processes of the aesthetic being absorbed by the cultural. The avant-garde, as well as neo-avant-garde, subversive practices inscribe themselves in the new systems of cultural functionalization, which in many of their manifestations, undeniably, led to the loss of art’s critical potential.

However, there is an intrinsic ambivalence to the delayed effect of the “gambit strategy” – it is both destructive (the dissolution of the principles which served as a foundation of the traditional, autonomous and critical “art world”), and constructive in its nature. The potency and the staying power of the avant-garde in its new form – despite numerous declarations of its death – lie in its critical re-immersion in contemporary human experience and in preserving the tension between engagement and critical distance characteristic of the experience of late modernity. This, however, requires the reworking of the old formulas of anti-modernist protest and fragile alliances with postmodernism. As both neo-avant-garde and post-avant-garde art with their automatism are facing the prospect of their own defeat, and philosophical aesthetics is attempting to examine the

forementioned functionalization, new sources of artistic expression, criticality and influence are found in the very image of their defeat. These new forms of the avant-garde touch the “last line of defence” that art has against cultural and institutional functionalization – its irreducible ontological autonomy and the irreducible basis of human experiences. They demonstrate the power of resistance, which constitutes the line of defence of the facticity of aesthetic experience. In other words, the artists who are known today as the post-avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde give testimony to the contemporary way of experiencing the world by the virtue of their participation in this experience as understanding and self-critical agents.

The nature of the dominant subversive strategies in neo-avant-garde art requires us, by way of introduction, to expand our view to include philosophical analyses concerning the condition of the experience of the late modern subject, albeit briefly. On the one hand, it is pointed out that the concept of experience has a primordial character and belongs to everyday language², and therefore it is impossible to eliminate the word from the register of elementary, colloquial articulations of our contacts with the world. On the other hand, however – following Simmel, Benjamin, or Adorno – the state of the late modern culture has been diagnosed as a nexus of conditions which lead to the waning, decay, or even loss of the meaning of experience. The emphasis is on the rupture between experience and lived-experience (*Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis* in Dilthey’s terminology) as a consequence of economic and social transformations (Simmel). The conception of experience as *Erfahrung* tends to highlight such important aspects of experience as its inherent relationship with sensory perception, and thus – the experiential and sensual level of cognition, its belonging to the sphere of cognition (Kant), the cumulative, often progressive nature of this cognitive process seen as filling out of a whole in time, which allows us to conceptualize this process in terms of learning. Such cognition/learning, however, is not free from the risk of error as new elements are being included in the sphere of the known and the practically tamed. This understanding of the ideal of *Erfahrung* was employed in the descriptions of modern culture by, for example, Dilthey, Husserl (phenomenology in general) or Dewey, and even Gadamer.

At the same time, philosophers such as Dilthey, Buber, and Benjamin write of the opposition between *Erfahrung* and *Erlebnis*³. Experience as lived-experience (*Erlebnis*) loses the character of a cumulatively complemented whole, and thus both its foothold in tradition (epistemic, cultural) and its subordination to the conceptual model of cognition. It pertains to a sphere which precedes conceptual

² Cf. J.W. Scott, *The Evidence of Experience*, “Critical Inquiry” 1991, vol. 17, no 4.

³ Cf. M. Jay, *Songs of Experience. Modern American and European Variation on a Universal Theme*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 2005, pp. 9-12.

cognitive objectivization, one that is socially communicable and intersubjectively conveyable. It is something direct, personal and pre-reflective. The shift of the modern formula of experience in the direction of insular, conceptually unmediated experience of the world – although indispensable and understandable in view of the cultural and philosophical opposition against the dominance of the epistemic model – remains a concern among philosophers. Is consensual solidarity possible given the state of affairs? Is it possible to preserve continuity of experience, implement the idea of *Bildung* together with its inherent post-Enlightenment project of improvement?

