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Book Review

***Globalizing the Avant-Garde*, edited by David Ayers, Margarida Brito Alves, Joana Cunha Leal and Benedikt Hjartarson, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2025.**

One of the most interesting books published in 2025 is *Globalizing the Avant-Garde*, edited by David Ayers, Margarida Brito Alves, Joana Cunha Leal and Benedikt Hjartarson. After the globalization of modernism, poetry studies, and visual art, we are witnessing the globalization of the avant-garde as a transdisciplinary field that encompasses visual art and literature studies. The book is divided into seven parts: “Theory,” “Japan,” “Travel and Ethnography,” “Oceanic,” “Translations and Appropriations,” “Going Global,” and “Modalities and Locations,” each of which includes from seven to two essays. In his “Introduction,” David Ayers explained the book’s structure and provided a brief summary of each essay. Many of the texts used as references are books and works in postcolonial and decolonial studies, socialist studies, new modernist studies, and new world literature, to broaden the boundaries of avant-garde studies. I will point to the first three essays because they discuss the globalizing of the avant-garde; their authors gave insight into the most important general theoretical and historical issues.

The first essay, “Pluriversal Avant-Gardism: Deworlding, Reworlding, and Worlding the Avant-Garde,” is written by Ming Tiampo, a Canadian curator, professor of art history, and director of the Institute of Comparative Studies in Literature, Art, and Culture at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario. Tiampo explained the project of imagining the avant-garde on a global scale as complex, making us aware that the avant-garde is now conceptualized as temporal and spatial practices, not just as European practice. It needs to enable “the emergence of multiple epistemologies, temporalities, political and aesthetic projects, allowing the possibilities of thinking about cultural formations on a planetary scale from the bottom up and from the outside in.” (p. 9) Referring to Arturo Escobar’s term *pluriversal*, Tiampo maintained that “[i]t is through the pluriversal that the critical approach to the Avant-Garde on a global scale can be imagined.” (p. 20) She introduced the term *transversals* “in order to theorize avant-gardism as pluriversal, traversing multiple national contexts rather than as separate, disconnected avant-gardes, or multiple modernism.” (p. 20) In looking to the other avant-gardes, the researcher has to have in mind “their contextual specificities

and to understand their radical political and aesthetic practices at the scale of the local and the regional as well as on this larger scale of the global.” (p. 21) She proposes three models of articulating the responses to Western avant-garde: *agonistic avant-gardes* (for them European Avant-Garde is the measuring stick), *anthropophagic avant-gardes* (they produced “natural synthesis” and questioned the established hierarchies), and *centrifugal avant-gardes* (the authors who “rejected the notion of the West as the authoritative site of iteration” p. 29).

In the second essay, “The Globalization of the Avant-Garde: A User’s Handbook”, Paul Wood, a British art historian associated with the Open University, examines the transformations in the meanings of modernism and the avant-garde. He discussed Clement Greenberg’s definition of his coinage “Modernism,” by which Greenberg privileged “medium-specificity, at the expense of trans-media aspects of avant-garde art.” (p. 37) After discussing Peter Birger’s critique of the neo-avant-garde, which appeared in the context of the German Left, Wood pointed to the “post-modernist/identity politics critique of the concept of avant-gardism as such” (p. 38), which he objected to for being apolitical. As the last example Wood pointed to Sasha Bru’s studies of avant-garde in the book *The European Avant-Gardes 1905–1935* (2018) explaining that Bru “is writing in—and indeed *to*—the early twenty-first century, an art-context in which the counter-modernist Conceptual avant-garde of the 1960s and 70s has evolved into the new normal of an established ‘Contemporary Art’: a formation whose technical hallmark is a mixing of media and genres.” (p. 39) He objected to Bru’s approach on the grounds that it was informed by *identity politics*, which he saw as *apolitization* of the avant-garde, but also emphasized the positive aspect of Bru’s “insistence on the Europe-wide nature of the avant-garde in the decades before the Second World War.” (p. 39)

Lev Kreft, a Slovenian aesthetician, wrote the third essay, “Avant-Garde: A Global Concept?” Kreft pointed to three avant-garde theoreticians from different cultures: two from capitalist countries, Renato Poggioli and Peter Bürger, and one from a socialist country, Aleksandar Flaker. Poggioli’s Eurocentric model connected the proto-avant-garde and the avant-garde of his own time. Bürger’s model of the avant-garde was narrow, embracing Dadaism, early Surrealism, and Russian post-revolutionary avant-garde. Kreft emphasized that Flaker’s advantage was “that he knows all about Western European avant-gardes and all that was possible in his time about Russian avant-garde, but his specific accent is on cases of Central European and Yugoslav avant-gardes, not as additional cases of the Western cultural influence but as phenomena which have a high artistic value and are important for theory.” (p. 61) Kraft locates the paradox in the fact that some of the main protagonists were extremely nationalist (as Futurists and Zenitists), but “still cannot be grasped as ‘national culture.’” (p. 55) Remembering the 1960s and 70s in Yugoslavia and the usage of avant-garde, Kreft states that this formation was omitted from museums, and “overlooked by school curricula, an irritating phenomenon still, and still not accepted into treasury of fine national art because of avant-garde’s attack on tradition, its revolutionary charge, and its internationalism.” (p. 57) He also emphasized that “[i]t is imperative to avoid the concept of the avant-garde developed just from the traditional hegemonic centers of

the artworld.” (p. 56) In this context, the author proposed that the radical art practice in Yugoslavia had gone through four stages: *historical avant-garde*, *neo-avant-garde*, *postsocialist postmodern avant-garde* (reference to what he calls the punk effect), and the contemporary activism that appeared in the new millennium, and at the end of his essay, he discusses contemporary bioart and its Slovenian representative, artist and theoretician Polona Tratnik. (p. 59)

I will now briefly turn my attention to texts dealing with the Yugoslav/Post-Yugoslav cultures. The first is “Abe Nobuya in the Balkans: Ethnography, Travel, and the Japanese Avant-Garde,” written by Jelena Stojković, art historian and critic who teaches at Oxford Brookes University. The author deals with Abe, the avant-garde artist, who worked in the following media: painting, photography, and drawing, and was associated with Surrealism, abstraction, and the group ZERO. He was “the only Japanese avant-garde artist to travel around all regions of former Yugoslavia in the fifties.” (p. 192) Stojković emphasized that during his stay in Yugoslavia, traveling through Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia, Abe was interested in “medieval burial stones called *stećci*, as well as Serbian eighteenth—and nineteenth-century tombstones and roadside monuments known as *krajputaši*.” (192) He photographed them and in 1958 wrote a text describing his first visit to Yugoslavia. The encounter of one artist from the periphery (Japan) with the past cultures of other (semi) peripheries (socialist Yugoslavia) is exotic and contextualized given the specific time of the Cold War era.

The other text, “Cosmopolitical? Political Determinants of ‘Apolitical’ Programs of Neo-and Post-Avant-Garde Artistic Groups: Selected Case Studies from United States, Yugoslavia and Poland”, is by Polish scholar Joanna Orska, a professor in the Department of Polish Studies at the University of Wrocław. Orska discussed the status of American Expressionism and its influence on socialist countries, where it was understood as ‘pure art’ and used as a tool to oppose the expansion of Soviet Realism. (p. 433) Making references to the work of various theorists, such as Piotr Piotrowski, Miklós Haraszti, Rosalind Krauss, Miško Šuvaković, Ješa Denegri, etc., Orska comparatively researched the relations of Slovene and Polish poetry to American poetry, especially the New York school. At the center of her research is Tomaž Šalamun (and the OHO Group, which he was a member of), highlighting the relations between poetry and visual art. Translation is an important topic; that is why she discussed translations of Šalamun into English and Polish, as well as translations of American poets into Polish. Comparing the situation in Yugoslavia and Poland, Orska concluded:

As in the case of the neo-avant-garde movements of the former Yugoslavia, that proper context for Polish translations of New York School should be the fear of the politicization of art, stemming from a strong aversion to political manipulation of art that characterized Cold War propaganda. (p. 444)

Globalizing the Avant-Garde is a book that should be unavoidable in any research on the avant-garde.