It enables both the lamentation, which we encountered in the introduction, that “experience” (in one of the senses of *Erfahrung*) is no longer possible and the apparently contradictory claim that we now live in a veritable “experience society” (*Erlebnisgesellschaft*)⁴. It allows us both to “appeal” to experience, as if it were always a thing in the past, and to “hunger” for it, as if it were something that one might enjoy in the future.⁵

The above observation aptly captures the ambivalence of modernity’s attitude towards experience and sets up the stage for the discussion of aesthetic experience in relation to the avant-garde. It would seem that the failure of the projects aimed at piecing experience back together (e.g. within communicative understanding, as is the case with Apple or Habermas) serves as a foundation for subversive artistic practices, which may be viewed as an artistic substitute of such projects. They offer a model of experience as oscillation between consensus and dissensus, communication and breaking its rules in favour of the idiomatic and the inarticulable. This model situates the phenomenon of the death of art in an interminable loop, which follows the logic of an “endless ending”. The moment of breaking with the traditional formula of art – the point of dissensus and the disruption of the rules of aesthetic communication is in a certain sense invalidated as it is absorbed by the cultural consensus, which, paradoxically, preserves it and endlessly renews it. As Octavio Paz aptly notes, “the tradition of the break encompasses not only the negation of tradition, but also the negation of that very break”⁶.

The purpose of this essay is to point out several important (in my view) strategies of the neo-avant-garde which led to some shifts in the modes of experiencing the world established by modernity, and which, at the same time, evidence the transformations taking place in the sphere of the late modern experience. I will indicate certain tendencies, not aspiring to present a comprehensive review of neo-avant-garde subversions.

⁴ M. Jay, whom I quote here, refers to the statement of Gerhard Schulze from *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft: Kultursoziologie der Gegenwart*, Frankfurt 1992.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶ O. Paz, *Point de convergence*, Paris, Gallimard, 1976, p. 13.

2. Towards new materiality

The uncrossable line of resistance of the experience of facticity⁷ in neo-avant-garde art has been described by many authors. There are two possible directions of interpretation – one developed by Lyotard, where the Kantian category of the sublime is reformulated with reference to Newman’s monochromes in his famous essay “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” and in his book *L`Inhumain* in reference to the fascination of the artists of late modernity with “pure materiality” (*matière immatérielle*), from Symbolism through Futurism. The common denominator that allows Lyotard to construct this analogy is touching the boundary of the visible and the representable or conceptualizable in language. This interpretation (especially in the second text) is interesting as it signals a trend in the philosophical analyses of avant-garde art which involves exploring Kant’s category of the sublime in order to give new meaning to the term “material,” and which, according to such authors Lyotard or de Man (we could also include here Rancière and Derrida), desubstantializes the metaphysical idea of matter in favour of its understanding as “pure difference”. Here is how Jacques Rancière interprets Lyotard’s idea from *L`Inhumain*:

First, matter is *pure difference*. By this is meant a difference that is not determined by any set of conceptual determinations, such as timbre or nuance, the singularity of which stands in contrast to the play of differences and determinations that which govern musical composition or the harmony of colours. Lyotard gives this irreducible material difference an unexpected name: he calls it ‘immateriality’.⁸

⁷ The meaning of the term “facticity” which I adopt here differs from its everyday use. I emphasize such properties of factual life as self-sufficiency, originary nature, and turning towards oneself in a practical dimension, its non-reflexive and a-theoretical character, which does not involve meaninglessness. Factual life is always directed towards the future and motivated by the past. It is a structure defined by new references to the future and the past; a nexus of motives and directions, which determine its sense. This sense, however, is not theoretical or predicative. Understanding the phenomenon of factual life comes in contact with what is hidden from intuition of objects, which is a sense rather than a meaning. This sense becomes accessible in the matter of sensory experience, in the reanimation of the living presence of meaning in the sensual. This dimension of the facticity of life, which is made accessible to us by artists, corresponds to the term *aisthesis*. Thanks to aesthetic experience, in particular – thanks to the experience of art – we can “touch” sense. This is because aesthetic experience transposes and extracts from semantic and symbolic sedimentations the original sensory and spatial “architectonics” of sense. What is at stake here, above all, is the internal dynamics of temporality and spatiality characteristic of the experience of the facticity of life as well as aesthetic experience and the expansiveness of aesthetic experience related to this dynamics, which increasingly appropriates the non-aesthetic.

⁸ J. Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran, Polity Press, Cambridge, Malden 2009, pp. 90-91.

Let us emphasize that we are not talking here about a quality that can be perceived by the senses, but an irreducible event of passion [*d'une passion*] – what Lyotard calls *aistheton* – and at the same time pure materiality and a “sign”. However, it is a sign in its trans-semiological sense; it refers to the reality of feeling in which the event of pure materiality acquires an affective sense. I will further add that it becomes part of our immersion in the facticity of the experience of life – affective, event-like, situated in time and space, unfolding between expectation and mourning, hope and melancholy. For Lyotard, art, in particular avant-garde art, as it constitutes its specific world of sensuality, described above, is doomed to dissensus. The inherent “tragedy of dissensus” is not alienation, as in e.g. Adorno’s view; it is not related to the strategy typical of the functioning of capitalist societies, which consists in isolating aesthetic experience for the purpose of its political, economic, and cultural functionalization. Lyotard speaks of a more fundamental dissensus inherent in the human condition. The avant-garde, which is particularly laden with this dissensuality, is more than “a child of its times – an epoch torn apart by contradictions and subjected to various forms of alienation.” Its potential also has universal value. On this point, Lyotard’s views are close to Merleau-Ponty’s, although he maintains a polemical and critical distance.

Paul de Man is another philosopher who refers to Kant’s concept of the sublime. In his *Aesthetic Ideology*, he writes – similarly to Lyotard – about the kind of experiences characterized by the impossibility of giving them meaning, about essentially a-meaningful experiences of the “material”. The irreducible line of resistance of our experience of the world against meaning, to which contemporary art gives expression, constitutes the boundary of the “material”. If the experience of the material does not consist in – as in Greenberg’s view – the modernist turn of art towards its means of representation, but rather in touching the boundaries of representation and meaning, then it becomes an important evaluative category of our contemporary experience of the world in general. It inscribes itself in the broadly understood social, cultural, and political processes of gradual loss of meanings inherited from the Western tradition (and in consequence its beliefs and ideology), that has been already “plowed over” and nihilistically reworked by postmodernist theoretical and artistic practices.

3. The problematic return to reality

In the above context, Hal Foster’s analyses of neo-avant-garde art in *The Return of the Real* seem particularly convincing. This art is not so much about engaging in a debate with mimetism – as this would impose an understanding of reality inherent in the Western strategy of representation – but rather about being reality. In other words, in reference to the earlier remarks, it deals with participating in the facticity of experience, together with its trauma, pain, joy, expectations, as well as events of “pure materiality”. Foster notes that “This shift in conception – from

reality as an effect of representation to the real as a thing of trauma – may be definitive in contemporary art, let alone in contemporary theory, fiction, and film.”⁹

The American scholar calls Surrealism “traumatic realism,” to which Pop-art displays many similarities. In this respect, his analyses of Warhol’s works, in particular his paintings from the *Death of America* series, are especially convincing. Using Lacanian tools and his own understanding of the category of the Real, he shows that in Warhol’s work, the Real tears down the veil of repetition, which results in the subject being “touched” by the painting. This touch is analyzed in reference to Roland Barthes’ “punctum”. However, in Warhol’s case, the “punctum” resides not in the detail, but in the repeated “explosions” of the painting. The traumatic effect of the impossibility of making the subject whole again (I will add: the impossibility of obtaining a wholeness of experience, described by philosophers from Dilthey to Benjamin, and expanded by Lacan’s psychoanalysis) and the various ways of referencing the Real are also characteristic of the continuations of Pop-art; it resounds in some examples of Hyperrealism, e.g. Duane Hanson and John de Andrea, the art of appropriation, or in contemporary illusionism). As for the last one, Foster points to such artists as Robert Gober, Charles Ray, Matthew Barney, Katarina Fritch, Mike Kelley, and Anette Messager¹⁰.

A large portion of contemporary art, especially anti-representational art, cuts off the umbilical cord of metaphysical obligations and in its unfulfillable longing to touch the Real and the pursuit of immediacy of experience, at the same time upholds the idea of truth/authenticity. However, as in the first avant-garde, e.g. in the case of Artaud, although contemporary neo-avant-garde’s “return of the real” undermines the principles of representation and pushes its limits, it is unable to completely depart from it. Simultaneously, it often assumes a form of aesthetic exclusivism, which is least critical of its own assumptions and philosophical affiliations.

One significant example is the exhibition which took place in 2016 at Warsaw Zachęta Gallery, where the exhibited works (e.g. a series of canvases soaked in secretions from dissection tables, a piece showing a drastic injury to the artist’s teeth, an image of sewed lips) affect our senses and neurological system as a shock, causing the spectator to experience suffering, pain, fear, and disgust. They also involve a dose of unhealthy fascination, which certainly has a lot to do with the awareness that we are dealing with something that is exhibited, and not real (analogically, Kant writes about fascinating, sublime natural phenomena, which are viewed from a safe distance). The question is whether this fascination – to announce the direction of our further argumentation – is the combination

⁹ H. Foster, *The Return of the Real. The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England 1996, p. 146.

¹⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*

of immersion in an experience and distance from participating in it so coveted by artists and aestheticians? Is the aesthetic distance not pulled into the game taking place on another, different, invisible stage that is hidden from our view?

Lacoue-Labarthe¹¹ – following Nietzsche and Freud – quite aptly notes that art’s attempts to pierce the veil of the devalued, phantom-like “truth” of reality to reach what is true, even if it were to be a shock therapy at the price of suffering (pain and abnegation), will never be sufficiently radical. It “never *presents*, as such, the suffering that it (re)presents (*darstellt*), but on the contrary presupposes a space of derealization, if you will, circumscribed in advance and thanks to which the ‘deepest pathos’ is in fact never anything but *aesthetic play*”. In a world that is conceived of as – following Nietzsche – “an aesthetic phenomenon”, “the suffering itself becomes ecstasy” under which the pain of the aesthetic experience (the thing that is unpleasant, evokes fear, repulsion or disgust, the repressed) is rewarded with an “additional profit,” a “bonus” that is a masochistic satisfaction. In this view, the kind of art whose examples I have mentioned above – triggers a conflict between the conscious and the repressed source of suffering inscribed in neurosis and becomes a psychopathological case. As a result of the dilution of the mimetic moment, the spectator is pulled into a game which contains a blind spot – a moment of risk, loss, or – in different terms – the subject of experience losing him-/herself in something that is arranged by an artist and that surpasses it.

Paraphrasing Nietzsche: If the world is a representation (a fairy-tale), then an escape from its phantom-like truth into an artistic idea of authenticity may mean not the destruction of its scene, but rather its displacement: The “truth” of thus understood artistic authenticity will play out on a primordial scene by the forces which escape the very formula of understanding. The moment of aesthetic exposition is far from being a safe position for a distanced spectator, as Kant or Schiller would have it (especially in de Man’s interpretation from *Aesthetic Ideology*).

It is not the same critical subject who used to lift the “veil of Maya,” denounce accepted forms of validity, expose the mechanism of the theatricalisation of their experience. Rather, the subject him-/herself becomes a place-scene (primordial scene as Freud would say) of a struggle between the forces of the economy of ecstasy and the death drive.

The moment of masochistic, reverse pleasure, which forces us to experience these works “regardless,” seems to deliver us, in Freud’s view, into the hands of the death drive. The aforementioned works do not belong to classical representation. They happen in a space “between libido and death”; they are exhibited, but at the same time they break with the principle of representation. “The death drive works in silence; the whole commotion of life emanates from Eros” notes Labarthe.

¹¹ Cf. Ph. Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Subject of Philosophy*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, London 1993, p. 105.

4. Ontology versus ideology; thing versus meaning

In order to place the above conceptions in the most current context, let me mention one of the many contemporary publications which raise the question of the relation between the disillusionment as to the rebirth of the declining systems of meanings (and the related axiological systems) and the contemporary turn of the artists towards materiality (as well as embodiment and affect) as the limit of the signifier/representable: Walter Ben Michaels's book entitled *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (2004). The book was written under the impression of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, and given today's pressing problem of terrorist attacks, it appears especially relevant and provides additional context for the above-mentioned problems of "materiality" in contemporary art and the interest of contemporary artists, in particular performative artists, in corporeality.

We are bound to agree with the view expressed in the book that "the point of the war on terrorism is to imagine a world no longer divided by the conflicting beliefs of ideologies or conflicting interests of nations" (p. 172). In their book *Imperium* (2005), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri – stimulated by the need to react to terrorism – raise an important issue of the discourse of globalization, where the talk of wars between ideologies and beliefs is replaced by the talk about defending life, and discourse on political conflict is replaced by talking about a biopolitical conflict (by the way this mutation of discourses is substantiated more broadly than just by the reaction against the terrorism of the 20th and 21st century, as convincingly argued by Giorgio Agamben). The view that metaphysical tradition has exhausted itself constitutes the broadest philosophical dimension of Michaels's thought, which brings it close to the "weak thought" of hermeneutic philosophy and postmodernism that originated with Nietzsche. In this discourse – mutated under the influence of world wars and terrorism – in place of beliefs we are dealing with needs and desires, and in place of ideas – with bodies. Thus, an artistic statement, e.g. of a Minimalist, aims at transforming a text into a thing, transforming meaning as an object of understanding into a thing or event as an object of experience. In short, in Michaels's own words: "Ideologies are replaced by ontology in terrorism discourse."¹² Therefore, if we can postulate today any form of universality as a weapon against terrorism, it cannot be a universality of beliefs, but rather "a potential universality of desire" or "commonality" as postulated by Judith Butler¹³. Michaels concludes that "the words you write with your own blood testify to your presence without needing to signify it."¹⁴

¹² W.B. Michaels. *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2004, p. 177.

¹³ Cf. J. Butler, E. Laclau, S. Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*, London: Verso, 2000; In *The Shape of the Signifier*, Michaels also subjects his views to a critical reconstruction, to which the reader may refer. I do not summarize it here, as it is outside the scope of the present inquiry.

¹⁴ W.B. Michaels, *The Shape of...*, p. 182.

5. Rhetorization of cultural reality: ideology versus politics

The traumatizing unattainability of the real present in neo-avant-garde art is compensated in a twofold way: either by the above mentioned preservation of the idea of authenticity as immediate experience of life (whose blind spot is succumbing to Tanatos) or by rhetorization, perspectivism and interpretationism. This poses two dangers to the neo-avant-garde: those of losing itself in “pure authenticity” of experience, or losing itself in the realm of phantasms and delusion.

The second path is one of the progressive rhetorization of modern culture. The shifts we observe in this sphere lead to the fictionalization of philosophical truth and the collapse of the stability of its discourse. As for philosophy, this is the path taken not only by Nietzsche, but also by Vattimo, Lacoue-Labarthe, Žižek/Lacan and Paul de Man.

Vattimo – following Nietzsche – calls metaphysical discourse a fairy tale. This fairy-tale quality of the philosophical story spun by the West is discussed at length by Lacoue-Labarthe. Truth is replaced by rhetorics, which orients itself towards the linguistic nature of its own practice. De Man emphasizes that this process leads to a situation in which philosophy no longer reveals the truth, but produces it. Lacoue-Labarthe speaks of excessive and self-reflexive character of rhetorical representation. The above situation – embedded in the broader processes of the erosion of metaphysical foundations – not only tints the rhetorical character of philosophical discourse with phantasmal shades of rhetoric, but does the same to the culture of late modernity. Late modern art points to itself as representation without a ground, it “plays” with illusions of reference. The rule of fiction means the birth of *homo politicus* as Labarthe excellently shows in his discussion on producing politics as a work of art in the Nazi practice, which involved manufacturing a phantasmal “reality of a dream”.

Thus, according to Foster¹⁵, both the art of appropriation and *site-specific* works (e.g. by such artists as Fred Wilson or Andrea Fraser) take part in a game with the processes of “institutional coding of art and artifacts”. They show “how objects are translated into historical evidence and/or cultural exempla, invested with value, and cathected by viewers”¹⁶. They perform a peculiar deconstruction, de-fictionalization of established positions and hierarchies, and, at the same time, cooperate with institutions (such as museums) in constructing and upholding new fictions. Foster rightly sees these activities as a fraud of cynical reason, “in which artist and institution have it both ways – retain the social status of art and entertain the moral purity of critique.”¹⁷ One other example of such strategy is Situationist *détournement*, or practices of demontage and montage – characteristic

¹⁵ Cf. H. Foster, *The Return of...*, p. 195.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

also of the historical avant-garde – which use old, existing artistic elements, take them out of their context and incorporate them in a new whole.

Another example of a subversive strategy which results in shifts towards the rhetorization of culture (in consequence – dangerously exposes it to yet another mythization and ideologization) is the idealization and mythization of the category of the Other – a peculiar “passe-partout” of political correctness and moral righteousness. On the one hand, the movement and the artistic phenomena on the side of the discriminated Otherness¹⁸ substantiate the regulative idea of cultural equality (democratization of culture), but on the other hand it is lined – as Hal Foster aptly notes – with its rhetorical reversal, which often leads to privileging the new, discriminated definition of cultural identity, and thus paradoxically subverts the idea of democratic equality.

6. Towards a new sense of artistic criticality

The turn towards the critical, or maybe merely rebellious, meaninglessness that is antithetical to the meanings of the Western culture, towards the a-semantic, non-sensical, corporeal, desire-able, material, which characterized the first avant-garde in Dadaism, Surrealism, with Artaud at its helm, in line with the “logic of the gambit” became a part of some of the contemporary varieties of the avant-garde (for example, Minimalism) and acquired new meaning in the context outlined by the above-mentioned authors. New meaning was also bestowed upon the old, early-modern (reinforced and ideologized by Romanticism) opposition between the aesthetic (emotional, sensual), and the cultural (communicable, rational, governing the rules of social and political regulation). The escape into meaninglessness, into a revolt against the established meanings and narrations became part of the defense of the autonomy of the aesthetic against the pressures of the cultural.

One unwanted result, as in the case of Dadaism and Surrealism, was the effacement of the critical dimension of this kind of artistic protests. Thus, threats to the criticality of the avant-garde came from two directions: from the side of an overly radical break with meanings and values inscribed in the Western tradition (which endangered the criteria of differentiation and evaluation in the sphere of art) and from the side of the mechanisms of the cultural assimilation of the artistic.

The new avant-garde – in its relation to technological and civilizational changes, as well as the development of mechanism of top-down cultural and social regulation – made it even more exposed to the above dangers. Today’s criticism

¹⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 178,179; Foster support his view with Franco Rella’s claim, who critically distances himself from Lacan, Foucault, Deleuze, Guattari in *The Myth of the Other*, that idealization of otherness often results not only in the effacement of differences, but also politicization: the privileging of a designated entity.

– as noted by Hal Foster – is also subject to these mechanisms of top-down regulation. He asks, therefore:

what is the place of criticism in a visual culture that is evermore administered – from an art world dominated by promotional players with scant need for criticism, to a media world of communication-and-entertainment corporations with no interest whatsoever? And what is the place of criticism in a political culture that is evermore affirmative – especially in the midst of culture wars (...)? Of course this situation makes the old services of criticism ever more urgent as well.¹⁹

Lyotard and Jimenez²⁰ write about the avant-garde – especially its later incarnations – as a playground of anonymous institutional, economic, and political forces. Duchamp's deferred gesture entails a cold calculation of the machinery of differentiation, which functions outside the criteria of style, taste, and feeling. In a sense, the gesture prefigures the paradoxical condition of contemporary art: it is something that belongs to the past and at the same time something that is current in the highest degree. In the case of Jimenez – who clearly remains under the influence of Adorno – there appears a new related context which defines the peculiar situation of the neo- and post-avant-garde art, namely the historical context which introduces a discussion with the teleological, Hegelian version of the theme of the death of art. It is an important characteristic feature of many contemporary continuators of the avant-garde: on the auto-thematic and meta-critical level, they feed on celebrating its own end as art as something that is determined by the history of Western representation.

However, this applies not only to the avant-garde. Late modern art in general is experiencing an “endless ending,” which makes it a particularly potent ground for the Hegelian motif of the death of art in its new version (one extreme example is Arthur Danto's theory, for whom the ready-made is a necessary moment of a teleologically oriented logic of history, in which art is preparing for philosophy, until it cedes its place). According to such theoreticians as Danto, Nelson Goodman, Martin Seel, and Christoph Menke, only challenging art in late modernity allows us to understand the sense of the meta-critical mechanism inscribed in the readymade. Duchamp's work is a meta-criticism of its own failure as a mimetic project; its artistic identity is constituted in the face of this failure as an expression of the critical distance towards mimetic expectations inherent in Western metaphysics. As Marc Jimenez rightly points out²¹, Adorno, in his

¹⁹ Ibid., p. xv.

²⁰ F. Lyotard, *Les transformateurs Duchamps, Galilee, Paris 1977*; M. Jimenez, *La critique. Crise de l'art ou consensus culturel?*, Paris, Klincksieck 1995.

²¹ Cf. M. Jimenez, *Ibid.*, p. 31.

concern about the fate of the avant-garde, infers that the cause of its failure was the loss of its role as a positive or negative mediator between the rationality of social totality and individual sensitivity. According to the French philosopher, late modernity is torn between the ideological promises of consensus and the conflicted reality of particular interests.

7. Conclusions

Subversiveness is an intrinsic feature of contemporary neo-avant-garde art. However, it requires a reinterpretation of contemporary experience on the level of reflection, in whose sphere all the forms of contention against a unifying and violent consensus are absorbed and upheld. Rainer Rochlitz ironically notes that the subversiveness of contemporary art reveals itself only when it appeals in this way to social consensus and profits from it. The upholding of the established order by neo-capitalism also takes place by way of stimulating the consumption of cultural goods, and thus by “opening the doors” to the heroes of the new avant-garde and its theoreticians. In this manner, subversion is subsidized by the establishment.²² Concern for the autonomy of art in the age of the cultural absorption of the aesthetic by neo-capitalist culture acquires a cynical dimension that many neo-avant-garde artists are aware of.²³

The processes of cultural democratization have a unifying potential – they mask opposition and conflicts, ruptures, nullify the criteria of criticism and differentiation (e.g. between art and non-art; good and poor works of art). These processes are fostered by the mass media revolution, which – as noted by Jimenez²⁴ – makes us unable to differentiate between fiction and reality. The space of the net is easily governed and manipulated, which deepens the chasm between its initiators and managers and the manipulated participants; between specialists with appropriate competences and the wide audience of the public media.

Following Adorno, Jimenez views artistic criticism as adopting the role of an alibi for the processes of cultural democratization, as otherwise – if it does not serve this role – it is doomed to perdition.²⁵ Here, the aesthetic and the cultural depart from each other. The results of aesthetic analysis remain in disagreement with the cultural image of a work of art or an artistic event. However, we may conclude that this discord does not necessarily mean that the aesthetic “falls into culture” (resp. politics, economy). Contemporary theorists of the neo-avant-garde do not always inscribe it into a rhetoric of failure, unfulfillable longing for what

²² Cf. R. Rochlitz, *Subversion et subvention. Art contemporain et argumentation esthétique*, Paris, Gallimard 1994.

²³ Cf. H. Foster, *The Return of...*, Chapter “The Art of Cynical Reason”.

²⁴ Cf. M. Jimenez, *Ibid.* pp. 37-38.

²⁵ Cf. T.W. Adorno, *Prismes. Critique de la culture et société*, Payot, Paris 1986.

was lost (as in the case of Adorno, or partially Benjamin), but they also note its constructive, critical, and reflective aspect: contemporary avant-garde significantly contributes to the condition of our self-awareness as the subjects of the late modern processes. The postulate of aesthetic sovereignty becomes a postulate to free human capacities in the face of the expansion of institutions acting in the name of the mechanisms of their functionalization and unification.

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SUBWERSYWNE STRATEGIE ARTYSTYCZNEJ AWANGARDY WOBEC KRYZYSU NOWOCZESNEGO DOŚWIADCZENIA (streszczenie)

Zamierzeniem niniejszego szkicu jest wskazanie na kilka ważnych dla zmian zachodzących w polu nowoczesnego doświadczenia i odpowiadających im strategii neoawangardy. Awangardowe, jak również neoawangardowe praktyki subwersywne wpisują się w nowe systemy kulturowej funkcjonalizacji, które w ich wielu przejawach prowadzą – z jednej strony – do utraty potencjału krytycznego sztuki. Jednakże z drugiej strony siła oddziaływania i moc przetrwania awangardy w nowej formule, wbrew licznym konstatacjom jej śmierci, po przepracowaniu dawnych formuł jej anty-modernistycznego protestu i kruchych przymierzach z postmodernizmem, tkwi w jej ponownym, krytycznym zanurzeniu się w doświadczeniach współczesnego człowieka. W przechowywaniu przez nią napięcia między zaangażowaniem i krytycznym dystansem cechującego późnonowoczesne doświadczenie.

Słowa kluczowe: neoawangarda, kryzys doświadczenia, subwersja, kulturowa funkcjonalizacja, krytycyzm artystyczny, nowa materialność, faktyczność doświadczenia.